

John McDowell and Charles Travis on Perceptual Experience

The adventure of making sense of our rational relation to the world

By

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Abstract

John McDowell and Charles Travis started debating over various issues concerning perception and perceptual experience in 2004. This thesis explores and considers mainly what is at issue concerning their opposed views on perceptual experience. McDowell's views on perceptual experience are expressed chiefly in *Mind and World*. There he presents us with a view of perceptual experience as having propositional representational content and as being conceptually structured. Travis in his influential essay titled "The Silence of Senses" criticizes various forms of representationalist theories of perception including that of McDowell. From that point on, in other later essays, their debate began to expand also on other issues regarding the idea of whether perceptual experience is something conceptual or nonconceptual and its rational role in perception, culminating on the issue of the Myth of the Given. My discussion explores these various dimensions of their debate over perceptual experience and, in the end, it focuses on the issue of the Myth of the Given. Finally, I defend McDowell against an objection of Travis concerning whether, on McDowell's view, we perceive the particular objects of the external mind-independent reality.

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Introduction

How enjoying a perceptual experience can bear us rationally on what we should think or judge? This is the core question that constitutes the starting point from which the debate between John McDowell and Charles Travis commenced. McDowell's fundamental thesis is that if perceptual experience is to constitute a genuine openness to the external world, then we should conceive it as having conceptual content. Travis's thesis, on the other hand, is that if anything that is given to us in perception can bear us rationally on what we should think, then this should be something nonconceptual.

There are three topics that I explore in my thesis. The first topic concerns the debate over whether perception and perceptual experience are representational. The second topic explores the contemporary debate, as articulated by McDowell and Travis, over whether perceptual experience is something conceptual or nonconceptual. Finally, the last topic concerns the debate over the Myth of the Given between the two thinkers.

My thesis consists of three parts. In the first part, I explore the debate between the two thinkers over whether perception and perceptual experiences are representational. In *Mind and World* McDowell contends that our experiences, in being conceptual, have propositional content, and in this sense are representational. Travis in his essay titled "The Silence of the Senses" mounts a significant attack on many representational views on perception in general, including that of McDowell. Travis' central thesis is that representationalism, even if we take it on its own terms, is an untenable thesis. After that, I explore McDowell's reaction to Travis' criticisms since in his later thought McDowell altered his view and conceived experiences as being non-representational and non-propositional having what he calls "intuitional content". There are also some changes in the way in which he conceives experiences as being conceptual.

The second part of my thesis explores the debate between the two thinkers over whether perceptual experience is something conceptual or nonconceptual. This is a major debate in contemporary epistemology. Travis, in criticisms and rejection of McDowell's conceptualism, challenges and criticizes what he calls 'The Condition' which credits McDowell, and objects against McDowell's Kantian-inspired version of conceptualism conceived as the function of a common unification at the level of perceptual experience. Finally, I make some remarks that suggest that Travis interprets McDowell's thesis on conceptualism in a wrong way.

In the third part of this thesis, I expound on the issue of the Myth of the Given which constitutes the third significant dimension of the debate in question. McDowell's standing thesis is that Travis' conception of perception and perceptual experience is a form of the Myth of the Given. I show what is at issue here since Travis' respective thesis is that his conception of perception and account of perceptual awareness does not lead him to fall victim to the Myth of the Given. In this sense, he believes that there is not any such thing as the Myth of the Given, and that there is nothing mythical to any similar thesis that contravenes the boundaries of McDowell's conception of the Myth of the Given. Finally, I defend McDowell against Travis' objection that McDowell's conceptualist conception of perceptual experience does not bring us into contact with the particular objects of the external mind-independent reality.

Part 1: McDowell and Travis on perceptual experience

Sense perception constitutes the most natural and fundamental way by which we encounter the objective world. Through perception, we acquire knowledge of the mind-independent world which contains a plethora of physical objects and happenings. However, when we start reflecting on how perception bears us rationally on the external mind-independent objective world to bring about our beliefs of it, then various problems and considerations come to the fore. Sometimes these problems begin by reflecting whether perceptual experience is something representational or not. This issue constitutes a central debate in the philosophy of perception. In the first part of this dissertation, I will be engaging in this debate as this is illustrated between Charles Travis and John McDowell.

1.1. Perceptual Experience in *Mind and World*

A pervasive concern underlies McDowell's *Mind and World*. This concern is posed by the question: how can we reconcile the fact that human beings, on the hand, are rational beings and, on the other hand, the fact that are deeply rooted in their animal nature? This concern also underlies his approach to perception. For although, as rational beings, we can reflect on our thoughts, our perceptual capacities are part of the natural world as are those of other animals. McDowell thinks that to accommodate both these desiderata we should conceive rationality in a *transformative way*.

According to this transformative conception of rationality, perceptual sensitivity to the environment has a special form in that it is informed or is transformed by our rational capacities. Perceiving then includes the actualization of capacities that have a rational role

to play in perceptual experience.^{1 2} But what does this rational role here amount to? For McDowell it is crucial that the content of our perceptual experiences should give rise to discursive thought. Nevertheless, in order to do that our perceptual experience should bear us on the external objective world rationally. This could be achieved only and only if we conceive perceptual experience as being conceptual in its structure. This means that the content of perceptual experience should represent the various aspects and features of the external environment as being a certain way.

One of the essential claims of *Mind and World* is exactly that perceptual experience possesses propositional content, that is, it represents the objective world as being a certain way. McDowell conceives the above idea in a Kantian-inspired way. The key idea here is that perceptual experience is always conceptualized. At the very beginning of *Mind and World*, McDowell stresses the significance of Kant's insight that "[t]houghts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, 1929: 93)

McDowell's conception of cognition in general draws heavily on this idea. In particular, perceptual experience belongs to the faculty of spontaneity, and at the same time it has a passive element, 'receptivity'. Perceptual experience, then, has both a passive and an active role. Is there a tension between these two roles of perceptual experience? McDowell believes that this is not the case, since, according to the above formulation, the same conceptual capacities that are actualized in perceptual experience are also implicated in the

¹ I will be using the technical term "*perceptual experience*" to denote mainly the various conscious states that we enjoy. The notion of *conscious states* can be understood in different ways. For instance, conscious states can refer to the ability to engage in thinking and reasoning. Conscious states, then, can provide us with the ability to process information of the environment and ourselves, also different types of justification. Moreover, we can also understand perceptual experience as the qualitative character of the conscious states when there is something it is like to experience something. This kind of experience seems to have a subjective quality. It appears to me that McDowell uses the notion of perceptual experience or experiences in general covering both these dimensions, that is, a rational-epistemic and phenomenological one.

² See (Matthew Boyle & Evgenia Mylonaki, 2022: 2-6), and McDowell (1996: 64) for this idea and conception of rationality.

judgments that we form based on the experience that we are undergoing. From this respect, McDowell believes that "...the content of an experience is 'the sort of thing one can also...judge'" (McDowell, 1994: 36)

We can break down McDowell's argument in the following three premises (Lerman, 2010: 1-2):

- I) For our empirical beliefs to have the content we take them to have, the experience must provide us with reasons for at least some of our empirical beliefs.
- II) In enjoying an experience, we are in a state that has conceptual-propositional content. The latter is the content that a judgment could also have.
- III) Therefore, the conceptual-propositional content must be of the same type of content as the content of a judgment.

Having said that, what is of high importance in McDowell's analysis is the idea that perceptual experience is already conceptualized. This insight means that the perceptual content of experience is representational, and in being representational provides us with acquaintance of specific aspects and features of the world.³ Although there is an intimate link between the idea that experiences have propositional content and the idea that experiences have conceptual content, we can distinguish the two ideas; for it is a different question of whether an experience has propositional content from the question of whether it has conceptual content (Crane, 2009: 465).

³ It is not of necessity that everything that is propositional is also conceptually structured. There are thinkers, such as Alex Byrne (2005), who think that non-conceptual content can also be propositional.

That perceptual experience is conceptual means that its content is conceptually structured or that it is composed of concepts. Now, McDowell goes beyond that in claiming additionally that since experiences have conceptual content, they need also to be propositional in character. In this sense, the things that we can judge are propositions, that is, things that we take a stance on them and, thus, can be either be true or false. Thus, having an experience, and through its conceptual-propositional content, is taken by the subject as to have a specific normative bearing on what she should hold to be true.

For McDowell, then, perceptual experience, through its perceptual content, represents the world as being thus and so. He seems to just postulate that perception has content, and then that perceptual experiences are representational. For him, perception is something that opens us to the knowledge of the external environment by placing the various things in view for us. The objects of our experiences are states of affairs. For instance, the perception of something red and rectangular is the perception of a state of affairs or a bit of occurrence of the external objective reality.

Having said the above, we can see that McDowell thinks that perceptual experience not only has objects but also contents that are propositional in making claims, namely that things are thus and so. The content of perceptual experience gives the cognitive role of perception a relational character since it is in virtue of it (the content) that we come to enjoy experiences that place us in various relations to things (McDowell, 2013: 145).

It seems to me that McDowell's analysis relies on what he calls minimal empiricism. This is because experiences by having conceptual-propositional content should be able to figure as reasons for our thought. This is exactly the idea of Minimal Empiricism. According to McDowell (1996: xi, xii), minimal empiricism refers to the idea that "experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our way of thinking is answerable to how things

are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all". Minimal empiricism then refers to the idea that if thinking is to be answerable to the external empirical reality, the experience of objects in the empirical world must (minimally) be able to exercise a rational constraint on our thought, that is, to constitute reasons for our beliefs or judgments in making them true.⁴

I take here the term "reasons" to refer to something specific in McDowell's thought. At a basic level, it refers to something in light of which it is appropriate to hold a belief or formulate a specific belief. A reason then is something that grounds the truth of our beliefs or judgments. Now, McDowell conceives reasons in a strong sense because for him a subject should have the ability to respond not simply to reasons but to reasons as such.

In brief, this view amounts to the idea that responsiveness to the reasons that our experiences provide us is of a normative kind depending essentially on our capacity to rationally self-ascribe these experiences and, accordingly, self-scrutinize and self-evaluating our rational credentials concerning them (McDowell, 1996: 52, Gersel, 2018: 83). My perception, then, is normative because, as a self-conscious rational thinker, I'm self-aware, can step back and correct my beliefs. McDowell, then, believes that this self-critical assessment of our situation is necessary if our perception is to have an objective purport. Genuine openness to the world, then, in responding to reasons as such, thus, is tied to our capacity to rationally self-ascribe and self-evaluate our experiences.

If minimal empiricism, then, is to be possible at all we must explicate under what conditions experiences can figure as reasons as such for our beliefs and judgments. McDowell, then, adopts a Kantian-inspired approach to perceptual experience to vindicate minimal

⁴ See (McDowell, 1996: 5, 67, 163–64) and also (Gersel, 2018: 80-84)

empiricism, according to which, as we have seen, experiences must possess conceptual content (McDowell, 1996: 10–11).

If perceptual experience is to provide a rational constraint on our thinking it must be conceived as having a passive element that is already conceptually structured. Perceptual experience, accordingly, has propositional content in representing things as having particular features and being in certain ways. This content then can figure as a reason for the “justification” of our external world beliefs. It is in this way that minimal empiricism entails the central idea that is pervasive in *Mind and World*: that perceptual experiences can be characterized in terms of having propositional contents which are expressed in the form of declarative sentences or “that-clauses” such as “that apple is red”.

In perception, things are presented to us as being thus and so, and in this way, they constitute the content of our experiences. The perceptual content of our experiences, then, represents aspects of the layout of external reality, and, since, in this way, exerts a rational constraint to our thinking, it is simultaneously an openness to it. The subject, then, since the content of her experience and, to this extent, judgment is that things are thus and so, takes a specific attitude over them, or, in other words, “[she] decides to take the experience at face value” (McDowell, 1996: 26).

We can spell out this view by analyzing the notion of representational content in terms of its reference and the way that classifies how things are represented to us. When we perceive an object, for instance, a red apple, our experience refers to that specific object in the first place and then classifies it by presenting it to us as having certain features, that is, being red, having a quasi-round shape, being shiny, and so on. The perceptual content of our experiences has these two dimensions: an intentional and a classificatory one. The perceptual subject then can take a particular attitude towards it, namely can accept it or

reject it since it represents things either veridically or nonveridically. It is in this sense, that McDowell, in *Mind and World*, advocates straightforwardly for a propositional-representationalist view of perceptual experience which is structured by contents that are conceptual.

1.2. The silence of the senses: a response from a non-representationalist

The picture that I have been sketching so far includes some elements that are pervasive in how representationalists conceive perceptual experience. The core idea of this view is that perceptual experience takes a stand on how things are. In representing things as thus and so, that is, as having specific features and characteristics, it has a face value and presents things in a certain objective way. This view has been severely criticized by some thinkers recently. Although the way they have been questioning this view is diverse, there is a locus where their criticisms have been concentrated: the idea that our experiences represent the perceived objects as being some particular way. One prominent critic of this idea is Charles Travis who mounts a powerful attack on the representational view of perceptual experience. Travis begins his essay by characterizing the central conditions, necessary but not sufficient, under which, according to his interpretation, most of the representational approaches to perception fall, including McDowell's one:

- I) The objectivity condition: the content of perceptual experiences represents things as thus and so. It has an objective status that allows the perceptual subject to perceive things veridically or non-veridically.
- II) The face value condition: perceptual experience has a face value in that the perceptual subject can decline or accept the content of it.

- III) The givenness condition: perceptual experience represents things to the subject and not by the subject itself. It is not an autorepresentation, to use Travis' terminology, but an allorepresentation.
- IV) The availability condition: when the perceptual subject has a perceptual experience, they should be able to recognize what it is that the content of it represents to us as thus and so.

In my analysis, I will chiefly focus only on the objectivity, face value, and availability condition, since these are the conditions that are more germane to McDowell's conception of perceptual experience.

The objectivity condition is simply about the claim that the representationalists hold with respect to how perceptual experience represents the objects of the external environment. As we have seen, McDowell holds that perceptual content represents things as being thus and so, and, in this sense, allows the perceptual subject to enjoy an experience that has an objective status.

The face value condition, as I understand Travis' account, stems from considerations that relate to the objectivity condition. The face value condition begins from the objectivity view, namely that the content of perceptual experience conveys to the perceptual subject how particular things are. It then proceeds by stating that perceptual experiences have face value that allows the perceptual subject to accept or judge that things are indeed thus and so.

The availability condition is motivated by the ideas that are endorsed in the face value and givenness conditions. More specifically, the availability condition, as it appears to me, has two dimensions: I) an epistemic and II) a phenomenological one. The epistemic dimension states that the perceptual subject should enjoy a perceptual experience that represents things

in a way that will be epistemically or cognitively tractable or available to them. Now, regarding the phenomenological dimension, the availability condition demands that an account of perceptual experience should respect its phenomenology. The content of our experiences should be made available to the subject via a conscious perceptual state, and, to this extent, a non-conscious perceptual state could not perform as the vehicle through which a subject could cognitively recognize its content.

As I have already mentioned, Travis's central strategy in "The Silence of the Senses" is to demonstrate the perception is not representational, that is, an intentional phenomenon. He clearly states that "...perception, as such, simply places our surroundings in view; affords us awareness of them. There is no commitment to their being one way or another. It confronts us with what is there... It makes us aware, to some extent, of things (around us) being as they are" (Travis, 2013: 31). In his argument from looks, Travis endeavors to show that the philosophical notion of representation is incapable of satisfying some of the conditions which a great deal of the representationalists conceive as pivotal to their theory of perception.

As I have indicated, crucial to McDowell's conception of perception and perceptual experience as openness to the external world is that it has a face value, that is, that it represents the world as being thus and so. However, to achieve that and also be available to the subject the content of our experiences should, through its conceptual character, be in some way available to the perceptual subject. For McDowell, the external world can bear us on what to think in so far as the subject can recognize the content of her experiences, tokened as the representation of something possessing a determinate property, as a reason for judging so.

In his argument from looks, Travis aim is to show that these two aspects of McDowell's approach (and other representationalists) to perception, namely the face value and the recognizability/availability aspect of the perceptual content, cannot be squared with each other since perception does not represent something as thus-and-so. To demonstrate that, he distinguishes between two kinds of look:

- I) Visual looks
- II) Thinkable looks.

Let's see more closely what these notions amount to and why none of them, according to Travis, can succeed in the roles the representationalist ascribes them. Travis begins his analysis by explicating the notion of what he calls the 'looks-indexing'. The general idea of this notion is realized in the way representationalists conceive perceptual experience as representing things as thus and so. We have seen, that for McDowell perceptual experience represents things in a propositional manner. However, for him, the perceptual subject must, in engaging in active thinking, come to appreciate the rational credentials of what it is that is represented as thus and so. The subject of perceptual experience should be rationally responsive to that that is supplied from experience to be available or recognizable to him.

Travis' notion of looks-indexing, then, applies to the idea that the deliverances of experience should in some way be recognizable to the perceptual subject. He spells out this notion in terms of how things look to the subject. For him, then, if the deliverances of experience are to be recognizable at all, this should be brought about in terms of the way things look to them. This then gives the opportunity to Travis distinguish between the two above-mentioned notions of look. He then argues against representationalists by contending that neither visual nor thinkable looks can achieve what the latter desire most,

namely that the content of perceptual experience represents things of the outer environment as thus and so by making them available to the perceptual subject.

When we perceive an object in external reality, according to Travis, at the first level, this thing perceptually appears to us by just having visual effects on our sensory apparatus. Our visual equipment reacts to the things of the environment by formulating visual appearances, which are brought about by way of how things are arranged in it. I perceive things from diverse angles, light conditions, and circumstances. The perceptual engagement with the objects of the environment gives rise to visual looks which, through being detectable, are simply how things appear to the subject via the visual effects that have upon them:

“Whether something has the look is settled simply by its visual effect. It has the look, perhaps, only under given conditions for producing that effect—only when viewed thus (such as from a certain angle). The look may be detectable only by one with suitable visual equipment” (Travis, 2013: 35).

For Travis, however, for a perceptual subject to have a look is still not to perceptually take something to be thus and so. An object has a characteristic kind of look. For instance, when I perceive an apple it looks to me as being distinctively reddish. Whether the subject will acknowledge that it should be so in comparison to how the thing looks to them is an independent consideration that should not be conflated with the simple fact of the possession of a visual look.

The immediate consequence that Travis draws from that idea is that a visual look can have a plethora of alternatives of things that, by resembling each other, could be identified as being so. I say “resembling” here since for Travis visual looks are “a matter of visual comparisons” (Travis, 2013: 41). By having a visual look a great number of alternatives could enter the game. In this sense, the way Travis defines the nature of visual looks

indicates that they are fundamentally comparative. The perceptual subject then will implicitly or explicitly compare the diverse ways in which an object is presented to them.

The red apple might be a wooden or a wax-like imitation of a real one, or anything that could resemble a red apple. We can here locate the crux of Travis' criticism in the idea that how something visually looks in any given experience does not determine a single representational content, and in this sense, the representational content of the perceptual experience goes astray regarding the face value condition. Travis here, then, also targets what in the philosophy of perception and mind is called the noncomparative (Chisholm, 1957) or phenomenal looks (Jackson, 1977) of perceptual experience since, he believes, they are equally susceptible to be equivocal among a wide variety of contents.

To go back to my example, according to Travis if perceptual experiences present us with a plethora of indistinguishable alternatives, then visual looks are unable to identify “...any particular representational content for any given experience to have” (Travis 2013: 34), and, therefore, no face value can be ascribed to them. The corollary of this criticism touches on what I have indicated as the availability condition. For if the content of the perceptual experience, via how it looks to us, confronts us with numerous series of indistinguishable alternatives for a specific object, then it will also fail to make available to us something that we, then, could objectively assess. Travis concludes that on this notion of visual looks:

“...looking like such-and-such cannot contribute to determining how things should be to be the way they look simpliciter. For, so far as it goes, there is no particular way things should be to be the way they look simpliciter. For that reason, things looking like such-and-such, or looking such-and-such ways, on this first notion of looks, cannot index anything as represented to us as being so” (Travis, 2013: 39).

The representational content of our experiences which McDowell favors in his analysis of perceptual experience does not have any explanatory role in informing us how the world is or in offering us any reason for our judgments. Accordingly, being available to us lacks any objective status. Here, I reckon, it is important to highlight that what underlies Travis' criticism of what the representationalists, such as McDowell, call face value is also an idea about occasion-sensitivity concerning meaning.

We have seen that Travis' criticism against the idea of the content of the perceptual experience as having face value refers to the idea that it does not determine any single representational content, and in that sense does not meet the desired objective status of correctness or incorrectness of the representationalists. This is so, because, according to Travis, perceptual acquaintance with a thing is occasion sensitive and sensitive to our human sensibilities and interests, what Travis calls the parochial. Moreover, this is a view which connects with Travis conception of what truth is. What underlies much of his debate with McDowell is a disagreement about how we should conceive truth and the nature of representation.⁵ This means that if for things to be thus and so is for them to belong to a certain range of cases, then he thinks that "...there may be two or more (sometimes) reasonable ways of sorting cases into those which do belong and those which do not, with different results for things as they are" (Travis, 2013: 131).

Things admit different understandings under different occasions, and, therefore, different ways things are. The world does not articulate one absolute and particular way for things to be. It appears to me that this insight implicitly informs also Travis' idea concerning experiences conceived as ranging over and presenting us with a plethora of alternatives. As

⁵ See Travis' (2018b) reply to Guy Longworth.

I have shown, this undermines the face value condition of perceptual experiences that the representationalists place in their analysis.

Travis's strategy can be identified as that of excluding any possible notion of looks that could be used by the representationalists. After that, he moves to another notion of looks which he calls the thinkable looks or appearances. Travis sketches his analysis of thinkable looks by characterizing them as the looks of:

“...what is to be made of things by a thinker relevantly au fait with the world, and knowing enough of what to make of what he is thus aware of” (Travis, 2013: 40).

And that they are:

“...a matter of what can be gathered from, or what is suggested by, the facts at hand, or those visibly (audibly, and so on) on hand” (Travis, 2013: 42).

To apprehend what Travis is up to here, I think, we need to see how he contrasts thinkable looks with visual looks. The core element that differentiates thinkable from visual looks is that the former is not something that could be characterized in terms of visual or perceptual awareness. It is *prima facie* that in speaking of thinkable looks, part of Travis' attack, if not its only object, is the conception of perceptual experience as a propositional attitude that many representationalists, like McDowell as we have seen, adhere to. Thinkable looks, then, are the contents of experiences that the subject judges or believes in taking how the world could be, and this is “a matter of some proposition enjoying some status or other in being the thing to think” (Travis, 2013: 41).

The central problem that this approach faces is that perceptual experience ends up being, what Travis calls, an ‘autorepresentation’ or just an indication of the facts in hand (Travis, 2013: 43). The ramifications of conceiving perceptual experience in this manner is that perceptual experiences appear to be dominated by what we epistemically already take or

we are inclined to judge, via our background beliefs, that it could be the case. The epistemic element of experiences overrides what is perceptually given to the subject. Therefore, perceptual experience ceases to be a perceptual phenomenon and starts being an epistemic one.

It is an epistemic one due to the fact that perceptual experience becomes merely an issue of autorepresentation, and in this sense, perceptual experience collapses into what we already judge, via interpretation, things to indicate or mean. Travis highlights that “to take that to fix what was represented as so would collapse representation into indicating, or factive meaning, and thus to lose it altogether”. The element that we “lose it altogether” here is the experience itself, that is, how the content or the representational/propositional content perceptually appears to the subject. In that sense, we fall short of the givenness condition.

To Travis, therefore, neither visual looks nor thinkable looks can meet the conditions the representationalists want their theories to satisfy. For one thing, visual looks contravene the face value condition. For another, thinkable looks do not satisfy the availability condition, since perceptual experience collapses being a matter of what we epistemically judge something to be. We then overlook the availability condition which demands that experiences should also be a matter of things that appear to the subject.

Could there be any other path that avoids the above hindrances? Travis believes that the possibility that there could be any other hybrid notion of perceptual content that could free us from the obstacles that representationalists, such as McDowell, are confronted with is a chimera. Much of Travis' argumentation strategy so far aims, implicitly, to show that a hybrid notion of visual and thinkable looks is impossible to attain.

He argues for this thesis by considering McDowell's conception of ‘ostensible seeings’, namely, “...experiences in which it looks to their subject as if things are a certain way”

(McDowell, 2009: 10). In short, Travis contends that McDowell attempts to combine the aforementioned notions of looks into a single notion of look, namely the notion of 'ostensible seeings' since the latter devises the idea of experience as representing something based on what it makes perceptually available to us. He thinks that such an approach is doomed to failure. This is because it is incapable of satisfying the face value condition. In trying to meet a notion of visual looks in which something will merely appear or look to the subject as something, nothing is univocally fixed concerning the content of our experience. McDowell then would contravene the face value condition (Travis, 2013: 47). For another, if McDowell endeavors to capture the notion of thinkable looks, then he will end up endorsing that the content of perceptual experience is simply an autorepresentation. A thesis like that would be intolerable for him since this version of empirical thinking would be simply what he calls "...a frictionless spinning in a void" (McDowell, 1996: 77). In other words, empirical thinking would be no more than a version of idealism which is partly what McDowell wants to avoid in *Mind and World*. This then would contravene both the givenness and the availability condition. Perceptual experience, according to Travis, cannot just be a matter of perceptually taking something to be. The phenomenology of perception calls initially for something to be given to us in order then to formulate our perceptual beliefs, and not the other way around. Meeting the availability condition would then follow since the representational content of our experiences would be available based on the givenness of that very experience. As Keith Wilson highlights "...representationalist's explanation of perceptual phenomenology and the epistemic role of p-representation appear to be in tension with each other" (Wilson, 2018: 219).

1.3. McDowell's reaction to Travis's challenge

In the account I have been sketching, for McDowell perceptual experience can bear us rationally on the external world if and only if conceptual capacities are actualized passively in it. In his later thought, McDowell reconsiders his approach to perceptual experience conceived as the compound of an active and passive element. There are two aspects of this reconsideration and both stem from defects that he finds in *Mind and World's* exposition of perceptual experience and, as I shall be elucidating in due course, from criticisms put forward by Travis. In this respect, McDowell acknowledges some of Travis' points, but he still disagrees with others.

In 'Avoiding the Myth of the Given', McDowell renounces two assumptions that are embodied in his previous account of perceptual experience in *Mind and World*. First, he dismisses the idea that the content of perceptual experience should non-inferentially provide the subject with everything that she can know through enjoying this experience itself.

McDowell still believes that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual, since he still conceives perceptual experience as the interplay between spontaneity and receptivity where conceptual capacities are passively in operation. However, now McDowell puts a dichotomy between experiential content and judgmental content. Let's expound more on what this view amounts to.

You go for a walk and you see a bird which is a cardinal. Firstly, McDowell contends that the content of perceptual experience, that is, what is visually present to me in enjoying that experience, contains only the concept of the 'bird' and not that of the 'cardinal'. McDowell then contends that to be able to non-inferentially judge that the bird is a cardinal, we need our recognitional capacities to be actualized in perceptual experience. Therefore, whether

this bird will be acknowledged as a cardinal or not is a matter of our *recognitional capacities* that are activated in perceptual experiences. However, this does not mean that in our experiences no conceptual capacities are actualized, but the conceptual content of our experiences itself contains concepts that *can be distinguished* from those in our judgments.

McDowell puts forward the idea that perceptual experience itself contains only the concept ‘bird’. He contends then that it is our recognitional capacities that enable the subject to know that the bird in front of her is a cardinal. Recognitional capacities have an essential role to play in further rationally and non-inferentially formulating our judgments whose content isn't contained in our experience itself upon which it is based. Here, it seems to me, McDowell makes a concession to Travis since, as will see in due course, for Travis recognitional capacities play a fundamental role in how we conceptualize what is given to us in our experiences.

McDowell, then, holds that different ways in which our perceptual experiences can put a subject in a position to bring an object under a concept (McDowell, 2018: 25):

- I) One way is that the judgments that we articulate contain conceptual content that is already contained in our perceptual experience/awareness.
- II) Another way is that our judgments bring conceptual capacities or concepts that are not contained in the content of our experiences themselves.

McDowell's position here deviates from his previous one in *Mind and World*. The crucial thing here is that the perceptual content does not contain a proposition of the type “that’s a cardinal” where the concept of a cardinal can be detected. McDowell explicitly acknowledges that now he has spelled out a view “of intuitions on which they do not have propositional content” (McDowell, 2009: 266-267). In this sense, now McDowell rejects

that the content of perceptual experience is propositional expressed in declarative sentences like:

- 1) This table is red.

In his later view regarding the content of perceptual experiences, McDowell puts forward an account of perceptual experience as having "intuitional content". So, what is the difference compared to his previous view? Simply put, the main difference is supposed to be that the intuitional content that McDowell invokes does not have propositional form, since, as I indicated above, McDowell conceives the content of perceptual experience as containing concepts that refer to proper and common sensibles. Conceiving perceptual content in this sense is conceiving it as non-propositional, since proper and common sensibles are not propositional. McDowell, then, thinks that we can express intuitional content by using demonstrative noun phrases like:

- 2) This red table.

Therefore, the difference here is between something that can be expressed in a "that-clause" and something that can be expressed in terms of having the structure of a substance as falling under a substance concept, namely the demonstrative "this-such". The form of the demonstrative noun phrase "this red table" is not propositional. Here, then, we can see another concession of McDowell to Travis. This is more closely connected with what I have been showing in the first section of this dissertation concerning Travis' criticism of the representational approach in perception, namely of perceptual experience as having propositional content.

McDowell contends that the content of the intuitions consists in the unification of the presentations of some of the ways an object is in having the perceptual awareness of that object. Our intuitions then make us already aware of some of the ways an object is, and it

is in this sense that McDowell suggests that the very unity present in intuitions is a function of the very same capacity that gives unity to our thoughts:

“The unity of intuitional content reflects an operation of the same unifying function that is operative in the unity of judgment, in that case actively exercised” (McDowell, 2009: 264).

The basic idea here is that perceptual experience has unity in its conceptual structure, and therefore there is no gap between what is given to us in our intuitional content and the judgments we formulate. McDowell then, as I see it, endorses a transcendental argument. For he argues for the thesis that if only our empirical intuitions and our judgments have a common unity constituted by the same function, would it be possible for the empirical objects given in intuitions themselves to figure as reasons for our judgments. From that point, our perceptual awareness puts us in a position to make judgments in which what we articulate is already contained in the intuitional content. But our judgments, according to McDowell, can have content that can articulate a way for a thing to be that is not contained in how an object is visually present to us in having the perceptual awareness of it.

Part 2: Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism about perceptual experience

So far, we have seen the exchanges between Travis and McDowell in debating over the issue of whether our perceptual experiences are representational. As I have shown, the heart of Travis’ criticism against representationalists and, more specifically, against McDowell is his argumentation concerning looks.

I will now proceed by expounding on what I take as the second dimension of the debate between the two thinkers. In this second part of my dissertation, then, I will be exhibiting

Travis' rejection of the idea that perception and the content of our perceptual experiences is something that is already conceptually structured. I will be examining his essays entitled "Reason's Reach" and "Unlocking the Outer World". Finally, I will suggest why Travis misinterprets McDowell's thesis on this issue.

2.1. Travis's rejection of McDowell's conceptualism

The second face of the debate between the two thinkers is shaped by considerations which are about the notion of conceptual content. In his essay titled "Reason's Reach" Travis wants to establish the view that even if we conceive perceptual experience as being non-conceptual, it is possible to provide us with reasons for our judgments. Both philosophers agree on the idea that what is given to us in having the sense-perception of the external world should provide us with reasons for our beliefs. Nevertheless, they deeply disagree on how the connection between the objects that are perceptually given to us and our beliefs or judgments about them should be established. In what follows, I shall be expounding on Travis' analysis of that matter.

Travis begins his essay by defining what he calls the "The Condition". Travis uses these terms to refer to the issue of how perception can afford us awareness of how the empirical objects that surround in our environment bear us rationally on the external reality. Travis credits McDowell with the acceptance of the 'The Condition', and he explicitly states that he parts from him in rejecting it. Hence, his project here is to show why the view that McDowell sketches through accepting 'The Condition' is false. From this aspect, his target is McDowell's conceptualism. Travis, in elucidating what he takes McDowell's condition to be, begins his analysis by quoting two passages from *Mind and World* (Travis, 2013: 120). In these passages, we can see McDowell's contrast between the 'normative context'

of the relations that constitute the ‘logical space of reasons’ and the relations that constitute ‘logical space of nature’.

The logical space of reasons is the space where rational, normative, and conceptual relations hold. McDowell thinks that we should conceive the logical space of reasons as *sui generis*, that is, as the space which is constituted only out of rational-normative-conceptual relations and not natural-causal ones. He draws a dichotomy between the natural and the normative. The logical space of nature, then, refers to the brute causal impact of external reality on the perceptual subject. It is the logical framework of natural happenings where the "natural-scientific understanding" provides explanations of how the external world impinges on us. McDowell coins the term "bald naturalism" for this outlook, that is, the view that the logical space of reasons is nothing more than the natural.

These insights shed some light on what is ‘The Condition’ that Travis refers to and credits McDowell. ‘The condition’ refers to how we should conceive our having an experience of an empirical object if that latter is to intelligibly regulate and bear us rationally on what we should think or judge. Therefore, for our experiences to lead us to the kind of genuine world openness, the perceptual sensitivity of the subject to the empirical objects of her environment must be explicated in terms of the normative-rational-conceptual relations that constitute the space of reasons.

Travis’ target in “Reason’s Reach” is the above-elucidated condition as it is exemplified in how McDowell’s conceive perceptual experience. Since for McDowell “the logical space of reasons does not extend further than the space of concepts” (McDowell, 1996: 14), Travis wants to show that this is wrong and that something non-conceptual, that is, something that goes beyond the bounds of the logical space of reasons can rationally bear us on what one is to think.

Travis' starting point is an insight into truth. To have a truth is to have a generality that *ranges over* or *reaches* to a particular thing, that is, something being as it is. The particular thing is the thing which *instances* the generality, that is, a thought which refers to a way for things to be. The fundamental difference, then, between the particular things and a thought is that the latter has a certain sort of generality while the particular things are devoid of it. We can formulate this view in the following principle:

For something to be true that *q* is for things being as they are to instance or to be a case of things being such that *q*.

Hence, to Travis, we can distinguish between particular things, like seeing a piece of meat, and a generality or a thought when, for instance, we take the meat to be on a red rug. To use Travis' way of taking who follows Frege, particular things belong to the left-hand side of this dichotomy and on right-hand side we have generalities.

Now, Travis believes that what we can only perceive is particular things. For Travis 'things' here refers not just to an element of the world, but the world as such since the term 'things' is used in a " 'catholic reading', one that blocks the question 'Which things' " (Travis, 2013: 4) . This is what he calls in his later writings the historical: the particular actual unfolding of the particular things of the external reality. The generality of a thought, which, for Travis, refers to a specific form intrinsic to it, accordingly, relates to a way for the world to be, and we can call this the conceptual (Wallage, 2020: 3, Travis, 2013: 125).

The resulting distinction between the historical and the conceptual is, for Travis, something like a building block of his philosophy that underlies his account of and approach to the philosophy of perception and language. The conceptual, that is, the generality of a thought, Travis believes, cannot be given to us in perception since it has no perceivable or spatial features. Therefore, to perceive a piece of meat by seeing it is to be sensitive to the meat

being as it is in its very particularity. This is something that our perceptual capacities can directly provide us. The formation of the judgment that the meat is on the rug is the recognition of something particular, the world as such, that instances the generality of a thought or a concept, a way for the world to be, that ranges over it.

From this analysis, Travis arrives at the view that only something nonconceptual, that is, something that is not conceptually structured, “the thing being as it is”, can rationally constrain our thoughts, such as the fact “that the meat is on the rug”. In other words, only something non-conceptual can be a reason for the formation of our beliefs or judgments. Travis’ disagreement, then, and his rejection of McDowell’s conceptualism can be found in the idea that the rational relations in perceiving things, having perceptual experiences, and formulating judgments about them cannot hold between generalities. For McDowell, the very objects of the external reality are given to us in perception by being seen to be in various general ways. McDowell’s conceptualism, then, has to do with the idea that in experience there must be some generality. McDowell thinks that the presence of generality in our experiences is the only way the various objects can be given to us. Travis rejects such a view since if anything can be given in our experiences and, accordingly, provide us with reasons for our beliefs at all, then it must be possibly something non-conceptual since McDowell’s general ways that things are cannot be given in our perception at all.

Travis, also, thinks that the way McDowell conceives 'The Condition' excludes the particular things, the things being as they are, that surround us in our environment since the latter fail McDowell's condition (Travis, 2013: 118).⁶ In this sense, for him also, there is no reason to posit conceptual content in our experiences, since the particular things, the

⁶ What the “things being as they are” here means is that, for Travis, what is given to us when we perceive something isn’t just objects, but the very specific way in which a particular object is. This contrasts with McDowell’s idea that what is given to us in experience is a general way in which an object is which is also a way that could be judged to be.

historical, do not themselves draw on conceptual capacities that belong to our rationality, that is, to the space of reasons.

From this aspect, then, Travis contends that if we follow McDowell in his ‘Condition’ and postulate a conceptual moment of perception, the phenomenon of judgment would be lost since we would be deprived of judging something to be the case. Judging, that is, conceptualizing what is given to us in perception, is something we, ourselves, do actively in response to perception through the operation of our recognitional capacities. These recognitional capacities, for him, reflect and are relative to our sensibilities and interests, what he calls the “parochial”, and also demand to take into account the specific occasion in which we are, what he calls, as we have seen, “occasion-sensitivity”. But another implicit idea here is that for Travis, it appears, that the concepts that we utilize through our recognitional capacities to carve up what is given to us reflect our human point of view determined by our sensibilities and interests.

Now, as we have seen, another part of McDowell's conceptualism is the idea that there is a common function that unifies the intuitional content and judgments. Travis's second attack on McDowell's conceptualism can be found in his essay titled “Unlocking The Outer World” in which he challenges this Kantian idea of the unification that, according to McDowell, is required in perceptual experiences. Travis' central claim is that no unification is required in perceptual experience to bear us rationally on the external environment.

Travis' disagreement with the idea of a common unifying function at the level of perceptual experiences begins by pointing out an idea from Frege concerning the notion of judgment. Following Frege, Travis claims that judgments constitute the basic elements of thoughts, and, in this sense, they are not things that are constructed out of basic elements that need some function of unification to hold them together (Travis, 2013: 223). For Travis, it is the

other way around. Whole thoughts, and to that extent judgments, have an inherently unified structure of their own. Hence, instead of endorsing the view that thoughts and judgments arise out of the composition and unification of some more basic elements, Travis asserts that it is the other way around, that is, that whole thoughts and judgments can be decomposed into their elements, namely, concepts to which they reach:

“Thoughts, and judgments, are not built out of building blocks which somehow require something else to hold them together. Rather, the existence of their elements...presupposes whole thoughts, only by decomposition which are concepts (and so on) arrived at” (Travis, 2013: 223).

In this sense, Travis believes that McDowell is wrong in arguing for the thesis that a common function of unification constitutes a central element of our judgments. From this idea of the ‘multiple decomposability’ of thoughts into their more basic elements, Travis arrives at some conclusions concerning our perceptual experiences. He believes that McDowell’s idea of a common function of unification is not required at the level of perceptual experience. Travis identifies two assumptions concerning McDowell’s idea:

- 1) The objects of judgments should be the same as or should be found in our sensory awareness which then are unified by the same function.
- 2) What our mind carves up must lie within its reach to carve up or shape.

Having identified these two assumptions that underlie McDowell’s idea, Travis is led to question whether the objects of our perceptual experiences are mind-independent since “they are not objects without the mind” (Travis, 2013: 230). From this aspect, he believes that McDowell’s appeal to a notion of common unification is something that is not required for the perceptual knowledge of the mind-independent objects. Travis is adamant that the

mind's recognitional capacities in judging something being the case could shape only something mind-independent, because the truth of a judgment reaches to the particular things, that is, the things being as they are. Thus, for him, this notion of common unification is even not compatible with the perceptual acquaintance of the mind-independent objects.

2.2. The Unboundness of the Conceptual

One central idea of McDowell's conceptualism is the idea that the conceptual is unbounded. In this sense, for him, there is nothing outside the conceptual or that there is nothing that is beyond the reach of reason:

“Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere” (McDowell, 1996: 26).

According to the above view, then, McDowell thinks that Travis, in the ‘Condition’ that he sketches against his views on perceptual experience, is wrong because he misconstrues his thesis concerning what is the reach of reason. McDowell certainly acknowledges that there is a limit in his thesis about the unboundness of the conceptual: the brute causal impingement of the external reality on our rationality, without the passive actualization of conceptual capacities in our experience, is something that is unacceptable for McDowell’s thesis. It is unacceptable because, as I will be expounding on it in the next part of my thesis, is a case of the Myth of the Given. But, as McDowell contends, that reason has this limitation should not be understood as being a boundary.

The conception of reason where there is no boundary beyond it leads McDowell to a kind of identity theory of truth: what is the case is thinkable and if it is not thinkable then it is not the case. The reach of reason coincides with the realm of thought, but this should not

be understood in the sense that what is thinkable is only what we actually think in our minds, in the sense that everything is in our minds. McDowell elsewhere appears to confirm such a thesis. He says that the identity theory of truth “is a truism, not a thesis, not a possibly contentious bit of philosophical doctrine. What point can there be in affirming a truism? Just that keeping it in view helps to prevent unprofitable philosophical anxieties from arising” (McDowell, 1999: 93). Of course, for McDowell particular pieces of meat are not ‘thinkables’, since they belong to the left-hand side of Travis’ distinction, but this does not mean that they are beyond the reach of reason, that is, of our conceptual capacities.

From this aspect, then, McDowell responds to Travis’ criticism that his ‘Condition’ leaves out the particular things that surround us in our environment. The idea of the unboundness of the conceptual is a thesis that even the things that belong to the left-hand side of Frege’s line, namely, for instance, simple pieces of meat, are not outside the reach of reason. Having the experience of a piece of meat draws passively on conceptual capacities, that is, capacities that belong to reason, our rationality. In this sense, nonconceptual things fall under concepts, and, in this sense, they are within the reach of reason. Simple pieces of meat, then, are not excluded from bearing us rationally on what to think and from reason’s reach. Finally, by McDowell’s lights, this means that if experiences are actualization of conceptual capacities, then they must certainly have conceptual content (McDowell, 2008: 260).

Part 3: The debate over the Myth of the Given

As we have seen so far, McDowell and Travis think in different ways and they have a different understanding of how perceptual experience bears us rationally on what to think.

In a similar vein, they gravely disagree about what is involved in the idea of the Myth of the Given and whether there is something mythical about the Myth of the Given, or whether the Myth of the Given is something that exists. In what follows, I will be undertaking to show what the disagreement over the Myth of the Given between the two thinkers consists in. I will commence my analysis with how McDowell understands the Myth here and what his criticism against Travis is concerning this issue. I will then articulate Travis' views on that matter. Finally, I argue for and defend McDowell against Travis' contention that his (of McDowell) conception of perceptual experience prevents us from experiencing the objects of the external mind-independent reality themselves.

3.1. McDowell's conception of the Myth of Given and his criticism of Travis

One of the most fundamental dimensions of McDowell's conception of perception and perceptual experience is to define what our experiences ought to involve to for them to be capable of opening us (rationally) to the external reality in the first place. So far, we have seen that the above, for McDowell, involves the idea that perceptual experience must be conceptual, that is, must have conceptual content. This for him amounts importantly to the idea that what is supposedly given to us should be something that rationally regulates our beliefs or judgments. For McDowell, these views on conceptualism concerning perceptual experience are motivated by a strenuous effort to avoid the Myth of the Given.

The debate over the Myth of the Given is a debate concerning the nature of that that is given in our experiences. The word “given” here in referring to what our experiences give us is used metaphorically since it refers to the sensory deliverances that our senses provide us. There are different formulations of the Myth of the Given which, as Gersel (2018: 77-79)

rightly points out, highlight its incontestability and substantiality concerning how we should conceive our theories so as to not fall prey to it.

As I see it, a basic formulation of the Myth of the Given refers to "the supposed idea of an availability for knowledge (in a demanding sense involving the idea of a standing in the space of reasons) that presupposes nothing about the knower except, perhaps, natural endowments, for instance, sensory capacities -an availability for knowledge that presupposes no learning or acculturation " (McDowell, 2008: 208).

On this definition of the Myth, then, it is obvious, as we have seen, that McDowell takes it that (acquired) conceptual capacities should be actualized within perceptual experience itself. Therefore, on this view only if we put our most elementary and immediate access to the world firmly within the space of reasons, that is, the space of rational relations, can our sensory deliverances be rationally connected to the world; only in this way, then, our sensory deliverances can they be considered as capable of serving as evidence for the justification of our beliefs and judgments about the empirical world.

For McDowell, then, a theory that denies conceptualism is a form of the myth of the Given. As Gersel (2018: 77-79) shows, McDowell believes strongly that the idea of the Myth of the Given leads to the view that the only acceptable theory of perception and perceptual experience is a theory that accepts conceptualism. It is in this sense that the Myth imposes a substantial constraint on any theory of perception. Avoiding the Myth of the Given then involves the endorsement of conceptualism as the only remedy of it. The idea of the incontestability of the Myth refers to the idea that any theory that does not accept conceptualism is, according to McDowell, incoherent. Having said the above, let's now see why McDowell accuses Travis' conception of perception of falling prey to the Myth of the Given.

As I have briefly shown and will further expound in the next section of this unit, for Travis what is given to us in perception and our experiences is particular things, ‘the things being as they are’, for instance, a mere piece of meat. For Travis, this is something perception directly presents us since it “simply places our surroundings in view” (Travis, 2013: 31). When it comes to the issue of what is given to us in perception bear us rationally on what we should think, Travis thinks that this is something we do in *response* to perception through our recognitional capacities alone. Travis then thinks that what is given to us in perception is devoid of any generality; that is, not drawing passively in conceptual capacities, it is not conceptually structured in any way whatsoever. Only in response to the brute effect of the external world which provides us with the particular objects of perception, we come to carve up what is given to us according to our recognitional capacities.

McDowell thinks that the idea that a piece of meat can impinge (causally) on the subject’s perceptual apparatus and rationality -that is, without conceptual capacities that belong to our rationality being actualized- is unacceptable, and, in this sense, it is a version of the Myth of the Given. This version of the Myth is embodied in Travis’ conception of perception. McDowell then believes that Travis falls prey to the Myth of the Given because Travis’ conception of perception embodies this idea of causal impingement: his conception of perception is just a matter of the stimuli which start from our retinas, are transformed into images, and then are further processed through the workings of other mechanisms. Travis calls this whole process “Stuff Happens” (Travis, 2013: 9). This image of impingement, then, is the image of the external world which has a brute (causal) effect on our sensory apparatus and rationality without the passive actualization of our conceptual capacities *within* perceptual experience itself. In Travis’ view, we come to rationally and conceptually partition things only in response to the sensory deliverances of our senses

which are devoid of anything conceptual whatsoever. McDowell states clearly this criticism against Travis:

“On Travis's account, capacities that are distinctive to us as rational animals are in act only in our responses to the things to which we stand in relation to having them perceptually given to us; operations of such capacities do not enter into the constitution of the relation itself” (McDowell, 2018: 24).

Therefore, Travis’ approach to perception falls prey to the Myth of the Given because, by McDowell’s lights, his view on perception is one in which how we bear rationally on the external reality is provided by sensibility alone, without passively conceptual capacities being drawn on. For McDowell, then, such deliverances that sensibility alone can provide us due to they are independent of conceptual capacities, and, therefore, “ cannot ground the knowing of anything else, as traditional empiricism makes out that it does” (McDowell, 2009: 110). Here, however, there is a stronger conclusion that is made: that Travis’ theory of perception makes the world alien to our reason. It is in this sense, that for McDowell, Travis’ theory of perception is a version of the Myth of the Given.

Finally, McDowell complains that Travis in his theory of perception postulates fact-like items which can be stated in phrases like “Sid’s being as he is” or “things being as they are” (McDowell, 2018: 34). These items that McDowell highlights are, as we have seen, Travis’ particular things, the nonconceptual items, which he takes to be the objects of perception. McDowell, then, contends that the abovementioned items, the fact-like nonconceptual-particular things, that Travis appeals to, drawing on a passage from Frege, are impossible on grammatical grounds.⁷

⁷ See (Travis, 2013: 236) where Travis quotes Frege concerning this issue.

McDowell begins his analysis by pointing out that in the phrase “Sid’s being as he is” the “being” has the grammatical status of the copula, and, in this sense, he contends that the same goes for the phrase “things being as they are”. From this remark, McDowell claims that these two phrases have the logical form of a proposition, and, in this sense, they specify something that has the logical character of the generality of Travis' conception of thought as the way for a thing to be. McDowell, then, contends that such a phrase is something conceptual, and, hence, it belongs to the second side of Travis’ distinction between particular things and generalities. Accordingly, he claims that the phrase ‘Sid’s being as he is’ and the phrase ‘Sid’s being engaged in eating peanuts’ cannot belong to opposite sides of Travis’ distinction. McDowell contends that the correct way to interpret the phrase 'Sid's being as he is' is that the 'being as he is' expresses a general way for a thing to be: "for any way Sid is, his being as he is includes his being that way" (McDowell, 2018: 33). It is in this sense, McDowell believes, that the phrase "Sid's being as he is" expresses something conceptual.

From this analysis, and through a discussion of Frege, McDowell concludes that the fact-like nonconceptual items (“Sid’s being as he is”) that Travis invokes and employs in his theory of perception are a mere invention, and, in this sense, they are mythical (McDowell, 2018: 35). They are mythical because, on grammatical grounds, they are untenable and, therefore, cannot be what Travis wants them to be and, accordingly, play the (explanatory) role that he envisages them in his conception of perception, that is, bear rationally for us on the external reality by making our judgments true. Hence, from this aspect, since his theory of perception appeals to such mythical items, it falls prey to the Myth of the Given.

3.2. Travis' 'Move'. Or: why the Myth of the Given is not a Myth but a Dogma

Travis' disagreement on the issue of the Myth of the Given has its roots in his views on truth and, then, accordingly, on the role of perception and perceptual experience in opening up the world to us. Travis believes two things concerning this dimension of his debate with McDowell: I) that his theory of perception does not fall prey to the Myth of the Given, while renouncing the idea that in perception and perceptual experiences we need to posit conceptual content additionally, II) he denies the existence of any such thing as the Myth of the Given, and, therefore, he denies that there is anything mythical to any theory that transgress the boundaries of McDowell's conception of the Myth of the Given. Let's unpack each of these two claims.

Travis' theory of perception begins from a very simple fact: perception makes us directly aware of what surrounds us in our environment, that is, with things being as they are. Therefore, he adopts a direct realist approach to perception: perception makes us directly aware of what is before our eyes. Travis does not confine this view to our capacity for sight, but he believes that this is also the case for hearing and the other senses. I have already indicated that part of this conception of perception is just a matter of the stimuli which start from our retinas and through other mechanisms and processes deliver us awareness of the environment that surrounds us.

From this approach to perception, Travis proceeds by claiming that the further role of perception is to provide us with a specific sort of acquaintance: it provides acquaintance of the things being as they are, that is, of the particular things that surround us in our environment. Perception, in affording us awareness of the scene that is before our eyes, allows us to exercise our recognitional capacities. Our recognitional capacities alone are what enables us to extract information contained in what is given to us in perceiving things

in our environment. The above view is for Travis a fundamental insight in how perception makes the world bear us rationally on what to think, and, in this sense, gives rise to our judgements. From this set of ideas, Travis arrives at a view concerning the way our responses to what perception provides us can be rational.

Travis believes importantly that the transition from the particular things that perception provides us to the formation of our judgments is not a logical one, that is, an inferential relation. In perceiving things and making judgments about them we do not make inferences. For him, such inferences and logical relations belong to the conceptual realm. As we have seen, he conceives truth as an instancing relation between a generality (the conceptual) and the particular things that instance the generality (the non-conceptual). The rational relations and ‘moves’, then, for Travis, between what perception directly provides us, the historical, and the commitments we make in our judgments that we make subsequently, are not relations and moves within the realm of the conceptual. It is a move from a particular case, that is, something nonconceptual, the thing being as it is, to something general, that is, to something conceptual which refers to a way for a thing to be. Travis, also, thinks that this ‘Move’ here consists in the passage across two categorically different sorts of things: from things that are given directly in perception, that is, historical presences, to things that exhibit generality and, in this sense, are not perceivable.

In this sense, the rational relation of seeing a pig snuffling in being as it is in our environment and the recognition or the judgment that it is a case of a pig snuffling is a relation between something non-conceptual and conceptual. It is at this point that Travis parts ways significantly from McDowell's view on what it is when we are talking about rational relations and how he conceives the idea of the Myth of the Given.

Travis disagrees with McDowell at this point, because he thinks that McDowell confines rational relations only within the conceptual, that is, only within things that exhibit some sort of generality. This, for him, is something unacceptable. The conceptual, as I have already highlighted, being a generality that ranges over particular things, is for Travis something not perceivable. Therefore, Travis here disagrees with McDowell because he thinks that perception does not have the role of supplying us with acquaintance of the conceptual, that is, with something that has an inherent element of generality, and that perception itself is not even able to supply us with acquaintance of something like that. The most that perception and perceptual experience can do is to provide us with acquaintance of particular things, that is, ‘a historical instance’ of the conceptual which, for Travis, is what is before our eyes.

Now, Travis, in advocating the above-mentioned views on perception and its role arrives at some views concerning McDowell’s conception of the Myth of the Given. Travis contends that behind the idea of the Myth of the Given, in the way McDowell conceives it lurks another view which he calls the ‘Dogma’. This view refers to the idea that the Myth of the Given is motivated by the inability to see that reason, that is, our rational capacities, can reach the particular cases and things of the external reality themselves. In other words, Travis thinks that the Myth is motivated by our inability, and McDowell’s inability, to see that perception can directly present us with the particular cases and things themselves that surrounds us in our environment, and that only in actively responding through the exercise of our recognitional capacities alone, do we come to rationally recognize them as falling under generalities, that is, concepts (Travis, 2018a: 39-40). Hence, the ‘Dogma’ here refers to a view in which the reach of reason is conceived in a restricted sense, and, according to it, any view that contravenes these boundaries is a version of the Myth.

To show this view that is behind the idea of the Myth Travis focuses his discussion on events. He contends that when I'm seeing an event such as "Pia launches a left hook at the upside of Sid's head" (Travis' example) the relation here is that of a move from a "particular event" to "a way for an event to be". From this respect, Travis thinks that the move here is from something that is non-conceptual and, in this sense, "ineligible to be either true or false" to something conceptual/general that is "eligible to be true or false (or so or not so)" (Travis, 2018a: 40). Travis, then, concludes that the above-mentioned relation is not one of truth-transmitting, for there is no truth to be transmitted. The particular cases that Travis here appeals to in the form of particular and concrete events are things in the world that is, cases of Travis' notion of the historical. Things in the world alone cannot be either true or false. In the same manner, the particular case of the piece of meat alone cannot be either true or false. What can be either true or false are only propositions such as that "the meat is on the rug" which are made true by the particular things of the external reality.

For McDowell, the idea of particular events as proper objects that are given in our experience and perception is something unacceptable, because, for him, there is no such thing as the particular event of "Pia launching a left hook at the upside of Sid's head" without the presence of some inherent generality in it. We saw that for McDowell such items, what he calls as fact-like items, are mythical. Therefore, thinking in the way that Travis thinks is, for him, a case of the Myth of the Given.

Travis denies precisely this idea of McDowell. He thinks that McDowell's view neglects such cases and that if we follow it then such particular events could not be able to "start a proof" (Travis, 2018a: 39), that is, they could figure as (conclusive) reasons or as the ground for the truth of our judgments. In this sense, our rational recognitional capacities would not be able to make us recognize them. This is because, according to Travis, McDowell's

conception of perception and perceptual experience being conceptual allow only truth-transmitting relations between things that are already truth-laden; that is, things that are already conceptually-structured and, thus, according to him, being representational bear truth conditions in presenting the world in a certain way. The relation, then, between what is given to us in perception and what we make of it in our judgments, is of a truth-transmitting relation.

Travis through his examples concerning events (Travis, 2018a: 39-40) tries to show that this is something wrong since what is given in perception is particular things that do not bear any truth or falsity. The move then is from something that does not any truth to something to something that has truth and, thus, bears *truth-preserving* relations to this former (particular) thing (Travis, 2018a: 40). What bears truth-preserving relations to the particular things is our judgments or everything that is an item within “the conceptual”. These latter, being something general, intrinsically, according to Travis, reach to the particulars which instance it. That it is intrinsic to a thought that it reaches the historical means that it is not the special form of the constitutive relation itself that, as McDowell would contend, rationally gives raise to our discursive thought and saves us from the jeopardy of the Myth of the Given. For Travis, the unfolding of the historical before our eyes is what does all the work. The world relatum which is the historical is what intrinsically a thought points to or reaches.

Through our recognitional capacities alone, Travis thinks, we come to rationally appreciate such truth-preserving moves. For Travis, to rationally judge something to be the case is to recognize the instancing of the way for things to be by the particular things in being as they are. The rationality of our judgments, then, does not depend on what is given to us in having

any special form, or on any self-conscious awareness of how the things that are passively given to us give us reasons as such to judge them a way for them to be.

In this sense, Travis denies that and strongly disagrees with McDowell that his conception of perception falls prey to the Myth. Perception confronts us with what is there in the external reality, and this cannot be taken as things being either in some certain way or some (general) way. In other words, he denies that there is an element of generality that is common in the given perceptual empirical objects and our judgments that warrant them. It is only in response, through our recognitional capacities alone, under suitable conditions, to what perception confronts us that we form perceptual judgments. For Travis, McDowell's contention that such an approach to perception is a form of the Myth is based on a view that is merely a Dogma. There is nothing mythical in such a conception of perception and perceptual awareness, according to Travis, and in any theory that goes beyond what McDowell believes as being the boundaries of the pernicious Myth of the Given. For Travis then the Myth of the Given is just a myth of the Myth, since there is no such a thing (Travis, 2018a: 40).

Now, Travis, also, accuses McDowell that he posits representational-conceptual content, and, in this way, he posits something extraneous in perceptual experience (Travis, 2017: 231). Travis, then, contends that if our experiences are infused with conceptual content then what our experiences would bring us into contact with would be propositional content (Gersel, 2018: 86). However, Travis thinks that a proposition, and, to that extent, propositional content, is something that exhibits generality, and, in this sense, it is something that is abstract. This, for him, means that a proposition alone cannot be either true or false since there is a plethora of ways through which could be made true.

For instance, the proposition “that dog there is running”, despite that it has a singularity, could be made true in a variety of ways: it could be a brown-haired dog or a white-haired one, or it might be without a tail, or running in a forest, in the morning, and so on. We need to take particular stance on it, and for Travis, this means that the proposition “that dog there is running” can principally and at the most basic level be made true by an absolutely particular and unrepeatable state of the world (Gersel, 2018: 86).

Now, if the above is the case, Travis thinks that McDowell is wrong in thinking that what is distinctive in enjoying a perceptual experience is that it has a certain structure via its conceptual content, and, in this sense, that it presents us with something which has a generality. If that was the case, our experiences would bring us into contact not, with the particular objects of the external reality which ultimately make our judgments true, but, according to Travis, with propositional content. For Travis, such thing cannot be the object of our perceptual experiences since the objects of our experiences cannot be susceptible to have such a structure. Therefore, Travis thinks that what our experiences must ultimately bring us into contact with is the historical, that is, the particular things that unfold before our eyes in the external mind-independent reality. It is the particular cases and episodes of the historical that make our empirical propositions true. From this analysis, Travis concludes that the Myth of the Given is not something that exists since it is not truly a Myth.

Travis arrives at this conclusion because he thinks that McDowell’s contention and requirement that our experiences must provide us and serve as reasons for our thoughts or judgments to make them true, that is, Minimal Empiricism, cannot be met and satisfied. For if our experiences were infused with conceptual content, then they could not bring us into contact with the particular things of the empirical external reality which, for Travis,

are ultimately what make our judgments true by forming reasons for them. Therefore, McDowell's contention that it is a version of the Myth if we conceive perceptual experience and perception without postulating conceptual content is untenable. Hence, there is nothing mythical to a theory such as that of Travis, and the Myth then cannot exist.

3.3. What do we perceive?

As we have seen, the main thrust of Travis' argumentation against McDowell concerning the existence of the Myth of the Given is that if we follow McDowell in postulating conceptual content, then we are lead to thesis in which what is given to us are propositions, and in this sense, we are cut off from the external reality since what we perceive and what our experiences bring us into contact are not external particular things. In this section, I want to argue that Travis is wrong in this contention against McDowell. This is also partly a response to Travis' criticism of McDowell's notion of a common function of unification which takes place at the level of experience.

McDowell clearly states that in our experiences "objects are perceptually given to us for being brought under concepts" (McDowell, 2018: 24). Therefore, what our perceptual experience brings us into contact with are the objects of the external reality themselves. In this respect, what McDowell contends when he says that our experiences have content which is conceptually structured is the following: our experiences bring us into contact with the objects of the mind-independent external reality themselves, such as tables, trees, cars, bags, and so on, which *are brought under concepts* through the passive actualization of conceptual capacities. These conceptual capacities are implicated in our experience by the involvement of the understanding in it. It seems to me, then, that Travis misinterprets McDowell's thesis or, we could also say, he tries to put on McDowell's mouth things that

we cannot find in his analysis, at least in his analysis of perception and perceptual experience as this articulated in his later essays where he has abandoned the idea of propositional content and speaks of intuitional content.

Having said that, in our experiences, we encounter the objects themselves, but we encounter them, by McDowell lights, by seeing them to be some general ways. Therefore, McDowell's claim is that it is objects and their qualities that our experiences bring us into contact. Therefore, when we encounter these objects, we see them to be some general ways *we could also judge them to be*. This means that although our experiences are ultimately conceptual, this does not mean that what we experience are conceptual items (Gersel, 2018: 87). Our experience presents us with objects of the external mind-independent reality -what Travis takes it to be as something nonconceptual-, but this presentation is a presentation of these nonconceptual objects *as falling under concepts*, and it is in this way that, for McDowell, we also importantly, if it is to bear rationally on the external world, see them to be some general ways we could also judge them to be.

Conclusion

I started this thesis, in the introduction, with the core question of how enjoying a perceptual experience can bear us rationally on what we should think. From that point on, I gradually started unraveling the skein of the complex issues and different dimensions through which both thinkers provide answers to the above query.

In the first part of my thesis, after the discussion of McDowell's conception of perceptual experience in *Mind and World*, I discussed some central difficulties that Travis, through his argument from looks, poses to representationalist approaches to perception. In essence,

Travis shows the difficulties that such approaches to perception face taken in their own terms, that is, according to their theoretical commitments.

For him, importantly, there is the question of what individuates the representational content of our experiences, and the question of what makes the representational content of our experiences recognizable and available to us. It seems to me that Travis' challenge concerning specifically the availability question -that is, what makes the representational-propositional content cognitively available to the subject- still poses a considerable difficulty and challenge to McDowell's and other representationalists' approaches to perception. It seems to me that McDowell came to see these difficulties in his account of perceptual experience as having propositional content in *Mind and World*, and, as I showed, he sharpened and refined his thesis later.

In the second part of this thesis, I expounded on the criticisms of Travis against McDowell's conceptualism. His criticism is directed against what he calls the 'Condition' which credits McDowell to hold. I demonstrated that much of Travis' criticism is based on his views on truth, that is, on the view that a particular thing instances a generality that ranges over it. From that, one fundamental claim of Travis is that if anything can play the role of providing us with reasons for our thoughts and judgments in bearing us rationally on the external reality, then this thing must be possibly something nonconceptual. From this aspect, Travis, also, takes issue with and rejects McDowell's notion of a common function of unification which takes place at the level of experience. Finally, I showed, by expounding briefly on McDowell's view on the 'Unboundness of the Conceptual', why Travis' criticism against McDowell's conceptualism does not do justice to the thesis of the latter.

In the third part of this thesis, I expounded on the debate between the two thinkers over the Myth of the Given. McDowell's fundamental thesis is that Travis' view on perception is

one in which how we bear rationally on the external reality is provided by sensibility alone, without passively conceptual capacities being drawn on. My discussion on this matter showed that for McDowell Travis' version of the Myth is one in which the objects of the external reality impinge on our sensory apparatus without conceptual capacities being actualized. He also contends that Travis' particular things, the things being they are, are mythical items that Travis postulates in his theory of perception.

Travis, on the other hand, rejects the existence of the Myth, and, accordingly, he believes that his theory does not fall victim into the Myth. In my discussion, I showed that Travis tries to respond to McDowell's criticism by arguing that what underlies the Myth is a restricted view on the limits of reason, what he calls 'the Dogma'. Much of Travis' discussion in this part aims also to provide a response to McDowell's claim and accusation of 'mythical' items. Travis also argues that the Myth of the Given does not exist. His main contention is that if we follow McDowell and conceive perceptual experience as having conceptual content, then what our experiences would bring us into contact would be propositional content. From this, he concludes that the requirements of McDowell's Minimal Empiricism cannot be satisfied, and, therefore, the Myth is something that does not exist.

Finally, I defended McDowell and argued against Travis' accusation that McDowell's conceptualism leads us to a thesis in which what is given to us are propositions, and in this sense what we perceive and what our experiences bring us into contact are not the particular things of the external reality. What I examined is whether indeed McDowell endorses such a thesis or if we can even extract such a view from what he really contends. I argued that McDowell claims that our experience presents us with objects of the external mind-independent reality and their properties. When one enjoys a perceptual experience or

perceives something, what is given to her or what she perceives are the objects of mind-independent external reality and their properties as falling under concepts, and it is in this manner that, for McDowell, we importantly also see them to be some general ways that we could also judge them to be.

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