EXPERIENCE AND THE WORLD OF THE LIVING:

A CRITIQUE OF JOHN MCDOWELL’S CONCEPTION OF EXPERIENCE AND NATURE

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2007

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ABSTRACT

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John McDowell’s work (in Mind and World and elsewhere) has largely been devoted to two main objectives: 1) defending a non-traditional form of empiricism; and 2) articulating a revised conception of nature. McDowell sees these two objectives as connected. He wants to defend a conception of experience as involving the reception of conceptual “impressions” from the world. But, he sees that such a conception of experience seems to be blocked by a dominant form of naturalism which views nature as devoid of value and meaning. Such a “disenchanted” view of nature makes it impossible to combine the idea that impressions are impacts from the world with the idea that impressions are conceptually structured (by human minds). McDowell’s solution to this problem involves “re-enchanting” or revising naturalism so that nature can be understood as incorporating a “second nature”. McDowell’s notion of second nature is intended to “make room” (in nature) for the idea that the world’s impacts on the sensory faculties of concept-using human beings can be already imbued with intentionality.

I agree with McDowell that both our concept of experience and our concept of nature are in need of revision. But, I disagree with (and critique) the revised conceptions that McDowell proposes. McDowell’s view is that experience should be conceived in terms of “subjects” passively receiving conceptual contents (or “impressions”) from the world. I criticize McDowell’s conception of experience for focusing on “subjects” who are passively acted upon by the world. Instead, I argue that experience needs to be conceived as an agential interaction,
which involves organisms actively doing and undergoing things. Because McDowell conceives of experience in terms of being subject to passive transactions, his revision of naturalism does not challenge the widespread conception of nature as exhausted by passive relations, a conception which, I argue, extrudes agency from nature. Instead, he advocates for the idea of a second nature that simply “makes room” in nature for passive relations to be concept-involving.

In this dissertation I charge that McDowell’s re-conception of nature does not go far enough. Nature, I argue, needs to be re-enchanted with more than just concepts; it needs to be re-enchanted with active relations. Thus, I argue for a different idea of second nature, one which includes all living organisms, not just concept-using creatures. I argue that the sort of relations that occur in the world of the living—i.e. my conception of second nature—are fundamentally distinct from the inanimate, passive relations that occur in first nature. Relations in second nature are “active” because they involve organisms doing things to their environment in an effort to utilize energy for the process of living. Experience, accordingly, must be understood as an agential relation; thus I argue that “experience” is a term that essentially refers to the doings and undergoings of living organisms.
To Michelle and family:
for their support and encouragement.
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INTRODUCTION

NATURALISM, EXPERIENTIAL AGENCY, AND THE WORLD OF THE LIVING

As the title suggests, this dissertation claims only to offer a critique of John McDowell’s conceptions of “experience” and “nature”. But, in my eyes at least, it tries to do much more than that. I think it ought to be seen as something more than a mere critique, that is, as a piece of positive philosophizing. The sort of philosophy it espouses—if it can indeed be seen in that light—is grounded upon a view of nature that can best be seen as a form of pragmatic naturalism.1 Specifically, I have largely been inspired by the work of John Dewey. In fact, the title of this dissertation is intended to allude to what is considered by many to be the greatest work of that American philosophical naturalist: *Experience and Nature*.

I have framed this project in terms of a commentary on and critique of the work of a single contemporary philosopher: John McDowell. I think that John McDowell is the appropriate target because a major theme running throughout his work is the articulation of a new, more liberal naturalism. McDowell has proposed the idea that there can be “Two Sorts of

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1 See, e.g., S. Morris Eames, *Pragmatic Naturalism: An Introduction*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977. Eames generally associates the term “pragmatic naturalism” with the pragmatic philosophy espoused by Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead. However, I have something more specific in mind when I use the term “pragmatic naturalism.” My use of the term is meant to refer to a form of naturalism that is pluralistic about natural relations. By contrast, traditional, scientistic naturalism tends to be monistic about natural relations, seeking to reduce all relations in nature to causal relations. The form of pragmatic naturalism that I defend in this dissertation is “pluralistic” because it admits not only causal relations but also, specifically, agential relations—which I take to be a natural, non-causal relation. I cannot defend this point here; I begin to offer a defense for such a view in Chapter Three.
Naturalism,” corresponding to two conceptions of nature: first nature and second nature.²

McDowell critiques a more restrictive, scientistic naturalism which he calls the “disenchanted view of nature.” According to the disenchanted conception of nature, “something’s way of being natural is its position in the realm of law.” McDowell’s complaint is that this picture of nature as exhausted by first nature threatens “to empty it of meaning.”

In response to the disenchanted view of nature, McDowell articulates a conception of “second nature”, which is intended to naturalize the space of reasons, or, alternately, the space of concepts. McDowell thinks that intentionality can only be naturalized if the space of concepts is already seen as occupying a part of the space of nature. Hence, when he talks about re-enchanting nature, he means to incorporate into our ordinary understanding of “nature” relations in the space of reasons—relations (or concepts) such as warrant, justification, aboutness, answerability, in short, normative, epistemological notions such as giving and asking for reasons. McDowell describes his re-enchantment of nature as “making room” in nature for the inclusion of conceptual content. He then discusses the acquired ability of second nature as a capacity to “resonate to the space of reasons.” The idea is that the acquisition of second nature affords human beings the capacity to have experience, which he conceives as the passive reception of conceptual contents.

I agree with McDowell’s basic strategy of articulating a more relaxed conception of naturalism, one that can include the idea of a first nature and a second nature. But, I critique his particular revision of naturalism as still being committed to a view of natural relations as exhausted by passive occurrences or mere happenings. McDowell’s response simply incorporates conceptual relations (or “impressions”) in this space of passive occurrences. In

contrast to this passive view of natural relations, I propose an alternative relaxed naturalism, one that views natural relations as divided into two basic types: active relations and passive relations. Passive relations apply to inanimate objects—the scope of such relations extend to what I call (following McDowell’s locution) first nature. Active relations, by contrast, apply to all living organisms (not just concept-using creatures) and they differ from passive relations in that living things are active: they do and undergo things by utilizing energy in the process of living. So when I use the term second nature I mean to refer to the relations of living agents. Accordingly, my conception of experience differs from McDowell in that I view experience as involving the active relation of doing and undergoing.

I think that the most devastating effect that passive naturalism has is on our conception of experience and agency. The overall thrust of my critique is that a passive naturalism simply cannot account for agency and action. Passive naturalism, I argue, thus results in a deformed picture of experience, one in which experience is understood merely an undergoing—i.e., as a state or episode of awareness or consciousness of content, a mere “impression”. As such, the conception of experience that I attack is one that takes humans and animals to be passive subjects rather than agents.

Informally, the dissertation can be understood as divided into two parts. Part one could be entitled: “an exploration and analysis of the epistemology of John McDowell.” It would consist of the first two chapters. Chapter one is an attempt to provide a charitable and objective reconstruction of the basic structure of McDowell’s argument in *Mind and World* and his defense of a non-traditional empiricism and an accompanying re-enchantment of nature. The second chapter also aims to be charitable to McDowell; it essentially endeavors to defend his view against recent attacks from anti-empiricists like Davidson and Rorty.
Part two of the dissertation can be understood to consist of the final two chapters, in which I provide a critique of McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature. He sees “nature” as being grounded in passive relations—relations in which one thing is passively acted upon by another. Chapter three lays out my criticism of the particular way that he divides up nature into first nature and second nature. In that chapter I provide reasons for thinking that second nature cannot be properly understood as resting upon a picture of natural relations as passive occurrences. I describe first nature as the realm in which inanimate objects are subject to the passive forces of cause-effect relations; and, I describe second nature as the world of the living—the world of active, non-causal relations in which living organisms (agents) do and undergo things. In the final chapter I focus more on exposing the flaws in McDowell’s account that result from his continued attachment to a passive conception of natural relations. I argue that the reliance upon a passive view of natural relations results in the inability to coherently naturalize experience, education, and free-agency itself.
CHAPTER I

MAKING IT SAFE FOR INTENTIONALITY: MCDOWELL’S RE-ENCHANTMENT OF NATURE

Introduction: The Disenchanted View of Nature and the Interminable Oscillation

John McDowell describes his project in *Mind and World* as an attempt to defend a non-traditional form of empiricism, which he calls “minimal empiricism”. According to minimal empiricism,

the very idea of thought’s directedness at the empirical world is intelligible only in terms of answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects.¹

The idea that thought can be about the world—i.e., “thought’s directedness at the empirical world”—is the idea of intentionality. McDowell thinks that intentionality must be a rational relation, in the sense that it requires conceptual capacities to categorize or represent the world as being some such way or other.² But, McDowell notes, this idea of intentionality has been made to seem problematic due to a “characteristically modern conception [of nature] according to

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² McDowell says: “So the picture is this: the fact that thoughts are not empty, the fact that thoughts have representational content, emerges out of an interplay of concepts and intuitions” (*MW*, p. 4, emphasis added).
which something’s way of being natural is its position in the realm of law.”3 This “disenchanted picture of nature”, as McDowell calls it, excludes descriptions in terms of the “space of reasons”, and so it forces us to see conceptual or rational relations—“relations such as one thing’s being warranted, or…correct, in the light of another”—as extra-natural events.4 McDowell’s project, then, involves re-enchanting our conception of nature so as to make it safe for the notion of intentionality—i.e., safe for the idea that the world’s “impressing itself on perceiving subjects” can be simultaneously both a causal and a conceptual event. In this chapter I am going to describe McDowell’s attempt to defend this doctrine.

The first thing to be said about McDowell’s project is that his mode of argumentation is non-standard. Because McDowell considers the idea of minimal empiricism to be the default position—i.e., a matter of common sense—his strategy involves diagnosing certain background assumptions about nature that seem to stand in the way of its acceptance. His aim is to “exorcize” or cure philosophy of certain faulty naturalistic assumptions. Specifically, McDowell intends to expose and eradicate a tendency for epistemological theories to oscillate between two less than satisfactory positions: traditional, foundationalist empiricism and coherentism.

McDowell blames traditional empiricism for advancing an illegitimate view of what it means for “the world to impress itself on perceiving subjects.” Because of the distorting influence of the disenchanted view of nature, McDowell suggests that traditional empiricism conceives of the worldly effects on a person’s sensory capacities, i.e. “impressions”, as non-conceptual events. As a result, traditional empiricism, according to McDowell, goes on to mistakenly assume that a non-conceptual notion of impressions can rationally ground beliefs or world-views. But McDowell rejects the idea that such non-conceptual, merely causal,

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3 MW, p. 74.  
4 MW, p. xv.
impressions—i.e. the “Given”—can stand in justificatory or rational relations to beliefs. Here McDowell admits to following Wilfrid Sellars in complaining that such a notion of justification falls into the Myth of the Given.

The coherentist also recognizes that the Myth of the Given is a myth, which is to say that he recognizes that it is impossible for non-conceptual experiences to justify beliefs. According to the coherentist, then, the only thing that can justify a belief is something that is also conceptual or rational, and since experiences—causally conceived (a la traditional empiricism)—are non-conceptual, they cannot justify beliefs. Therefore, the coherentist concludes that only other beliefs—not experiences—can stand as justifications or warrants for holding a particular belief. But McDowell complains that the coherentist’s resulting notion of “beliefs”—as conceptually segregated from sensory experience—lacks the sort of world-directedness that is fundamental to intentional content. Hence McDowell ridicules the coherentist’s conception of beliefs as lacking “friction” with the world. In short, McDowell finds both coherentism and the Myth of the Given to be unsatisfactory views.

Not only does McDowell complain that both positions are unsatisfactory, he adds that epistemology itself has typically been pulled in either of these two unsatisfactory directions by a naturalistic impulse to view passive, causal impacts—like impressions—as excluded from the conceptual sphere. So, as Hilary Putnam describes it,

What Coherentism and the Myth of the Given share is the assumption that if the deliverances of the senses are purely natural, then they cannot also be conceptually structured. It is the picture of sensory experience as non-conceptual that drives the Coherentist to deny that they can justify anything and the believer in the Myth of the
Given to postulate that there is a form of justification that is non-conceptual, and hence not subject to rational criticism.\(^5\)

McDowell suggests that the only way to end this oscillation is to achieve two desiderata: “to attain a conception of...experience which lets its relation to our empirical beliefs be a rational one and at the same time allows experience to emerge as a real worldly constraint on our thought.”\(^6\) But, as McDowell sees it, the disenchanted view of nature stands as an obstacle for this conception of experience because it forces us to see natural events—like “the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects”—as devoid of conceptual content. So, as McDowell puts it, “Empirical content looks problematic, in the way I aim to deal with, when one becomes inexplicitly aware of an apparent tension between empiricism and the fact that the idea of an impression is the idea of an occurrence in nature.”\(^7\) McDowell thinks that this tension can only be resolved by re-enchanting our conception of nature.

In the first two sections of this chapter I will describe the two “poles” of the “oscillation”, i.e., what McDowell refers to as the “Myth of the Given” and “unconstrained coherentism”. In the final section of the chapter I will describe McDowell’s alternative route, i.e., his conception of experiences as passive impressions that are both causal and conceptual events, and, his corresponding proposal of a re-enchantment of nature.

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\(^6\) Crispin Wright, “Human Nature?”, RMW, p. 141

\(^7\) MW, p. xxi.
Traditional Empiricism and the Myth of the Given

1. Even though McDowell rejects traditional empiricism, he thinks that it is motivated by a plausible (and salvageable) insight: viz. the idea that we can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness, and we can understand answerability to the empirical world only as mediated by answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world’s direct impacts on possessors of perceptual capacities.

The plausible insight is the idea that experience can constitute a worldly constraint on the formation of our empirical beliefs. After all—an empiricist might point out—it is our predicament as human animals to confront the world by way of our five senses. And an obvious way to understand this confrontation or contact with the world is “in terms of the world’s impressing itself on perceiving subjects.” The conception of experience in terms of “impressions” can thus be considered a natural way to understand how our thoughts and beliefs about the world might be constrained by (and so be “answerable” to) something external to those thoughts and beliefs—viz. to the world itself.

So, the “plausible” insight that motivates empiricism, according to McDowell, is the idea that an empirical belief—i.e., a belief about the world—is subject to an external constraint due to “the world’s direct impacts on possessors of perceptual capacities.” As McDowell says:

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8 In fact, McDowell states that his goal in *Mind and World* is “to defend a non-traditional empiricism that retains the thought, inchoately present in traditional empiricism according to me, that the possibility of empirical objective content depends on a rational connection between experience and empirical belief” (John McDowell, “Response to Gregory McCulloch,” *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, p. 284).

9 *MW*, p. xvii.

10 *MW*, p. xvi.
The idea is that we can make sense of intellectual activity’s being correct or incorrect in the light of how things are in the world only if we can see it as, at least in part, answerable to impressions the world makes on us, as possessors of sensibility.\textsuperscript{11}

But this seemingly normative “answerability” requirement—viz. the idea that the “intellectual activity” of spontaneity can be correct or incorrect in the light of impressions the world makes on us—may also be seen to face the naturalist with a problem. For, as McDowell goes on to say, this felt requirement can easily seem impossible to satisfy. The notion of the world’s making an impression on a possessor of sensibility is on the face of it the notion of a kind of natural happening. As such it can seem to be excluded, on pain of naturalistic fallacy, from the special logical space—what Wilfrid Sellars calls ‘the logical space of reasons’—that we would have to be moving in when we take things to be related as tribunal and respondent.\textsuperscript{12}

The idea of a “logical space of reasons” is meant to capture the normative dimension of epistemological relations: “the idea that the understanding is a faculty of spontaneity—that conceptual capacities are capacities whose exercise is in the domain of responsible freedom.”\textsuperscript{13}

Events in this normative “space of reasons” are meant to be distinguished from the notion of mere “natural happenings”. But “Surely,” McDowell says, “such talk of impingements by the world is ‘empirical description’; or, to put the point in the variant terms I have introduced, the idea of receiving an impression is the idea of a transaction in nature.”\textsuperscript{14} So, at least according to the way that traditional empiricism conceives of impressions—viz. as causal “transactions” with the world—it does not seem like they could also be capable of standing in normative relations to

\textsuperscript{13}MW, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{14}MW, p. xv.
thoughts and beliefs. According to traditional empiricism, impressions are conceived as purely natural episodes of non-conceptual “awareness”. And, as such, the world’s causal impacts, or “impressions”, upon sensory receptors seems to represent operations in a different, non-normative “logical space”—viz. “the realm of law”.15

Conflating these two spaces—i.e., conceiving a mere cause as a justification or a rational warrant for a belief—is what (McDowell notes) Sellars has criticized as a “naturalistic fallacy”. As McDowell says,

the logical space in which talk of impressions belongs is not one in which things are connected by relations such as one thing’s being warranted or correct in the light of another. So if we conceive of experience as made up of impressions, on these [traditional empiricist] principles it cannot serve as a tribunal.16

The point of empiricism’s thinking of experience in terms of a “tribunal” is that it is supposed to capture the normative or evidential role that an experience can play with regard to the correctness or incorrectness of a belief; i.e., impressions are supposed to provide a worldly constraint on the formation of empirical beliefs. But the problem for traditional empiricism, as McDowell puts it, is that,

the idea of experience, at least construed in terms of impressions, evidently belongs in a logical space of natural connections. [And] That can easily make it seem that if we try to conceive experience as a tribunal, we must be falling into the naturalistic fallacy that Sellars depicts as a pitfall for would-be epistemologists.17

15 McDowell says: “We might say that to place something in nature on the relevant conception, as contrasted with placing it in the logical space of reasons, is to situate it in the realm of law. But what matters for Sellars’s point is not that or any other positive characterization, but the negative claim: whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are different in kind from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons” (MW, p. xv).
16 MW, p. xv.
17 MW, p. xvi.
So, as McDowell sees it, the traditional empiricist’s conception of experiences as natural occurrences has caused itself an epistemological dilemma. On the one hand, it says that sense experience can provide a worldly constraint on beliefs, yet on the other hand, it conceives of experience in such a way that it cannot serve as a justifier. As McDowell says, this problem or “tension” can look like an “antinomy”.\textsuperscript{18} Ultimately however, McDowell’s aim is to show that the appearance of an antinomy is simply the result of a disenchanted picture of nature. His goal is to re-enchant nature so that impressions can be both causal occurrences in nature—i.e., they can provide a worldly constraint on empirical beliefs—and conceptual occurrences as well—i.e., they can stand in justificatory relations to beliefs.

2. McDowell agrees with traditional empiricism that the main goal of our theorizing about the relation between mind and world in terms of “impressions” is to account for the idea that experience is a tribunal, i.e., that our thoughts are answerable to the world in the sense that they are rationally constrained (i.e. made true or false) by the world. In fact, McDowell considers this thought—that experience is a tribunal and can justify our empirical beliefs—to be the default view of common sense, and so, he thinks that it is in no need of philosophical defense.\textsuperscript{19} Rather, he thinks that some other plausible philosophical insight must be standing in the way of its legitimate acceptance. And indeed, McDowell suggests that there is another “frame of mind…that makes it hard to see how experience could function as a tribunal, delivering verdicts on our thinking.”\textsuperscript{20} Aside from that other “frame of mind”, however, McDowell thinks that the idea of “experience as a tribunal” is an idea that we should be looking to secure or vindicate; in

\textsuperscript{18} MW, p. xii.
\textsuperscript{19} See, e.g., Maximilian de Gaynesford, John McDowell, pp. 4-9.
\textsuperscript{20} MW, p. xii.
fact, that is why McDowell often refers to the idea as the “transcendental thought” or as a “minimal empiricism”. 21

Nonetheless, McDowell admits that traditional empiricism’s attempted defense of the transcendental thought is a failure. That is because, according to McDowell, traditional empiricism’s naturalistic conception of sensory experience forces impressions to be seen as bare presences—as something that is non-conceptually “Given”. For McDowell, this view of experience (in terms of Givenness) is what disqualifies it from playing any sort of justificatory role in relation to our empirical beliefs.

The idea of “Givenness” is the idea that there is “something given in experience independently of acquired conceptual capacities.” 22 In other words, it is the idea that the content of sensory experience can be non-conceptual. McDowell also describes the Given as “something that is simply received in experience,” a “non-conceptual deliverance of sensibility,” and a “bare presence”. 23 Thus theories that appeal to Givenness suppose that there is a pure, non-conceptual form of input passively received or Given in experience that is what serves as the justificatory basis or foundation for all of our beliefs and knowledge about the world. The justification provided to empirical beliefs, on such accounts, is thus understood as a matter of a conceptual belief matching up with, or corresponding to, a non-conceptual Given. According to such views, simply having the ability to see a plastic cup, e.g., can give one the (potential) ability to justify the conceptual belief that “that cup is made of plastic.” 24 That is, the world supposedly

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22 John McDowell, “Précis of Mind and World,” p. 365. McDowell distinguishes “non-conceptual content” from “representational content” in which one can take it that “such and such is the case”. Essentially though, McDowell doesn’t think that non-representational content is “content” at all. McDowell capitalizes the word “Given” in order to distinguish it from something conceptually given (small “g”), a concept he later appeal to. I follow his usage here.
23 MW, pp. 6, 39, & 19, respectively.
24 Of course epistemologists have provided lots of different stories about how a perception or sensation of x can cause a belief about x to be justified. Reliabilism, for example, offers one such story: viz. if the belief is formed on
constrains our empirical beliefs through the impacts of non-conceptual impressions upon our sensory faculties. It is in this sense that experience is purported to function as a “tribunal”, providing an “external constraint”—i.e., external to our conceptual capacities—on our thinking. So, as McDowell notes, justification, on this view, is supposed to take the form of simply “pointing” to a bit of the Given. In fact, the act of pointing would have to be the ultimate or final step that one could take in offering a justification for an empirical belief—an appeal to the Given, i.e., a bare, non-conceptual presence.

Traditional empiricism’s appeal to Givenness can thus be summarized by the following, simplified argument:

1. Experience is the passive, causal reception of non-conceptual sensory content (i.e., the Given).
2. Non-conceptual sensory content can justify beliefs.
3. Therefore, experience can justify beliefs.

The conclusion, (3), is just a re-statement of the plausible insight contained in the idea of a minimal empiricism, that is, the idea that experience can provide a worldly constraint on beliefs. McDowell’s long term goal in *Mind and World* is to preserve this insight, even though, as we will see later, he believes that both (1) and (2) are false. Premise (1) is a statement of traditional empiricism’s concept of experience. Experience, on that view, involves a passive, causal relation to sensory particulars—i.e., non-conceptual impressions. Premise (2) is a statement of

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25 *MW*, p. 39. McDowell adds that, “We fall into the Myth of the Given only if we suppose that this pointing would have to break out through a boundary that encloses the sphere of thinkable content.”
traditional empiricism’s notion of justification, namely, that non-conceptual sensory impressions can justify beliefs.

Ultimately, McDowell plans to show that the only way to save (3) is to modify both (1) and (2). But, before unveiling his own view, McDowell appeals to arguments given by Sellars and Davidson which reject the conclusion, (3), that experience (conceived as a passive occurrence) can justify a belief. Their arguments involve rejecting premise (2) on the grounds that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”26 This point about reasons for holding (or justifying) a belief is, in fact, the other plausible insight that stands in the way of accepting traditional empiricism’s idea of impressions as worldly constraints. It is important to note, however, that although McDowell invokes the views of Sellars and Davidson in his critique of the Myth of the Given, he thinks that their response to the Myth initiates the second phase of the “oscillation”. As McDowell describes the situation in Mind and World, Davidson (specifically) “recoils” from the idea of “Givenness” and so winds up defending a view—viz. coherentism—that definitely avoid it. But, McDowell says, “Davidson recoils from the Myth of the Given all the way to denying experience any justificatory role, and the coherentist upshot is a version of the conception of spontaneity as frictionless, the very thing that makes the idea of the Given attractive.”27 In section two we will examine this coherentist “recoil”, which initiates the second phase of the oscillation. In section three we will see that, although McDowell agrees with Davidson’s and Sellars’ critique of Givenness (i.e., their “insight” that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief”) he

27 MW, p. 14. As de Gaynesford says, “McDowell thinks Davidson ‘contrives’ to be ignorant of what is right about it (its ‘lure’), and hence falls into an opposed position that goes too far in the other direction (i.e. coherentism)” (de Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 100).
rejects the way that they “recoil” from it, viz. their coherentist response. Specifically, he disagrees with their conclusion that passively received experiences cannot justify beliefs.

3. So in a nutshell, the Myth of the Given is a *myth* because passively received non-conceptual impressions cannot be understood to justify beliefs. The problem with traditional empiricism’s notion of impressions as non-conceptual events is that such impressions are incapable of standing in rational relations to beliefs. Thus, according to Sellars and Davidson, premise (2) is a myth and should therefore be rejected. The reason that passive impressions cannot justify beliefs is because they are non-conceptual. Experience, as conceived of by traditional empiricism (viz. (1)), provides access only to *pure* “impressions”—images, or sensations, or qualia, or some other sort of non-conceptual intermediary. And since these things are simply “Given” to us in experience, they are “pure” in the sense of being uncontaminated by our abilities to categorize and conceptualize things. Hence, often the Given is described in terms of “impressions”, where the idea of an “impression” is spelled out in terms of non-conceptual impacts.\(^{28}\) Wilfrid Sellars, who initiated the attack on the Given in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, specifically targeted sense-datum theories. There, Sellars shows that the idea of being “aware of certain determinate sorts…simply by virtue of having sensations and images,” is a mere assumption, a Myth.\(^{29}\) And, he explains that, “There are various forms taken by the myth of the Given … but they all have in common the idea that the awareness of certain sorts—and by ‘sorts’ I have in mind, in the first instance, determinate sense repeatables—is a primordial, non-problematic feature of ‘immediate experience’. ”\(^{30}\) McDowell says that the form

\(^{28}\) Also, another way of attacking the idea of the Given is to point out that the notion of experience spelled out in terms of impressions is too *atomistic*. This approach, however, is not pursued by McDowell in *Mind and World*. 

\(^{29}\) Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 4.

of “the Myth of the Given...that concerns me is...the idea that non-conceptual occurrences in consciousness can rationally dictate, or sustain, or command, or warrant anything.”\textsuperscript{31} As Robert Brandom puts it, “The myth is the idea that one can coherently talk of experience both as not itself having a conceptual content and yet also as exercising the appropriate sort of rational constraint on empirical judgment.”\textsuperscript{32}

But of course McDowell agrees with Sellars’s and Davidson’s rejection of the Myth of the Given’s notion of justification. So, as McDowell sees it, the problem with the traditional notion of impressions as external constraints on belief formation is that it runs head-on into a second plausible insight. This second insight is referred to by Sellars—in his attack on the Myth of the Given—as a doctrine called “psychological nominalism”. Psychological nominalism is the idea that only something with a conceptual articulation can stand in a justificatory relation—a relation of warrant—to a belief. McDowell often sums up this competing insight by appealing to Davidson’s famous slogan: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”\textsuperscript{33} McDowell suggests that it is this very insight that motivates both Sellars and Davidson to reject the Myth. And McDowell too shares this insight with Sellars and Davidson, so he also agrees with their attack on the Myth of the Given. But, as we will see in the next section, McDowell rejects what he takes to be the conclusion that Sellars and Davidson draw, viz. that experience cannot justify.\textsuperscript{34}

In large part, Sellars’s complaints against the idea of Givenness stem from his adherence to the idea that the epistemological realm—the space of reasons or warrants—is a normative

\textsuperscript{31} McDowell, \textit{RMW}, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{MW}, p. 14.
realm.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, McDowell follows Sellars in thinking that we must make a distinction between the merely causal realm, the “realm of law” (or empirical descriptions), and the realm of justification and warrant, the “space of reasons”. As McDowell puts it, the sort of intelligibility something receives when we place it in the space of reasons is \textit{sui generis} as compared with events in the realm of law. So epistemological questions about \(S\)’s knowledge that \(x\), e.g., are questions about whether or not \(S\) is \textit{justified} in believing \(x\). And simply saying that \(S\) was \textit{caused} to believe \(x\) does not adequately capture the normative relation of \(S\)’s being justified in believing \(x\). Justification involves being able to give a reason for a belief, which involves taking on a certain sort of commitment or responsibility.\textsuperscript{36} The causal story about a particular sensory impression (i.e., a merely empirical description of it) does not capture this aspect of the epistemological relation. Justification is a normative notion whereas causation is not: hence the need for the division of “spaces”. Sellars puts the point like this: “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of \textit{knowing}, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”\textsuperscript{37}

According to Sellars, to construe a mere cause as a justification, as an appeal to the Given does, is to commit something along the lines of a naturalistic fallacy.\textsuperscript{38} And McDowell follows Sellars here when he makes the charge that “The idea of the Given is the idea that the space of

\textsuperscript{35} McDowell clearly follows Sellars here when he says, in the Introduction: “To make sense of a mental state’s or episode’s being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief or judgment is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context” (\textit{MW}, p. xi).

\textsuperscript{36} According to the view of “\textit{psychological nominalism\textsuperscript{39}}”, which Sellars endorses, this “commitment” is a linguistic one. Sellars says that psychological nominalism is a view, “according to which all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair” (\textit{EPM}, p. 63).

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{EPM}, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{EPM}, p. 19. McDowell says (\textit{MW}, p. xiv.), “…epistemology is liable to fall into a naturalistic fallacy. In the more general version I have insisted on, the thought is that the risk of a naturalistic fallacy besets reflection about world-directedness as such.”
reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere.”\(^{39}\) The problem is that the Myth *assumes* that extra-conceptual impacts from the world (i.e., bits of the Given) can serve as justifiers; and this notion of justification runs afoul of the doctrine of psychological nominalism, which holds, as McDowell puts it, that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts.”\(^{40}\) McDowell responds to the notion of justification offered by the Myth by saying that, “it is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification. In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications.”\(^{41}\) Although we can’t be faulted for believing something that we were simply *caused* to believe, we can’t be said to be justified in holding that belief either. McDowell’s point is that the Myth’s conception of justification as resulting from causal impacts (or impressions) from the world does not capture the normative dimension of responsibility, which is distinctive of explanations in terms of the space of reasons. And so, McDowell agrees with Sellars that an appeal to the Given is not enough to satisfy our yearning to see experience as a tribunal. Thus, insofar as traditional empiricism appeals to Givenness, it cannot secure minimal empiricism, that is, (3) above.

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**Unconstrained Coherentism and Frictionlessness**

1. As we saw in the last section, Davidson and Sellars reject the Myth of the Given for its failure to respect what McDowell admits is another plausible insight, viz. the idea that only something conceptual (i.e. only something that’s within the space of reasons) can stand in a

\(^{39}\) *MW*, p. 7.

\(^{40}\) *MW*, p. 143. Here McDowell presents a slightly modified version of Davidson’s slogan. See note 33 above.

\(^{41}\) *MW*, p. 8.
relation of warrant to a belief—including an *empirical* belief. This second plausible insight has been referred to as “psychological nominalism”, and it can be summed up in terms of the “spaces” metaphor that McDowell often employs by saying that the “the space of reasons and the space of concepts coincide.” In other words the operations within the space of reasons—such as giving reasons for and justifying beliefs—cannot, contrary to the Myth of the Given, be seen to involve making an appeal to passive, non-conceptual events such as what’s merely causally Given in pre-conceptual sensory awareness. To do so would be a case of the “naturalistic fallacy” that Sellars warned against—a conflation of justification with mere causation.

Accordingly, Sellars and Davidson try to provide accounts that explain how empirical beliefs can be justified without committing the naturalistic fallacy. In doing so they offer a coherence theory of justification, whereby it is not *experience*, but rather *other beliefs*, that justify. This view certainly avoids the naturalistic fallacy of confusing a mere cause with a rational justification. But, McDowell shows that this type of response to the Myth of the Given is just the second phase of an interminable oscillation.

2. Because Sellars and Davidson subscribe to the principle of psychological nominalism, they reject the idea that non-conceptual sensory presences (i.e., the Given) can justify beliefs.

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42 John McDowell: personal communication with McDowell: 4, 11, 2005. This very statement is diagrammed in Appendix A. McDowell makes the same point again in *Mind and World* by saying that, “The space of reasons does not extend further than the space of concepts, to take in a bare reception of the Given” (*MW*, p. 14). Crispin Wright succinctly describes it as “the principle that justification is essentially a rational relation” (*RMW*, p. 142).

43 Plus, as Sellars has pointed out, just giving an empirical description of something (like telling the causal story of a sensory impression) is not the same thing as “placing something in the space of reasons”.

44 It may be anachronistic to suggest that Sellars himself advances a “coherence theory”. Nonetheless, he refers to his view as “psychological nominalism”, the idea that all awareness is “a linguistic affair” (*EPM*, p. 63). And, McDowell seems to take his view to be roughly equivalent to a version of coherentism.

45 It may seem a bit suspicious at first that McDowell lumps Sellars and Davidson together, as I have followed him in doing so here as well. But, McDowell explains: “...it is mainly Donald Davidson who figures in the role I have here cast Sellars in: as someone whose reflection about experience disqualifies it from intelligibly constituting a tribunal. For these purposes, Sellars and Davidson are interchangeable.” (*MW*, pp. xv-xvi.)
That is, they reject premise (2) of the argument for the Myth of the Given. We saw this argument in the last section:

(1) Experience is the passive, causal reception of non-conceptual sensory content.
(2) Non-conceptual sensory content can justify beliefs.
(3) Therefore, experience can justify beliefs.

The essence of coherentism, according to Davidson, “is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.” Accordingly, premise (2) cannot be true: since non-conceptual sensory content isn’t a belief, it cannot justify a belief. But, since Sellars and Davidson do not question premise (1), to them it seems that the only response is to deny (3): the conclusion, that experience can justify beliefs. But this conclusion, remember, is really just an expression of what McDowell takes to be the first plausible insight, viz. that experience is a tribunal. So it seems that Davidson and Sellars think that the principle of psychological nominalism kills the first insight, that experience can be justificatory. And this is the crucial implication of their view, according to McDowell, because it seems to place even a minimal empiricism in jeopardy. Hence, the implication of the coherentist’s argument that McDowell is concerned with is this:

(1) Experience is the passive, causal reception of non-conceptual sensory content.
(2*) Non-conceptual sensory content cannot justify beliefs.
(3*) Therefore, experience cannot justify beliefs.

Of course, it’s highly doubtful that either Sellars or Davidson would accept premise (1) as is—given its deployment of the notion of “non-conceptual content”. Nonetheless, in the name of naturalism, both do accept the idea that our sensory relationship with the world is merely a

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causal matter, not an epistemic one.\textsuperscript{47} In fact this motivates the move towards a coherentist view of justification. And this is enough, according to McDowell, to make Sellars and Davidson willing to sever the connection between what’s passively taken in by experience (i.e., impressions) and what counts as a justification for a belief. McDowell says that, “Davidson thinks that experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons.”\textsuperscript{48} But, if it is true that we are \textit{merely caused} to have certain experiences by the world’s impinging upon our sensory receptors, and, we accept the principle of psychological nominalism, then it seems to follow that such causal experiences cannot count as justifications. In fact, the reason that Sellars and Davidson reject the Myth of the Given is because the influence of experience (as conceived by them) is merely causal. Thus the coherentist can be seen to be in agreement with the proponents of the Myth on premise (1), that the impact of the world on our sensory receptors is a matter of mere causation. Coherentism, however, dissents from the Myth by refusing to allow that that causal input can count as reason giving. In fact, that is the crux of their response to the Myth of the Given.\textsuperscript{49}

3. Davidson specifically directs his arguments against the idea that there can be a “dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content.”\textsuperscript{50} One implication of his argument entails a move

\textsuperscript{47} See, e.g., \textit{MW}, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{MW}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{49} I have suggested that it is best to view Davidson’s response to the Myth of the Given as endorsing coherentism whereas Sellars’s response amounts merely to an acceptance psychological nominalism. Both however, according to McDowell, reach the same conclusions about the status of mere sensory experience in relation to the justification of belief. Rorty too seems to agree with McDowell on this point. He says: “Sellars and Davidson both think that adopting psychological nominalism, and thereby avoiding a confusion between justification and causation, entails claiming that only a belief can justify a belief” (Richard Rorty, “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” in \textit{Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3}. (Cambridge University Press: 1998), p. 141.)
towards a more holistic conception of justification. But another implication of his critique of the dualism of scheme and content is negative; it involves a rejection of the idea of something independent of—or an external, rational constraint on—conceptual activity, something “waiting to be organized, [and] referred to variously as ‘experience’, ‘the stream of sensory experience’ and ‘physical evidence’.”\footnote{Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” \textit{Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation}, p. 190.} Consider also, for example, what Davidson says in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”:

I now suggest also giving up the distinction between observation sentences and the rest. For the distinction between sentences belief in whose truth is justified by sensations and sentences belief in whose truth is justified only by appeal to other sentences held true is as anathema to the coherentist as the distinction between beliefs justified by sensations and beliefs justified only by appeal to further beliefs. Accordingly, I suggest we give up the idea that meaning or knowledge is grounded on something that counts as an ultimate source of evidence. No doubt meaning and knowledge depend on experience, and experience ultimately on sensation. But this is the ‘depend’ of causality, not of evidence or justification.\footnote{Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, pp. 419-20.}

Notice the final sentence of this passage in which Davidson describes experience in terms of causality. This conception of experience is no doubt what McDowell has in mind as Davidson’s official view; for, he says that “sensory impressions themselves, as Davidson conceives them, cannot stand in rational relations to what a subject is to think.”\footnote{\textit{MW}, pp. 139-40. McDowell footnotes this remark, saying that: “At least in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” Davidson seems to reserve the word ‘experience’ for sensory impressions distinct fromappearings.”} Thus, the conception of experience as merely a causal transaction, implied by premise (1), combined with the principle of psychological nominalism—that only a belief can justify a belief, yields (3*), the idea that
experience itself cannot justify. As we saw before, McDowell thinks that Davidson’s refusal to credit experience with reason giving power (i.e., (3*)) is tantamount to a renunciation of even a “minimal empiricism”. Davidson, though, seems happily willing to accept this consequence when he says that the dualism of scheme and content “is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism.” ⁵⁴

4. McDowell admits that renouncing empiricism is one way of definitely avoiding the Myth of the Given. However, he thinks that renouncing empiricism comes only at the cost of flouting the first plausible insight contained in the transcendental thought—i.e., that through experience we are answerable to something external to our system of beliefs. And so, McDowell thinks that losing hold of empiricism altogether threatens to make our beliefs look unconstrained by, and out of touch with, the independent world. Later we’ll see that, according to McDowell, coherentism’s flouting of empiricism also threatens to provoke a “recoil” back towards Givenness. ⁵⁵ For now, it is enough to understand that McDowell’s primary complaint against coherentism is this: that it represents “the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in a void.” ⁵⁶ McDowell’s concern is that, if the only constraint experience can place on the space of reasons is a causal constraint, then it becomes impossible to see how our empirical beliefs about the world can be rationally answerable to (i.e. made true or false by) the world itself. McDowell

⁵⁶ MW, p. 11.
thinks that the plausibility of the transcendental thought lies in its demand for experience itself to provide a rational constraint on our empirical beliefs.$^{57}$

Davidson thinks that he can fill in the gap left by his renunciation of empiricism—i.e., his rejection of the idea that experience can justify a belief—by arguing that doing so does not lead to the skeptical conclusion that none of our empirical beliefs can be justified at all. In fact, one of coherentism’s main aims is to show how we can avoid skepticism by holding that our beliefs can be justified independently of constraints from experience. So, the coherentist attempts to reassure us that the realization that experience can only involve a causal—not an epistemic—relation or interaction with the world, isn’t supposed to threaten our very grip on an external reality. In fact, Davidson tries to lay claim to the idea, in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” that we can have “correspondence without confrontation,” and that, “coherence yields correspondence.”$^{58}$ He also says that “if a coherence theory of truth is acceptable, it must be consistent with a correspondence theory.”$^{59}$ McDowell, however, doubts that Davidson has left himself enough resources to allow for any sort of rational confrontation between our beliefs and the world.

At any rate, the coherentist’s solution to the skeptical problem involves a modification of our notion of “justification” (not, notably, a modification of the concept of “experience”$^{60}$).

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$^{57}$ And only then, McDowell is going to go on to argue, can we legitimately say that experience provides us access to genuine content. McDowell says that, “we can have empirical content in our picture only if we can acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions are rationally connected.” ($MW$, pp. 17-18.)

$^{58}$ Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, p. 413. He backs off of these claims a bit in “Afterthoughts, 1987” in response to some criticisms leveled by Rorty. There he says, “On internal evidence alone, as Rorty points out, my view cannot be called a correspondence theory” ($Ibid$, p. 426).

$^{59}$ $Ibid$, p. 415.

$^{60}$ Although, Rorty says that, “Sellars and Davidson both think that adopting psychological nominalism…means reinterpreting ‘experience’ as the ability to acquire beliefs noninferentially as a result of neurologically describable causal transactions with the world” (Rorty, “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism”, p. 141). In my view, and in McDowell’s too, obviously, this looks like a non-re-interpretation of the Myth’s characterization of experience. Perhaps the difference that Rorty is alluding to is that Sellars and Davidson just countenance caused “beliefs”, not non-conceptual, sensory justifiers (i.e., intermediaries).
Instead of seeing justification as a matter of a belief’s being answerable to the independent world (as it is presented in experience), Davidson thinks that we should be able to see justification as a matter of a belief’s coherence within a larger system of beliefs. We are supposed to think of this larger system of beliefs—within which beliefs are mutually supportive—as what was referred to before as a “scheme”, or, as the “space of reasons”. And so one thing that Davidson’s rejection of a scheme-content dualism means is that justification is to be understood only as occurring within a scheme: nothing outside of a scheme—i.e. outside a body of beliefs—can be appealed to as being responsible for producing justifications. BonJour makes this same point, independently of Davidson, when in “The Elements of Coherentism” he says: “If there is no way to justify empirical beliefs apart from an appeal to other justified empirical beliefs, and if an infinite sequence of distinct justified beliefs is ruled out, then the presumably finite system of justified empirical beliefs can only be justified from within, by virtue of the relations of its component beliefs to each other—if, that is, it is justified at all.” Davidson himself says that, “all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs.” But most importantly, for McDowell, the coherentist’s way of rejecting scheme-content dualism implies that experience itself, because it is merely a causal occurrence, cannot be conceptually structured and so cannot be seen as playing a justificatory role. Thus McDowell charges that “Davidson’s picture is that we cannot get outside our beliefs.”

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63 In the “Afterword”, McDowell says, “In the lectures, I use Davidson’s coherentism exclusively as a foil to the view of experience that I recommend” (MW, p. 129).
64 MW, p. 16.
5. Davidson recognizes that his coherentism endangers the view that experience allows us to be answerable to something that is independent of our beliefs or scheme. However, he wishes to allay this fear by attempting to argue that we can nonetheless have a form of answerability that is independent of experiential constraint, if, that is, we can accept the idea that our beliefs are mainly true. McDowell rejects this concession (basically, the idea that “coherence yields correspondence”) as merely an ad hoc maneuver. McDowell thinks that such a concession reflects the fact that Davidson’s conception of beliefs leaves them looking “frictionless” and out-of-touch with the world, and for that reason he cannot simply sidestep the first plausible idea that our empirical beliefs must somehow be seen as answerable to the world. In fact, McDowell suggests that the Myth’s faulty assumption that we are answerable to the world via non-conceptual impressions starts to regain some of its lost appeal once we are faced with the frictionlessness of coherentism’s notion of belief. That is, at least the Myth offers one the sense that one’s empirical beliefs can be seen as correct or incorrect based upon their corresponding to, or failing to correspond to, an independent reality. Of course Davidson and Sellars rightly object to the idea that conceptual beliefs can correspond or be answerable to non-conceptual impressions. Nonetheless, Davidson, at least, seems to acknowledge that we seem to be faced with a dilemma when he says that, “The search for an empirical foundation for meaning or knowledge leads to skepticism, while a coherence theory seems at a loss to provide any reason for a believer to believe that his beliefs, if coherent, are true.”

As was just mentioned, Davidson attempts to overcome skepticism and the apparent need for some form of correspondence view of truth by claiming that “belief is in its nature veridical.” His suggestion is that one cannot have a “system” of beliefs without it being the

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66 Ibid., p. 420.
case that most of those beliefs are true beliefs. Briefly, the idea is that when we form our beliefs (say as children) into a “system” of beliefs, then those beliefs are going to have to fit together systematically, i.e. into an overall coherent pattern that can be apprehended. The purported reason that beliefs are intrinsically truthful, according to Davidson, is that, because of the public (intersubjective) nature of language (out of which beliefs are formed), speaking a language involves interpretation. And, interpretation must, as a rule, be successful, or else we wouldn’t be able to communicate our beliefs to one another. Davidson’s argument for this point relies heavily upon his view of the connection between belief and meaning. But the important point, from McDowell’s perspective, is that Davidson must first assume a certain notion of beliefs—i.e., a notion of contentful states—before he can make the moves that supposedly dissolve the threat of global skeptical.

In a manner of argument surprisingly reminiscent of Descartes’ cogito, Davidson says:

In order to doubt or wonder about the provenance of his beliefs an agent must know what a belief is. This brings with it the concept of objective truth, for the notion of a belief is the notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality. But beliefs are also identified, directly and indirectly, by their causes. Two things stand out in this quotation: the idea that a belief is a state “that may or may not jibe with reality”, and, the idea that beliefs are “identified by their causes”. Both of these ideas actually seem to be pandering to the idea that beliefs must be answerable to something independent. Davidson, however, seems to be suggesting that both of these ideas are contained in the very concept of “belief” itself. And so, Davidson thinks that the notion of “belief” itself

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67 Ibid., p. 423.
69 Davidson also says the following: “Much of the point of the concept of belief is the potential gap it introduces between what is held to be true and what is true.” (Ibid, p. 414.)
is supposed to allow us to circumvent the need for answerability—i.e., that we need to compare our “beliefs” with something independent of them. Rorty endorses this reading of Davidson when he paraphrases Davidson as saying, “There is no such thing as knowing what you believe without knowing a great deal about the objects of your belief.”\textsuperscript{70} Furthermore, Rorty sees Davidson’s project as an attempt “to undermine the skeptic’s idea that we can know what our beliefs are without already having a lot of true beliefs about the causal relations between those beliefs and the world.”\textsuperscript{71}

But McDowell objects that Davidson (and so too Rorty) has all along just helped himself to the notion of a “belief”: the notion of a content-ful state. McDowell thinks that Davidson is not entitled to such a notion because his “coherentist rhetoric suggests images of confinement within the sphere of thinking, as opposed to being in touch with something outside it.”\textsuperscript{72} So, for McDowell, Davidson’s bland assertion that “belief is in its nature veridical” is not enough to get empirical content into the picture. Since, according to Davidson, experience is just a causal relation, it cannot play an evidentiary or representational role.\textsuperscript{73} But McDowell’s point is that that role is required if experience is to be seen as a contentful state at all. And so it is precisely coherentism’s image of our beliefs as rationally segregated from experience that McDowell thinks can leave us hankering for a recoil back towards the Myth of the Given. Thus McDowell says that the problem with coherentism is “the unnerving idea that the spontaneity of conceptual thinking is not subject to rational constraint from outside.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{MW}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{73} Caused beliefs, according to McDowell, might be said to give us “exculpations”, but they cannot be seen as giving us “justifications”. At best, simply having caused beliefs means that we “can’t be blamed” when we believe falsely. \textsuperscript{74} \textit{MW}, p. 15.
6. McDowell’s concern with coherentism is that it has lost its claim to the idea that our empirical beliefs are rationally constrained by experience. And, without that claim, McDowell thinks that the independent world cannot be legitimately taken-in as the content of an empirical belief. For this reason, McDowell is not at all impressed by Davidson’s thought that our beliefs are mainly true. McDowell says the following in response to that thought:

I do want to raise the question how effectively it [the thought that our beliefs are mainly true] can reassure us, if we are worried about whether Davidson’s coherenst picture can incorporate thought’s bearing on reality. Suppose one feels the worry in this familiar form: so far as the picture goes, one might be a brain in a mad scientist’s vat. The Davidsonian response seems to be that if one were a brain in a vat, it would be correct to interpret one’s beliefs as being largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment. But is that the reassurance we need if we are to be immunized against the attractions of the Given? The argument was supposed to start with the body of beliefs to which we are supposed to be confined, in our active efforts to suit our thinking to the available justifications. It was supposed to make the confinement imagery unthreatening by reassuring us that those beliefs are mostly true. But the response to the brain-in-a-vat worry works the wrong way round. The response does not calm the fear that our picture leaves our thinking possibly out of touch with the world outside us. It just gives us a dizzying sense that our grip on what it is that we believe is not as firm as we thought.\(^75\)

The point that McDowell stresses here is the idea that coherentism seems to threaten the very notion of empirical content. The sole appeal of the Myth of the Given, according to McDowell, lies in its claim that there is something independent of our conceptual beliefs that’s responsible for their being justified or not—viz., a stream of sensory input that’s causally received via

\(^{75}\) MW, pp. 16-17.
contact with an independent world. Coherentism, by contrast, denies that there is anything independent of our beliefs that can account for their being justified or not. But, if there is nothing independent of our beliefs in this way, then it becomes hard to see how our beliefs could have the feature of aboutness or contentful-ness or intentionality that they seem to have.76 And clearly, in this sense, simply saying that we have “mostly true beliefs” is no substitute for the idea of having one thing (a thought or belief) being about another (the world) in such a way that that other thing (i.e., the world) is what makes a thought or belief true or false.

McDowell thinks of this answerability relation between thought and the world as a “normative” aspect of experience. He says, for example, “This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world—to how things are—for whether or not it is correctly executed.”77 Since coherentism seems unwilling to acknowledge this particular sort of normative relation between minds (or beliefs) and the world, McDowell thinks that it is unable to formulate a notion of experience as providing access to representational content. Of course Davidson tries to argue that “belief” is intrinsically a normative notion, but, that sort of response to the Myth of the Given then leaves experience out of the normative equation. So the idea that “beliefs” are intrinsically representational is unsatisfactory, according to McDowell, because “the Myth of the Given has a deeper motivation, in the thought that if spontaneity is not subject to rational constraint from outside, as Davidson’s coherentist position insists that it is not, then we cannot make it intelligible to ourselves how exercises of spontaneity can represent the world at all.”

76 Gregory McCulloch agrees with McDowell’s view here when he says that, “What is undeniable is that intentionality does require “external constraint”: it doesn’t make sense to say that thinking is about, directed at, the world, if the world cannot appropriately constrain or influence it.” (McCulloch, RMW, p. 128.)

77 MW, p. xii. McDowell also says, “To make sense of the idea of a mental state’s or episode’s being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief of judgement is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context.” (MW, p. xi.)
For McDowell, placing experience outside of the normative boundary—i.e., outside of the space of reasons—endangers the very notion of empirical content.

This criticism of Davidson comes out most clearly, I think, when McDowell states it in the context of the brain-in-a-vat example. McDowell says that, “The Davidsonian response [to brain-in-a-vat skepticism] seems to be that if one were a brain in a vat, it would be correct to interpret one’s beliefs as being largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment”\textsuperscript{78}. It seems that in the envisaged brain-in-a-vat cases the key idea is that the cause of an experience of a red rose, for example, is not an actual red rose, but rather an electronic impulse on your envatted brain. The deceptive impulse is designed by the mad scientist to cause you to have a belief (as) of a red rose, though no red rose is present. The problem for Davidson’s view is this: it seems that he has to say (and according to Rorty he \textit{has} said) that most of the envatted brain’s empirical beliefs are true, although none of those beliefs are actually beliefs \textit{about} the external world. The brain’s beliefs about red roses, for example, are not caused by red roses, but rather by electronic impulses. The skeptical implication is this: if one can be mistaken in this way about the causes of a particular belief, then \textit{all} of one’s beliefs must be similarly suspect. And, McDowell’s point is that responding to the threat of global skepticism as the coherentist does—viz. by saying that most of our beliefs are “true”, although none of our beliefs are about what they purport to be about—seems to be genuinely unsatisfying. Thus coherentism is not a comforting response to the Myth of the Given at all. McDowell’s argument here is a subtle one, and it may be helpful to quote one of his defenses of it at length.

\begin{quote}
[In \textit{Mind and World}] I express a doubt about whether the supposition, or supposed supposition, that I may be a brain in a vat can be made comfortable by arguing that even if I am, my beliefs are still\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{MW}, pp. 16-17. Here McDowell notes that, “we have this [as being Davidson’s words] on the testimony of Richard Rorty.” I tend to think that Rorty reads a lot of himself into Davidson, though.
mostly true. Perhaps the supposedly comforting thought should rather be that even if I am a brain in a vat, most of what seem to be my beliefs are indeed beliefs, and are mostly true. The idea here is not that we are to contemplate something that is definitely a brain in a vat, and consider what, if anything, it believes. I am supposed to be contemplating myself. I at least seem, at least to myself, to have beliefs. And the question is whether the phenomenology of being me, seeming to have the beliefs I seem to have, can be made to fit comfortably with the supposition, or supposed supposition, that I am a brain in a vat, by the expedient of arguing that even so I am mostly right about my environment. The supposition that I am a brain in a vat is meant to be different from the supposition that I inhabit the ordinary world, containing cats and the like. But ex hypothesi it makes no difference to the phenomenology of being me, including my seeming beliefs, which of the two suppositions about my environment is correct. And if what I rightly take myself to be in touch with, in, say, what present themselves to me as cat beliefs, may or may not be electronic impulses (which are what I supposedly mean by ‘cat’ if the vat-brain hypothesis is the right one), that surely undermines any idea that what present themselves to me as beliefs I have make contact with anything in particular.79

This long quotation makes clear that McDowell’s concern with coherentism is the way that it deals with skepticism. The Coherentist thinks that it is satisfactory to dismiss the skeptic by arguing that even if we are brains in a vat our beliefs are still mostly true.80 But McDowell questions whether what the coherentist is calling a “belief” can actually be a state that purports to

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80 Of course, Davidson’s full response was that they’d be largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment, not about the actual environment. In the brain in a vat case the environment would presumably be an electronic one, and so, that’s what our beliefs would purportedly make reference to. But the key to the brain in a vat scenario is that we could be made completely unaware of what is causing our beliefs. And so, if Davidson’s point is that this is an impossibility—that we can’t be deceived about what’s causing our beliefs—then he would be right to conclude that we would have beliefs about the electronic environment. But, the electronic environment is supposed to be phenomenologically identical to the real environment. So, it seems to me that Davidson should actually argue that the brain in a vat case is not possible at all, because one could not have “beliefs” under envatted conditions. But, McDowell rightly points out that this is not the response that Davidson takes. Rather, he first countenances the scenario, and then goes on to argue that it is unthreatening because our beliefs are mainly true.
tell us anything at all about the external world. The “truth” of those things that Davidson is calling “beliefs” does not depend, in any evidential sort of way, upon the way the world is. McDowell says, “My doubt turns on the idea…that the phenomenology of having a belief should not leave indeterminate what it is about. The same goes for experiences.”\textsuperscript{81} This last point, about experience, is an important one. Empirical beliefs, even on Davidson’s view, are thought to be brought about by experience. But Davidson thinks that experience can at best be brought about in a causal sort of way. McDowell, by contrast, thinks that we must also see our beliefs as “answerable” to experience. That is, McDowell thinks we must see experience as epistemically, not just causally, relevant to our beliefs. If the content of an experience is at all times compatible with that content’s not being the case (with its being caused by a mad scientist, e.g.), then we can’t look to experience as evidence for our beliefs. So even if most of our beliefs are said to be true, it still looks like they’re out of touch with the world. That’s why McDowell says, “When Davidson argues that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, he helps himself to the idea of a body of beliefs, a body of states that have content. And that means that, however successfully the argument might work on its own terms, it comes too late to neutralize the real problem.”\textsuperscript{82}

The real problem, according to McDowell, has to do with the possibility of empirical content—i.e., intentional states. How can thoughts and beliefs be about the external world at all? It looks like neither the Myth of the Given nor coherentism can offer a satisfying answer. The Myth, though rightly motivated by the idea of external constraint, conceives of experience in such a way that a belief cannot be answerable to experience. Coherentism, motivated by the principle of psychological nominalism, thus concludes that the very idea that experience can be

\textsuperscript{81} McDowell, “Response to Gregory McCulloch,” RM\textit{W}, p. 286.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{MW}, p. 68.
justificatory is a myth. Of course, the coherentist tries to console us by saying that we can still have empirical knowledge, it just can’t be knowledge justified on the basis of experience. But then, McDowell complains, our beliefs seem to be out of touch with the external world. What’s more, coherentism’s unsatisfactory response to the myth, according to McDowell, leaves us hankering for the kind of external constraint on our beliefs that Givenness was supposed to provide. But alas, mere Givenness cannot justify. Coherentism once again looks like the only answer. But its not: and on and on in an interminable oscillation.

**McDowell’s Re-Enchantment of Nature**

1. McDowell thinks that the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism is intractable (or “interminable”). That is, both views, by McDowell’s lights, are motivated by legitimate and compelling insights, yet the two are fundamentally at odds. The first insight is that experience can rationally constrain empirical beliefs. The second insight is that only something conceptual can rationally constrain a belief. And since neither side views experience as involving access to conceptual content, it appears that the first insight, i.e., the transcendental thought “that empirical thinking is answerable to experience”, is in jeopardy. But McDowell thinks that if we are not able to secure the transcendental thought, then we will have lost our grip on the idea that in experience we take in how the world is—that is, we will have lost “friction” with something that is independent of our beliefs. Furthermore, McDowell argues that the inability to see experience as providing access to, or being about, something independent of our

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83 *MW*, p. xix.
beliefs fatally undermines any attempt to achieve a genuine notion of objective empirical content.84

Basically, McDowell’s resolution to this conflict involves combining the two insights into the idea that impressions can be conceptual events. But, there is a prominent conception of nature that seems to stand in the way of such a combination. The prominent conception of nature is what McDowell calls the disenchanted view of nature, which pictures natural events as exhausted by the realm of law. And, as McDowell says, “if we identify nature with what natural science aims to make comprehensible, we threaten, at least, to empty it of meaning.”85

Therefore, McDowell thinks we first need to revise or “relax” this conception of nature to “make room”, as he says, for conceptual activity in nature. His “re-enchantment” of nature thus involves rejecting the idea that being natural means being without (conceptual) content. Once nature has been re-enchanted, McDowell thinks he can then say what Davidson and other coherentists were unwilling to say, namely, that “empirical judgments [can be] justified not by other judgments but by experience” itself.86

McDowell’s main objective in *Mind and World* is thus to dissolve the tension between the two insights and thereby show that it is simply not problematic to see how experience can function as a tribunal. McDowell shows that the oscillation is “acute” and un-resolvable in order to make it clear that the very notion of “empirical content” is jeopardized by taking a side in that debate. Instead of taking a side, McDowell exploits the fact that that debate has the effect of making it look like we’re at an impasse or faced with an “antinomy”. This is the “tension” that McDowell says he aims to “cure” us of. As McDowell says, “Davidson’s ground for giving up

84 McDowell says, “If we suppose that rational answerability lapses at some outermost point of the space of reasons, short of the world itself, our picture ceases to depict anything recognizable as empirical judgements; we have obliterated empirical content altogether” (*MW*, p. 42).
85 *MW*, pp. 70-1.
empiricism is, in its essentials, the claim that we cannot take experience to be epistemologically significant except by falling into the Myth of the Given.\textsuperscript{87} Davidson’s response then, as we have seen, is to reject the epistemic significance of experience. But, as McDowell notes, simply doing this “does nothing to explain away the plausibility of the empiricist picture, according to which we can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness.”\textsuperscript{88} Thus, the urge to view experience as grounding our empirical thinking remains unfulfilled. McDowell therefore thinks that we need to find a way of seeing how our empirical thinking can be (rationally) answerable to the world which avoids both the Myth of the Given and frictionless coherentism.\textsuperscript{89} McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature thus can be seen as “making room” not only for a new conception of nature but for a new conception of experience as well. The new conception of experience can then come in to replace of the traditional empiricist’s causal conception (i.e., premise (1)), to which both the coherelist and the proponent of the Myth subscribe. As Crispin Wright puts it, McDowell’s view “amounts not to a rejection of the Given as such, but a recasting of it.”\textsuperscript{90} This is so because McDowell retains the notion of experience in terms of passive impressions; he simply adds that such passive occurrences can also count as conceptual occurrences. Thus, in order for experience to be “a justifier,” it “has to be thought of…as itself a passive exercise of concepts.”

\textsuperscript{87} MW, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{88} MW, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{89} McDowell says, “A genuine escape [from the oscillation] would require that we avoid the Myth of the Given without renouncing the claim that experience is a rational constraint on thinking.” (MW, p. 18.)
\textsuperscript{90} Crispin Wright, “Human Nature?” RMW, p. 160. Wright reiterates this point: he says that McDowell “does not dismiss the idea that something is ‘given’ in experience: he believes in a conceptual given—what he regards as mythical is, rather, the notion of a given which is both justificatory and ‘independent of conceptual capacities’” (Ibid.)
2. We have seen before that the proponents of the Myth of the Given offer the following argument:

(1) Experience is the passive, causal reception of non-conceptual input.

(2) Non-conceptual input can justify a belief.

(3) Therefore, experience can justify beliefs.

Sellars and Davidson reject premise (2) of this argument out of respect for the second insight—that only something conceptual, like a belief, can justify a belief.91 Since “non-conceptual inputs” are not beliefs, nor even conceptually structured, they cannot enter into justificatory relations. McDowell agrees with the spirit of Sellars’ and Davidson’s critique of the Myth and so too with the rejection of premise (2). But Sellars and Davidson, unlike McDowell, also accept premise (1).92 This means that for them (3) must be rejected along with (2). They assume that since experience is just a causal interaction, one cannot take experience to be reason giving without falling into the Myth of the Given (i.e., accepting (2)). Thus, Sellars and Davidson can be seen as responding to the Myth by making the following argument:

(1) Experience is the passive, causal reception of non-conceptual input.

(2*) Non-conceptual input cannot justify a belief.

(3*) Therefore, experience cannot justify beliefs.

Sellars and Davidson take it that a rejection of premise (2) of the argument for Givenness must lead to a rejection of the conclusion of the argument, viz. (3). But McDowell complains that doing so is tantamount to giving up on the transcendental thought, i.e. even a minimal

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91 Davidson says, “I was clear from the start that unconceptualized ‘experience’, sense data, sensations, Hume’s impressions and ideas, could not coherently serve as evidence for beliefs: only something with propositional content could do this.” (Davidson, “Reply to John McDowell,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 105).

92 Again, they don’t accept premise (1) verbatim, but they do accept a notion of experience as exerting a merely causal influence on our beliefs. And this is enough, McDowell thinks, to generate the faulty conception of experience that underlies the oscillation.
empiricism. And McDowell thinks that renouncing minimal empiricism can only lead to “frictionlessness”: the view that our empirical beliefs are not rationally connected to the independent world. But, McDowell doesn’t want to give up the second insight either. In fact, he agrees with Sellars and Davidson that, at least under the conception of experience given in (1), we cannot take experience to be reason giving without falling into the Myth.

3. McDowell’s proposed resolution to the problem should by now be pretty clear. He thinks that we need to reject premise (1)—the only premise shared by both the coherentist and the advocate of Givenness. That premise expresses commitment to a conception of experience as merely a causal transaction in nature. And this is the root of the trouble, according to McDowell, because it places experience outside of the space of reasons. And once experience is seen as lying outside of the space of reasons, we seem to be faced with the task of explaining how something that is outside of the space of reasons (viz. non-conceptual input) can nonetheless have an influence on the occupants of that space (viz. conceptual beliefs). And this is exactly the difficulty that McDowell takes both sides of the oscillation to be wrestling with: an attempt to reconcile a dualism of reason and nature. But, if we can remove premise (1) from their argument and replace it with a notion of experience as access to conceptual input (or content) we will have undercut the motivation for the debate between coherentism and the Myth of the Given. Premise (1) places experience outside of the space of reasons. McDowell thinks that we need a premise that gives us a concept of experience that places it inside of the space of reasons.\footnote{And, upon doing so, the argument that drives the oscillation can’t get started.}

Thus, McDowell argues that the conception of experience at work in premise (1) is not mandatory. We can, and should, he thinks, replace that conception with one that sees experience as capable of serving as a justifier. The way to do this, McDowell argues, is to advance the
Kantian notion of experience as involving a co-operation of spontaneity and receptivity. This co-operations is supposed to allow for episodes in which what is passively received in experience can—due to the involvement of spontaneity—already possess a conceptual structure. This Kantian thesis is supposed to provide a way to view experience as reason giving—that is, a way of accepting (3)—without falling into the Myth of the Given. The problem with the Myth of the Given is that it conceives of what’s received in experience as incapable of serving as a justifier, because it is non-conceptual. Sellars’ and Davidson’s argument against the Myth do not dispute this conception of experience, they simply maintain that only something that’s in the space of concepts (which experience, in this case, is not) can also be in the space of reasons. And this is what Sellars and Davidson argue prevents experience, on this conception, from functioning as a tribunal. So if instead, as McDowell argues, we see experience as already conceptual, i.e. as already inside the space of reasons, there will no longer be the difficulty (or “philosophical discomfort”) that Davidson and Sellars see in the idea of experience playing a justificatory role in relation to our empirical beliefs. In fact, according to McDowell, vindicating a view of experience as already conceptual is the only way of avoiding falling into the oscillation. He says: “If one fails to see that conceptual capacities can be operative in sensibility itself, one has two options: either, like Davidson, to insist that experience is only causally relevant to empirical thinking, not rationally; or else, like Evans, to fall into the Myth of the Given, and try to credit experience, conceived as extra-conceptual, with rational relations to empirical thinking.”94

McDowell argues for a notion of experience as conceptual by suggesting that we adhere to the Kantian notion of experience whereby our spontaneity is already operative in our reception

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94 MW, pp. 61-2. Later on in the lecture McDowell says, “Given an assumption that Davidson and Evans share, they are confined to the pair of positions between which they choose. And each has what looks like a completely cogent argument against the other.” (MW, p. 69.)
of sensuous intuitions. According to this view, what we have rational contact with in experience is conceptual content, not something extra-conceptual. This places experience inside the space of concepts so that it can therefore also be seen as entering into relations inside the space of reasons, i.e., justificatory relations with beliefs. Accordingly, McDowell offers the following modifications to the basic argument.

(1M) Experience is the passive, causal reception of conceptual content.

(2M) Conceptual content can justify a belief.

(3) Therefore, experience can justify beliefs.

Now, premise (2M) actually relies on and is in agreement with Sellars’ and Davidson’s principle of psychological nominalism, viz. that only something conceptual can justify a belief. But, in contrast to Sellars and Davidson, McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature allows him to re-conceive “experience”, in premise (1M), as involving access to conceptual content. Therefore, experience can justify a belief, without violating the principle of psychological nominalism. That is, since (1M) provides a (new) conception of experience as access to empirical content, it follows that experience, on that conception, can justify beliefs.

It is important to note that McDowell’s argument here is not designed to refute the Myth or coherentism on their own terms. Rather, the key is that McDowell undercuts both of their arguments at the same time by shifting the conception of experience in play. For, he admits that

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95 McDowell says, “The original Kantian thought was that empirical knowledge results from a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity.” And later: “We should understand what Kant calls ‘intuition’—experiential intake—not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content” (MW, p. 9). This is what McDowell means when he says in the first paragraph that, “Kant should still have a central place in our discussion of the way thought bears on reality” (MW, p. 3).

96 We will see later that McDowell agrees with the proponents of the Myth of the Given that empirical content is just given to us in experience. But, importantly, he thinks of it as a conceptual “given”.

97 The locution, “conceptual reception of empirical content”, is actually redundant because in order for something to count as “content” it must be conceptual, i.e., at least according to McDowell, Kant, Davidson, Sellars, etc. I phrase the premise in this redundant fashion only to emphasize the fact that we are dealing with something that is definitely conceptually structured. And, the emphasis also underscores McDowell’s understanding of the second insight—which factors into a defense of premise (2)—as an emendation of Davidson’s slogan. McDowell says, “Nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts” (MW, p. 143).
if we think of experience as a merely causal and therefore a non-conceptual transaction in nature, then we are bound to find ourselves in the familiar oscillation. But that situation has shown itself to be “acute”, and so McDowell suggests that the only way to get out of the resulting impasse is to re-conceive experience as itself conceptual. He says, “I have urged that in order to escape the oscillation, we need a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive but reflect conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity, in operation.” McDowell views this particular strategy for avoiding the oscillation as a form of philosophical therapy. Philosophical therapy is necessary here, according to McDowell, in order to remove a “block” that prevents both the coherentist and the proponent of the Myth from accepting McDowell’s notion of experience as already conceptual.

4. McDowell thinks that Sellars and Davidson, as well as the proponents of the Myth, show a “blind spot” for the way out that McDowell offers. The question is: what produces this “block” or “blind spot”? Why is it that both empiricists and anti-empiricists, like Sellars and Davidson, seem wedded to a conception of experience as extra-conceptual? McDowell traces this “deep-rooted mental block” to the rise of a modern naturalism which views nature as disenchanted. The disenchanted view of nature equates the space of nature with the realm of law, such that everything that counts as “natural” has an explanation in terms of necessary causal laws. That is, events in the space of nature must ultimately be conceived as explicable in terms of the idiom

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98 *MW*, p. 23.
99 That is, McDowell points out the flaws in opposing philosophical positions not by directly arguing against them but rather by exposing their weaknesses in terms of their inability to iron out long-standing philosophical perplexities. In a word, his goal is to achieve a “peace” or “transcendental comfort”.
100 McDowell says, “But they [Davidson and Evans] do no so much as consider the possibility that conceptual capacities might be already operative in actualizations of sensibility. It is not that they argue that there is no such possibility; it simply does not figure in their thinking. And the result of this absence is that they are faced by the choice I have described” (*MW*, p. 67).
101 *MW*, p. 69.
102 In *Mind and World*, on page 133, McDowell describes this as the “order of law governed happenings.”
that is proper to the physical sciences. Hence, McDowell says, “the image [of disenchantment] marks a contrast between two kinds of intelligibility: the kind that is sought by (as we call it) natural science, and the kind we find in something when we place it in relation to other occupants of “the logical space of reasons”.” This distinction in intelligibility is what McDowell refers to as the sui generis character of the space of reasons, as contrasted with the realm of law. And, when an acknowledgement of the sui generis character of our spontaneity is combined with the view that our sensibility—our reception of sensory impressions—is an occurrence in a logically separate sphere of intelligibility—viz. the (“disenchanted”) space of nature, it becomes impossible to see how our active (“enchanted”) employment of conceptual capacities could be operative in sensory experience itself. McDowell says that the effect of a disenchanted view of nature “is that reason is separated from our animal nature.” So, when McDowell says that modern scientific explanation leaves nature “disenchanted”, he specifically means that it depicts nature as “devoid of meaning”. Meaning, and by extension human intentionality, gets totally expelled from nature, McDowell thinks, when our sensory encounters with the world, because they are natural occurrences, are viewed as independent of (and

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103 *MW*, p. 70.

104 McDowell acknowledges that one can hold a position which denies that there is a separate sphere of intelligibility in which description amounts to giving and asking for reasons. McDowell calls this position “bald naturalism”, because it assumes that all natural phenomena can be explained in terms of events in the realm of law. Michael Friedman says that bald naturalism is the view that “seeks to incorporate the space of reasons into the realm of law through some kind of philosophical reduction” (*RMW*, p. 28). This would be a way of “opting out” of the oscillation debate, as McDowell himself does, but it is a less adequate way of doing so, according to McDowell, because it effectively obliterates any conception of a distinctive (sui generis) rational relation between thought and the world. And, of course, McDowell thinks that we must preserve such a notion—i.e. preserve a notion of spontaneity—in order to more accurately describe “our mode of living” (*MW*, p. 78).

105 McDowell describes spontaneity, not just the space of reasons, as working in “a sui generis conceptual framework.” (*MW*, p. 108.)

106 *MW*, p. 108. McDowell thinks that we share perception with non-human animals and that we can presumably describe their perceptual faculties completely within the realm of law. So when McDowell says that reason is separated from our “animal nature” he again just means that reason is separated from nature described as exhausted by the realm of law.

107 *MW*, p. 70. And, McDowell also says that disenchantment “takes nature…to be empty of meaning and value.” (*MW*, p. 181.) Crispin Wright says, “Modern science treats of Nature in a disenchanted form…So, according to McDowell, experience, as a natural process, is likewise disenchanted—divested of content—and thus disabled from playing the reason-giving role we need it to play” (*RMW*, p. 141).
therefore incapable of being shaped or influenced by) our spontaneity—i.e., our active employment of conceptual capacities. 108 McDowell says,

Now the idea of sensibility is the idea of a natural capacity. If one succumbs to the temptation to identify the logical space that is set off against the space of reasons as the logical space of nature, one will take the idea of sensibility and the idea of actualizations of conceptual capacities to belong in logical spaces that are alien to each other. This makes it seem that an episode of sensibility cannot, in itself and as such, be an actualization of conceptual capacities. 109

That is, according to McDowell, the “disenchanted view of nature” places experience outside the space of concepts. This is intolerable, however, because it forces us to see sensory experience as also falling outside of the space of reasons.

McDowell admits that, given the dominance of the modern-scientific worldview brought about through the scientific revolution, this conception of nature as disenchanted “can seem sheer common sense.” 110 And, McDowell doesn’t want to dispute the idea that the modern scientific conception of nature as disenchanted marks a genuine intellectual advance over a pre-scientific view of nature as enchanted by supernatural forces. After all, according to that hard-won intellectual insight we can now, for example, attribute an occurrence of lightning to

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108 MW, p. 72. It would of course be possible to hold a position that our sensory encounters are not natural occurrences at all, although I can’t imagine anyone actually holding such a view. McDowell, anyway, dismisses such a view as a “rampant Platonism”. It is on the opposite extreme end in comparison with “bald naturalism”: it says no naturalism can capture the concepts of our spontaneity.


110 MW, p. 70. He also admits that, “It is a splendid thing to find out the facts of disenchanted nature.” “But,” he adds, “not because that is as close as we can come to knowing the “in itself”.” That latter requirement is a byproduct of a mechanized view of nature that philosophy, not science, has cultivated as a condition for true objectivity. As McDowell says, “Science does not itself lay claim to enshrining metaphysical truth; it takes philosophers to make such claims on its behalf” (McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” in Mind, Value, and Reality, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 181).
electrical discharges rather than to the anger of the gods. In other words, there is a legitimate place for a disenchanted conception of the natural order. But it has run a bit too rampant in McDowell’s view, expelling even the conceptual and meaningful behaviors of adult human beings from the space of nature. It then looks as if we must figure out a way to reconcile uniquely meaningful human experiential states with a totally disenchanted “nature”. The result, in epistemological terms, according to McDowell, is that a disenchanted view of nature (albeit inchoately, or subliminally) motivates both the coherest and the proponent of the Myth of the Given to accept premise (1), the view of sensory experience as merely a causal, not an epistemic, interaction with the world. And this, according to McDowell, is the fundamental mistake that drives the interminable oscillation. That is why McDowell says: “If we acquiesce in the disenchantment of nature, if we let meaning be expelled from what I have been calling ‘the merely natural’, we shall certainly need to work at bringing meaning back into the picture when we come to consider human interactions.” And this is exactly the task that McDowell thinks the Myth of the Given and coherestism have both set themselves up for and doomed themselves to fail at; for, McDowell admits that there is no way to successfully integrate reason within a totally disenchanted picture of nature.

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111 McDowell says, “In a common mediaeval outlook, what we now see as the subject matter of natural science was conceived as filled with meaning, as if all of nature were a book of lessons for us; and it is a mark of intellectual progress that educated people cannot now take that idea seriously.” (MW, p. 71.)

112 McDowell says, “I promised to uncover [in Mind and World] a deep-rooted but, as we can come to realize, non-compulsory influence on our thinking that accounts for the predicament [oscillation]. I have now introduced my candidate for that role: the naturalism that leaves nature disenchanted.” (MW, p. 85.)

113 MW, p. 72. Again, McDowell’s point is that, the feeling that there is a gap to be bridged between the mind and the world stems from thinking that experience can’t be both a transaction in nature and have a reason-giving capacity as well.

114 Crispin Wright sums this point up nicely when he says the following: “it is the modern conception of Nature which sets up this unattractive, Homeric choice—between elimination or (quasi-)reduction of meaning, intentionality, and normativity, one the one hand, or an obscurantist metaphysical hypostatization of them, on the other—and it is this conception which McDowell aims to show us how to supersede. We should aim not to solve the difficulties of locating rational thought and intentional activity within the modern naturalist view, but to finesse them by accomplishing an improved—‘relaxed’—conception of what should rank as natural—one which allows us to ‘take in stride,’ without any sense of eeriness or mystification, an acceptance that Spontaneity is sui generis, by
So, in a word, McDowell blames the ascendancy of the modern scientific worldview for shrinking our conception of what counts as “natural”, so that “nature” winds-up excluding (an intelligibility of) the space of reasons. This results in a sort of separation anxiety of mind from world which cannot, under the terms of a disenchanted view of nature, be pacified. But, due to philosophy’s reverence for the disenchanted view of nature, the conception of experience which McDowell offers as an alternative remains shrouded. McDowell’s strategy, then, is to argue that there is actually no need to try to reduce reason and intentionality to a disenchanted nature. In fact, he attacks what he calls “bald naturalism” for attempting to provide just such a reduction. McDowell objects that such a bald naturalist project simply cannot respect the *sui generis* character of explanations in terms of the space of reasons. Thus McDowell distinguishes his project from reductionist attempts—like “bald naturalism”—to integrate spontaneity within a disenchanted conception of nature. McDowell thinks he can avoid reductionism though a re-enchantment of nature that aims to vindicate an idea of experience as both natural and already conceptual. Since experience is obviously a natural occurrence, McDowell thinks it needs only to be shown to be an occurrence that is also already inside the space of reasons. But, in order to sustain this conception of experience McDowell argues that we must hold fast to the idea that the causal realm of law does not exhaust the space of nature. Thus, as McDowell puts it, “Given

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115 Robert Pippin explains what McDowell means by the use of the term “anxiety” nicely when he says the following: “McDowell believes that a specific understanding of the realm of nature, due largely to modern natural science, has had philosophy in its grip for some time, and this in a way that then creates the appearance of unavoidable and largely unanswerable problems: how could meaning be possible? how could we be responsive to, and act on, reasons, given that we are the natural beings we are? These become such critical questions, and their topics begin to look ‘spooky,’ or only possible because of non-natural capacities, when natural being is understood as it is by modern natural science, where all intelligibility, understanding, and explanation are tied to subsumption under scientific law, and so to notions of causal necessity” (Robert Pippin, “Leaving Nature Behind,” *RMW*, p. 59).

116 …Which can be difficult in the face of a modern scientific view of nature as disenchanted.
that diagnosis, therapy must aim at loosening the grip of that [disenchanted] conception of the
natural.”

5. McDowell calls his attempt at “loosening the grip” of the disenchanted view of nature a
“relaxed naturalism”. He also refers to it as a “partial re-enchantment of nature” because it is
intended to extend the boundary of what counts as “natural” to include occurrences that are
inside the space of reasons—specifically, conceptual impressions. Since the disenchanted view
of nature expels concepts and meanings from the natural world, those who hold it cannot view
experience itself as inside the space of concepts. And this, in turn, excludes experiences from
entering into (justificatory) relations in the space of reasons. In which case it becomes
impossible to see experience as reason giving; and then we wind up faced with the pair of
choices that lead to oscillation. McDowell’s solution is to bring concepts back into the space of
nature so that experience can be seen as meaningful (i.e., conceptually structured). And if we
can do this, McDowell argues that an experience will not only be something that is (non-
problematically) considered “natural”, but it will also be inside the space of reasons and
therefore capable of genuinely being about the external world: we will have made naturalism
safe for intentionality.

Specifically, McDowell’s strategy of relaxed naturalism is aimed at integrating our active
employment of conceptual capacities—events supposedly capture-able only in terms of the sui
generis space of reasons—into our passive (natural, bodily) reception of sensory impressions. McDowell says that we can do this by combining a Kantian view of experience as involving a

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118 MW, p. 89.
119 McDowell says, “Meaning is not a mysterious gift from outside nature” (MW, p. 88).
120 According to the disenchanted view, those sensory events could only be described in terms of the operations of
non-conceptual causal laws.
cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity with the Aristotelian idea that a normal human being acquires a second nature by being “initiated into conceptual capacities” through upbringing.\textsuperscript{121}

In turn, those same conceptual capacities can be seen (\textit{à la} Kant) as passively employed in the very reception of experience itself, such that those capacities can play an integral role in shaping what’s “\textit{natural}” about our interaction with the environment (i.e., our “mode of living”). Nature then will have been partially re-enchanted by bringing a notion of \textit{meaningful} happenings, viz. conceptual impressions, into the space of nature.\textsuperscript{122}

According to McDowell impressions are a way of being acted on by the world. It is in that sense that they are “natural”. But, the passivity of impressions makes them look like occurrences that must be separate from the conceptual activity of spontaneity. Hence, McDowell suggests that we must conceive of experience in a quite specific way: “we must insist that the understanding is \textit{already} inextricably implicated in the deliverances of sensibility themselves.”\textsuperscript{123}

We can do this, as McDowell points out, by saying, with Kant, that experience “results from a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{124} Kant’s formulation, according to McDowell, “makes room for a different notion of givenness, one that is innocent of the confusion between justification and exculpation.”\textsuperscript{125} If our conceptual capacities are already operative in the reception of an impression, then that impression can be a case of receiving genuine empirical content.\textsuperscript{126} And, our experiences must have conceptual content or else they

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{MW}, p. xx. McDowell says that we can “generalize the way Aristotle conceives the molding of ethical character (\textit{MW}, p. 84). McDowell refers to this conceptual “upbringing” as \textit{Bildung} (\textit{MW}, p. 87).

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{MW}, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{MW}, p. 46. Emphasis added. Also, McDowell says that, “we can have empirical content in our picture only if we acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions are rationally connected” (\textit{MW}, pp. 17-18).

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{MW}, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{MW}, p. 10. That is, a small “\textit{g}”, conceptually-structured given.

\textsuperscript{126} McDowell is willing to keep the notion of “impressions” alive. But he suggests that we need to think of them as conceptual so that they can offer justifications, not mere exculpations. When impressions are conceived of as merely natural, causal transactions in an extra-conceptual sphere, then perhaps it could be said that we’re “not to
wouldn’t be experiences of anything recognizable.\textsuperscript{127} My experience of a plastic cup, for example, is not just an undifferentiated array of sense qualities, it involves my conceptual deployment of the concepts “plastic”, “cup”, “made of”, etc. Thus, in my experience of the plastic cup, what is \textit{“given”} is the conceptual content: “that cup is made of plastic”.

That gets empirical content into the picture for McDowell, but how can he assure us that a \textit{given} empirical content is “appropriately constrained by external reality,” so that it doesn’t just leave us “frictionless”? How can one be sure, for example, that when one has an experience of a plastic cup one is not just a brain in a mad scientist’s vat? This question points out what was so appealing about the Myth of the Given, namely, that it at least \textit{seemed} to satisfy our craving for an external constraint on our empirical thought. Sellars and Davidson exposed that “external constraint” as just a \textit{Myth}, so they rejected the notion of external constraint altogether. McDowell’s way of satisfying our craving for external constraint is to appeal to the \textit{passivity} of experience.

Our spontaneity is the \textit{active} faculty by which we have “freedom” to make judgments—i.e. to place things in the space of reasons.\textsuperscript{128} But, that very same faculty, the one that can be understood only in terms of placing something in the \textit{sui generis} space of reasons, is also inextricably implicated in the \textit{passive reception} of sensory impressions themselves. Thus, it is not that one’s conceptual capacities are “exercised \textit{on} some supposedly prior [and therefore
extra-conceptual] deliverances of receptivity.” 129 Rather, according to McDowell, we must say that in experience

One’s conceptual capacities have *already* been brought into play, in the content’s being available to one, before one has any choice in the matter. The content is not something one has put together oneself, as when one decides what to say about something. In fact it is precisely because experience is passive, a case of receptivity in operation, that the conception of experience I am recommending can satisfy the craving for a limit to freedom that underlies the Myth of the Given. 130

So for McDowell, the fact that concepts have *already* been deployed, *in* the very reception of an experience, before one has had any say-so in the matter so-to-speak, shows that an experience can be conceptual while at the same time being independent of thought: i.e., a “conceptual impression” can be seen as an impingement upon us from the external world. It is a conceptual happening. Thus, even though an empirical experience is thoroughly conceptual—and so therefore reflective of one’s active (free) “nature”, because that very same experience is also passively received, according to McDowell, it can be an episode or state in which the natural world itself “comes into view” as a conceptual content and can therefore rationally constrain what one thinks and believes. So, when McDowell says that, “In experience one finds oneself saddled with content,” he means to point out that the natural world imposes itself upon one in experience, and that *that natural constraint is also a rational constraint.* 131

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129 *MW*, p. 10. This cautionary note (i.e., use “in” versus “on”) is intended to remind us that the idea of experience as a cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity is not intended make experience look like a two-part process: one part, a contribution from the world (a sensation), and the other, a contribution from our spontaneity (an application of a concept). 129 That is, McDowell does not want to countenance a non-conceptual element in experience.

130 *MW*, p. 10, emphasis added.

131 McDowell says, “We need to conceive this expansive spontaneity as subject to control from outside our thinking, on pain of representing the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in a void.”
The fact that in experience one is passive is enough, according to McDowell, to provide experience with the necessary “friction”. For McDowell, because experience is a passive state in which we are acted upon by an external reality, i.e., an episode of receptivity, experience can provide the foothold by which our thinking makes rational contact with the world. This passivity also allows us to see experience as a transaction in the space of nature, though one which nonetheless, through the involvement of the operations of spontaneity, can enter into relations in the space of reasons. According to McDowell, one can, in experience, conceptually take-in how things are; and, as McDowell says, “How things are is independent of one’s thinking.” Thus, McDowell concludes that the passivity of experience is what makes it possible for experience to bring the world—something external to our beliefs—into view.

6. McDowell thinks that empirical experience must bring the world itself—not merely an intermediary or sense-datum—into view. Thus McDowell defends a direct realist conception of perception, according to which, “in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts, facts that obtain anyway and impress themselves on one’s sensibility.” On this point McDowell differs from Kant’s view, in which, in experience one has access only to appearances—i.e. the phenomenal world; this sort of access, according to McDowell, falls short of bringing the actual world into view. So Kant himself, according to McDowell, failed to “bring the world into view”. McDowell applauds Kant’s idea of a co-operation of spontaneity and receptivity for providing a way of seeing how the world’s impacts on us can show up in experience as empirical

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132 McDowell says, “Crediting experience with ordinary empirical passivity meets our need: it ensures that when we invoke spontaneity in connection with the employment of concepts in empirical thinking, we do not condemn ourselves to representing empirical thinking as rationally un-constrained, a frictionless spinning in a void” (MW, p. 42).
133 MW, p. 25.
134 MW, p. 29.
135 For illustrative purposes, we are ignoring Kant’s transcendental framework here.
content. But, because Kant too, as McDowell points out, was obstructed by a disenchanted view of nature, he failed to integrate his notion of empirical content into the natural order. McDowell says of Kant that, “since he does not contemplate a naturalism of second nature, and since bald naturalism has no appeal for him, he cannot find a place in nature for this required real connection between concepts and intuitions.”

Instead, Kant posits a noumenal realm, a realm of things as they are in-themselves, and a phenomenal realm, a realm of things as they appear (to a perceiving subject). And because of this distinction, McDowell says that, “Kant comes within a whisker of a satisfactory escape from the oscillation.” Kant falls short, in McDowell’s eyes, because Kant’s view contains a super-sensible realm—a noumenal realm beyond possible experience—which is supposedly responsible for our sensory intuitions. And this, for McDowell, “spoils the insight, because the radical mind-independence of the supersensible comes to seem exemplary of what any genuine mind-independence would be.”

For Kant, the involvement of spontaneity in receptivity brings merely the phenomenal world into view—the world as we experience it, but it does not bring the noumenal world into view—the world of things as they are in-themselves.

What McDowell wants is for experience to enable “the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks.” So he suggests that we cannot picture the content of experience as an intermediary, as something like a mere appearance of a plastic cup for example, which stands between my belief that “that cup is made of plastic” and the plastic cup

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136 MW, p. 98. Bald naturalism is a view which, according to McDowell, opts out of epistemology altogether by refusing to countenance the sui generis structure of the space of reasons. Instead, bald naturalists claim that the concepts of the space of reasons can be reduced to concepts that factor only in the realm of law. Paul Churchland is certainly an example of a bald naturalist. He’s holding out for the day when a mature neuroscience will allow us to eliminate all reference to psychological states in favor of reference to neuro-physiological states.

137 MW, p. 42.

138 MW, p. 96. McDowell also says that this “the transcendental framework forces a qualification. Transcendently speaking, our responsible freedom in empirical thinking seems to fall short of the genuine article” (MW, p. 43).

itself. That would be to picture a “boundary” between my thought and the world. And such a boundary, according to McDowell, would reintroduce a feeling of frictionlessness: the possibility that the appearance of a plastic cup before me is just as likely to have been caused by a real plastic cup as by the probing of a mad scientist on my en-vatted brain.\footnote{McDowell calls any view which posits experiential intermediaries, like “appearances”, “‘the highest common factor conception’ of our subjective position.” He says that this is “the idea that even when things go well, cognitively speaking, our subjective position can only be something common between such [veridical] cases and cases in which things do not go well [when ‘experience deceives’]” (MW, p. 113).}

So when McDowell defends his non-traditional empiricism, he defends a view in which impressions are direct presentations of the world, rather than re-presentations of the world. McDowell says that

the belief that an object has an observable property can be grounded in an impressions itself: the fact’s impressing itself on the subject. In my picture impressions are, so to speak, transparent. In the picture common to Sellars and Davidson they are opaque: if one knows enough about one’s causal connections with the world, one can argue from them to conclusions about the world, but they do not themselves disclose the world to one…If we cannot conceive impressions as transparent, we distance the world too far from our perceptual lives to be able to keep mystery out of the idea that our conceptual lives, including appearings, involve empirical content.

The key to understanding what McDowell is driving at here lies in his claim that empirical content depends upon a relation or connection with worldly objects that cannot be just a causal connection. Rather, the connection between intentional states and what they purport to be about must involve a rational relation. And in this regard, the problem with coherentism is much the same as the problem with the Myth of the Given. That is, both conceive of experience as less 

\footnote{MW, p. 145.}
than a direct, rational encounter with the world. Instead they view experiences in terms of non-conceptual deliverances. The only difference between the two views is that the Myth of the Given fallaciously allows for these non-conceptual deliverances to count as reasons (impressions) whereas the coherentist refuses to see them as such. That is, the Myth makes the vain attempt to identify the external constraint on our empirical beliefs in terms of a causal relation to the world: and that’s the part that runs afoul of the naturalistic fallacy. The coherentist sees this mistake and simply drops the idea of experience as an external (rational) constraint on belief formation. But then nothing counts as an external constraint on the space of reasons. And McDowell charges that that in turn results in the loss of empirical content. So neither view—and this is the important point—works with a concept of experience that can be conceived as providing access to representational (i.e. conceptual) content.

McDowell thinks that a notion of experience as an openness to the layout of reality avoids the threat of frictionlessness. For him, the actual objects of the world themselves must provide the content of one’s experience, not something less than those objects, like mere sensory appearances. McDowell says,

This image of openness to reality is at our disposal because of how we place the reality that makes its impression on a subject in experience. Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.\(^{142}\)

\(^{142}\) MW, p. 26.
It might seem that McDowell is not entitled to such a view of experience as openness, because he has so thoroughly conceptualized experience. How can he say that a conceptual structure is an “aspect of the perceptible world”? Nevertheless, McDowell maintains both that “how things are” is conceptual and also that “how things are” is independent of our thinking. McDowell defends this claim by appealing to the distinctive passivity of experience; it is the world’s impacts on a possessor of a faculty of receptivity, he thinks, that is responsible for the contents of an experience. He says:

The fact that experience is passive, a matter of receptivity in operation, should assure us that we have all the external constraint we can reasonably want. The constraint comes from outside thinking, but not from outside what is thinkable. When we trace justifications back, the last thing we come to is still a thinkable content; not something more ultimate than that, a bare pointing to a bit of the Given. But these final thinkable contents are put into place in operations of receptivity, and that means that when we appeal to them we register the required constraint on thinking from a reality external to it.\(^{143}\)

In defense of this view of experiential openness, McDowell appeals to the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus and says: “there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case.”\(^{144}\) “So,” McDowell continues, “since the world is everything that is the case (as he [Wittgenstein]\(^{145}\) himself once wrote), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world.”\(^{146}\) One of McDowell’s guiding ideas is that the realm in which justification takes place (i.e. the “space of

\(^{143}\) MW, pp. 28-9.
\(^{144}\) MW, p. 27.
\(^{146}\) MW, p. 27.
reasons”) cannot be conceived as a realm of mental states or episodes that are “self-standing” with respect to the objects that those states depend upon for their content. We cannot just start from the assumption that we have contentful (seemingly world-involving) states, like thoughts and beliefs, and then work our way back from there to the idea that those states must have been caused by (and so adequately reflect) an independent world. This is the position that Descartes leaves us in. But it also turns out to be the position that the coherentist leaves us in too, when he claims that beliefs are only rationally related to other belief, not also to the world. This pictures the contents of “minds” as populated by self-standing, world-independent states. McDowell is highly suspicious of this picture of contentful states, and he says that, “It is really an extraordinary idea that the contents of minds are things that, considered in themselves, just ‘stand there’. ” In “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” McDowell criticizes this conception of “self-standing” mental states as leading to a hopeless Cartesian skepticism in which our thought is out of touch with the world. In contrast to this, McDowell says that, “In my picture, actualizations of conceptual capacities in receptivity are already, in conforming to that specification, at least apparently revelatory of an objective world, and, when all goes well, actually so.” “They do not need to be turned into experiences with objective purport by being so taken….these ‘passively received impressions’ already have objective purport.”

7. The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature and to explain how he uses it to supersede the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. Neither of those two views can account for genuine empirical content and so neither one can explain how experience can be about an independent reality. McDowell exploits

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the Kantian insight that experience is already conceptual in order to get a view of experience as being genuinely contentful. McDowell says, “When we trace the ground for an empirical judgement, the last step takes us to experiences. Experiences already have conceptual content, so this last step does not take us outside the space of concepts.”149 Furthermore, even though experience is inside the space of concepts it is not, ipso facto, according to McDowell, outside of the space of nature. Therefore, because McDowell locates his alternative conception of experience against the background of a partially re-enchanted nature, he can make “room for us to suppose, as according to Sellars and Davidson we cannot, both that the very idea of experience is the idea of something natural and that empirical thinking is answerable to experience.”150

What is more, according to McDowell, a proper acknowledgement of our second nature, “gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science.”151 For, it is because of second nature that an experience can be seen as simultaneously an occurrence characterizable in terms of the sui generis space of reasons and an event within the space of nature. McDowell says: “We can claim both that the notion of spontaneity functions in a conceptual framework that is alien to the structure of the realm of law, and that it is needed for describing actualizations of natural powers as such.” That “conceptual framework” is created by the “naturalism of second nature” in which the idea of meaningful experiences can come into view as natural happenings that result from a properly initiated concept-user’s interaction with the independent world.

McDowell thinks that if we can allow for this extended conception of what counts as natural, then we should have no problem accepting the Kantian insight that, “the very idea of

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149 MW, p. 10.
150 MW, p. xix. He continues: “This requires a different way to avoid the threat of a naturalistic fallacy”: namely, an extension of the concept of the natural.
151 MW, p. 84.
representational content…requires an interplay between concepts and intuitions.”\textsuperscript{152} As a result of this “re-enchantment” we can say things like: “in experience one takes in, for instance sees, \emph{that things are thus and so}.”\textsuperscript{153} That is, we can say that in experience one has access to bona-fide (conceptual, representational, propositional, meaningful, in a word, \textit{reason-giving}) empirical content. Hence, McDowell’s reason for offering a re-enchantment of nature is that it can open the door for the kind of concept of experience that he employs in premise (1M): a notion of experience as providing access to conceptual content. And experience itself \textit{must} carry conceptual content so that it can be viewed as \textit{inside} the space of concepts and therefore capable of entering into justificatory relations in the space of reasons.

\textsuperscript{152} MW, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{153} MW, p. 9.
CHAPTER II

MCDOWELL ON THE EXPERIENTIAL RELATION: IMPRESSIONS AND ANSWERABILITY TO THE WORLD

Section one and two of the previous chapter covered traditional empiricism and coherentism, respectively, as two theories about the relation of experience to the empirical world. In section three we saw McDowell fault both views for conceiving of the relation to the world afforded by experience as merely a causal relation. In order to avoid oscillating between these two unsatisfactory views, McDowell argues that experience must be conceived as placing one in a normative or rational or conceptual relation to the empirical world, not just a causal relation. McDowell’s claim is that this requires that our experiential relation to the world be one in which our empirical thinking is answerable to the world for its truth or falsity. In this chapter we will examine that claim.

As we have seen, the Myth of the Given is a form of empiricism that takes our empirical thinking to be answerable to, and rationally constrained by, the passive reception of non-conceptual, causal impressions of sense. This view was found to be just an epistemological myth in so far as it relies upon the mistaken idea that we can be rationally constrained by non-conceptual impacts from the world. The coherentist responds to this mistaken assumption by rejecting empiricism altogether, that is, by rejecting the notion that impressions of sense (since
merely causal) can be accommodated in the space of reasons and thus figure in the order of justification as evidence. McDowell however argues that the coherentist’s response results in a loss of “friction” with the world. McDowell attempts to reinstate friction by re-enchanting nature and thereby allowing for a notion of impressions that can provide for answerability to the world.

The notion of answerability to the world, however, is a controversial notion. It is described by McDowell as the central core remnant of the embattled traditional empiricism that must be retained. This “central core” is what McDowell means to defend when he says that he is defending minimal empiricism: “the idea that experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all.” And, since McDowell defends this answerability relation as a form of empiricism spelled out in terms of “impressions”, the most incisive criticisms of McDowell’s view come from the anti-empiricist camp. Recently, Richard Rorty has been one of the most vocal critics of the notion of “answerability to the world”. Rorty, a self-professed pragmatist, also considers himself a defender of Davidsonian coherentism. In fact, according to Rorty, the
key insight of Davidsonian coherentism is the idea that we can replace the notion of answerability to the world with the notion that beliefs are intrinsically mostly true.  

The first two section of this chapter focus on McDowell’s notion of answerability to the world and its connection to impressions and the “aboutness” of thoughts and beliefs. The final two sections examine the conflict between McDowell and Rorty and Davidson over the very idea of answerability to the world. 

It is important to note that the shared aim of these three philosophers is to present a view of mind-world relations that avoids skepticism without falling into the naturalistic fallacy. Thus we are looking for an account of the relation of mind to world as having to meet two goals: (1) to quiet the skeptic, and (2) to avoid the naturalistic fallacy. In McDowell’s view, Rorty and Davidson successfully achieve (2) but fail to achieve (1). They fail to achieve (1) because they employ a notion of beliefs as self-standing and independent of rational constraint by the way the world is. McDowell, by contrast, defends the idea of experience as passive openness to the layout of reality, in which experience incorporates (as opposed to merely “represents”) the very objects and facts that it is about. McDowell takes this route to be a way to avoid both (1) and (2). His avoidance of (1) involves seeing experience as dependent upon the world for its content, such that empirical content cannot be understood as self-standing. And his avoidance of (2)
Answerability to the World, Aboutness, and Impressions

1. What does McDowell mean by “answerability to the world”? The notion of “answerability to the world,” like the notion of “experience functioning as a tribunal,” is a metaphor. What McDowell literally means (in both cases) is that a particular experience or belief or thought about how the world is, is correct or incorrect based upon whether or not the world is in fact that way—i.e. how it is experienced or perceived to be. For example, my belief that this particular cup is made of plastic is made true by the fact that it is indeed made of plastic, or false by the fact that it is not. Thus, McDowell uses “answerability” to pick out a certain sort of normative, epistemic, or rational relation between experiences, beliefs, thoughts, etc., on the one hand and the world on the other. He says: “This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world—to how things are—for whether or not it is correctly executed.”

Traditional empiricism’s use of the notion of answerability to the world fails (as Sellars’s attack on Givenness has shown) because we cannot be answerable to something non-conceptual, which is how they conceive of “the world”. Answerability is a normative (epistemic) notion and so cannot be captured by adverting to merely causal relations. That is, traditional empiricism

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6 MW, p. 31; see also MW, p. 10.
7 McDowell says, “A belief or judgment to the effect that things are thus and so—a belief or judgment whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so—must be a posture or stance that is correctly or incorrectly adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so” (MW, pp. xi-xii). In this sense, the notion of being answerable to the world can be seen as basically analogous to the notion of being constrained by the world.
8 MW, p. xii.
commits the naturalistic fallacy of confusing a cause and a justification. McDowell argues for a notion of answerability too, but one that avoids the naturalistic fallacy. He thinks that the notion of answerability to the world is needed in order to quiet the skeptic. And, McDowell says that, “A genuine escape [from the oscillation] would require that we avoid the Myth of the Given without renouncing the claim that experience is a rational constraint on thinking.”

To some, the idea that we are rationally answerable to the world may seem like sheer common sense. In fact, McDowell often seems to think that in defending answerability he is defending our pre-philosophical “default” view of the relation between mind and world. And, it is in this sense that he often refers to the answerability relation as the “transcendental thought”. But two things, at least, may stand out as controversial aspects of this view. The first is this: what is meant by “the world” in the phrase “answerability to the world”? And secondly: what does it mean to say that a belief is “made true by a fact”?

2. The term “the world” is often taken to mean “the external world,” whereby “external” means something like “what’s outside the head or mind of a subject”. This view is in line with traditional realism, which holds that “the world is completely independent of that which anyone can think or say about it, and that even if all human beings, or all thinkers, were to be wiped out of existence, the world would continue to exist.” But this view can open up a sort of dualism

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9 MW, p. 18.
10 Maximilian de Gaynesford e.g. describes McDowell’s objectives in Mind and World in terms of advocating for this “default” view (Maximilian de Gaynesford, John McDowell, pp. 4-9).
11 McDowell states that his aim is to “free the transcendental thought from the appearance of posing a philosophical difficulty.” He goes on to state also that, “if we cannot see conceptual activity as part of a package that includes sensory consciousness of the objective, then the very idea of conceptual activity—which must have objective purport in order to be recognizable as conceptual activity at all—becomes mysterious” (McDowell, “Reply to Brandom,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, (June, 1998), p. 406-7).
12 Sandra Dingli, On Thinking and the World: John McDowell’s Mind and World, p. 175. Dingli continues: “This view leads Richard Rorty to question whether there is any point in speaking about the world at all. He makes a rather extraordinary claim, that “the world” is either the purely vacuous notion of the ineffable cause of sense and
between a subject and the world, in which the external or “outer” world gets equated with “nature” while the “inner” world, the realm of thought and intentionality, gets equated with the “mind”. And from here it is but a short step to a dualism of scheme and world, which tempts us to think that the “inner” is independent of the “outer” such that the one represents the other. But notice that this view depends upon a notion of a “self-standing”, or autonomous, “inner” realm of mental states on one side of a dualism, with the world—an independent reality—on the other.13

And indeed, if this is the conception of “the world” that’s used, then the very idea of answerability to “the world” looks problematic in just the way that Richard Rorty spells out in “The World Well Lost.” Namely, if “the world” is only the real world insofar as it is conceived of as independent of any subject’s awareness of it, then our attempts to home in on that object (via sensibility) will surely always fall short.14 On the other hand, if the world is construed as consisting only of the “inner” world of representations (e.g. the passing show of sense-data in our Cartesian theaters), since that is all that we could be aware of, then we are only aware of (or in touch with) the “outer”—independent—world indirectly, via sensuous intermediaries, and, as a result, the threats of solipsism and skepticism loom large.15

McDowell traces the threat of this dualism to a remnant of Cartesianism that consists in thinking that the contents of experience are “self-standing” in relation to “the world.” This

13 McDowell specifically criticizes this picture of experiences and thoughts and beliefs as part of a “self-standing,” “self-contained subjective realm,” in “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space” (in Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality, pp. 241-52). In the context of my discussion here, I take the term “self-standing” to be roughly equivalent to “non-relational”, or “intrinsic to the system of beliefs”.

14 For example, Rorty says, “The notion of ‘the world’ as used in a phrase like ‘different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently’ must be the notion of something completely unspecified and unspecifiable—the thing-in-itself, in fact” (Richard Rorty, “The World Well Lost,” The Journal of Philosophy (October, 1972), p. 663). Moreover, Davidson sees a need to defend against the threat of a relativism of conceptual schemes: where your “world” or reality may differ from mine, in that you “organize” the incoming data of experience according to a different scheme (See, Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”).

15 Rorty complains that according to such a view, “reflections in the Mirror of Nature are intrinsically better known than nature itself” (Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 174).
“Cartesian picture,” according to McDowell, is “the idea of the inner realm as self-standing, with everything within it arranged as it is independently of external circumstances.” Accordingly, on such a view, being answerable to the world would look like it must amount to answering to some sort of experiential intermediary, e.g. an impression construed as a brute, causal impingement from the outside world. This is exactly the implication that leads Rorty and Davidson to endorse a form of coherentism.

But, in contrast to these contentious notions of “the world”, McDowell offers what he takes to be a more innocent notion when he uses that term. By “the world” he means: that which our thoughts, beliefs, sentences, etc. are about. And in this sense, the world and experiences of the world go hand in hand: the world is—when we are not misled—what we experience it to be. Given that, McDowell can be aptly labeled a direct realist about perception. So, when he says that our empirical thoughts and beliefs and experiences are about the world, he means they are about the world itself, not an intermediary like a sense-datum or mere representation of the world. For McDowell, we are answerable to what our experiences are about. And, in general, our experiences are about nature, i.e., the natural world. Davidson and Rorty basically seem to agree with McDowell that “the world” cannot be something that is merely given to us by an experiential intermediary. The dispute thus comes to this: does our experiential access to “the world” afford us standings in the space of reasons or not? If not, then we cannot be answerable to it (for Rorty this is tantamount to an abandonment of the notion “the world”); if so, then we can be. Thus the dispute between McDowell and Davidson and Rorty centers on the question of whether or not our experience is answerable to the world.

17 De Gaynesford concurs, saying “he is a realist about the world” (de Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, p. 90).
18 For example, Davidson says that, “In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false” (Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 198).
3. The second initially suspect aspect of McDowell’s transcendental thought is the idea that a belief or experience is “made true or false by a fact.” Some argue that facts are just true propositions or true thoughts, nothing more. So when we “grasp a fact” we grasp a proposition.\(^{19}\) This view is congenial to Davidson’s and Rorty’s coherentist approach, since it is a view that takes a particular proposition or belief to count as a “fact” not because of its relation to an extra-linguistic state of affairs, but because of its relation to other propositions and beliefs. McDowell, by contrast, wants to say that facts are independent of human beings and that when we “grasp a fact” we grasp the world.\(^{20}\) For example, when I assert that “this cup is made of plastic,” if I am right—i.e., if the assertion is true—I am right because the cup is in fact made of plastic. The object, i.e. the cup, is independent of what I, or anyone else, think, yet at the same time the facts about the constitution of the cup can constitute the contents of my thought—my thought is about that cup. And, it is in that sense that McDowell suggests that it is the world (or a worldly fact or state of affairs), and not some further proposition, that makes an empirical

\(^{19}\) However, Davidson says, “If we give up facts as entities that make sentences true, we ought to give up representations at the same time, for the legitimacy of each depends on the legitimacy of the other” (Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” The Journal of Philosophy (June, 1990), p. 304). Here Davidson links the demise of representations with the demise of facts. “Facts”, for him, here sound like things that exist apart from human language and are “entities” that “make” sentences true or false. Earlier Davidson says, “we ought…to question the popular assumption that sentences or their spoken tokens, or sentence-like entities or configurations in our brains, can properly be called ‘representations,’ since there is nothing for them to represent” (Ibid., emphasis added). McDowell interprets this view (especially the part I highlighted) as leaving out the world element (i.e. when Davidson gives up “facts”). In contrast to this view McDowell proposes to merge the “world element” and the “conceptual structure”—at least for human beings (i.e. at least for mature ones with a second nature). And, he claims that this is not idealism on the grounds that the “conceptual structure” mostly depends on (is constrained by) the “world element”, i.e. on how the world is. (So, the world is a “world of facts”, apparently: states of affairs, events and relations between objects, and so forth; and, I take it that these should not be considered “entities”.) McDowell is trying to cultivate a picture in which our “conceptual structure” is not floating freely (frictionlessly) from the “world element” but rather is a special way of being “open” to it.

\(^{20}\) McDowell says that, “facts in general are essentially capable of being embraced in thought” (MW, p. 28). He also says that, “since the world is everything that is the case…there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world” (MW, p. 27). What McDowell seems to mean is that although facts (the world) may be considered independent of particular thoughts, they cannot be independent of thought as such, i.e. the thinkable realm. This is one way in which McDowell puts his claim that the conceptual is “unbounded”, the idea that the world itself is not outside of a boundary which encloses human conceptualization.
belief true or false. McDowell argues for a position in which, even though there are no self-standing representations of facts—i.e., no sensuous intermediaries—the facts can nonetheless impress themselves on us because we are conceptually open to the world.

Part of what McDowell is suggesting is that once one rejects the notion of mental states as self-standing entities, it becomes unintelligible to speak of a “fact” as either a state of affairs in the world or a thought or belief (in the head) about (i.e., with the content of) that state of affairs.21 Facts come on the scene as dependent upon a combination (or meeting) of the two. On McDowell’s view, because a mental state (about the world) is fully dependent upon the world or state of affairs that it is about, a “fact” has no independent status (i.e., as either a mere appearance of a cup—like a “sense-datum”, or, as the cup itself (e.g. its physical properties)). This is what McDowell means to suggest by appealing to Wittgenstein’s statement in the *Investigations* that, “When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: this-is-so.”22 According to de Gaynesford’s interpretation of McDowell, experiences and beliefs must be seen as ontologically dependent on the world—on what is the case—in the following sort of way: where there is no worldly object or state of affairs, there is likewise no experiential content about that object or state of affairs.23 This is the leading claim of McDowell’s view of experience as openness.

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21 He means, in contrast to Rorty and Davidson, that “facts” are not kinds of thoughts—e.g. the true ones, but rather “thinkable contents,” (aspects of the layout of reality) which we may or may not pick up on in experience. “McDowell’s tactic,” as Dingli explains, “is to distinguish thinkables which exist independently of thought and with which the world is identified, with acts of thinking” (Sandra Dingli, *On Thinking and the World*, p. 162). McDowell says that, “My point about perceptual experiences is that they must provide rational credentials, not that they must have them. Perceptual experiences do not purport to report facts. In enjoying experiences one seems to, and in some cases does, take in facts; this makes the facts available to serve as rational credentials for judgments or beliefs based on the experiences” (McDowell, “Reply to Brandom,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (June, 1998), p. 406).


23 Sometimes it can *seem* like there is (something present) although there is not, but in those cases—i.e. illusions and such—there is no relevant world-directed content. And thus there is no such contentful state to be had. See e.g., de Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, p. 133. Consider also the following interpretation given by Gaskin. He say that McDowell “insists that in perceptual experience one is cognitively related to one’s environment in such a way as
McDowell says that “there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case.”\(^{24}\) For McDowell, when an experience or belief is *about* something, it has *that* thing or event as its object—its content. So, according to McDowell, saying that a fact makes an experience or belief true or false comes to this: if a belief or experience involves a claim (i.e., an “impression” or an “appearance”) about how the world is, then how the world *is* what *determines* not only the truth or falsity of that belief or experience *but also its very content.*\(^{25}\)

4. Another possible mistake—exacerbated, no doubt, by talk of “facts”—is to interpret McDowell’s notion of “answerability to the world” as just another way of saying that our empirical beliefs are true when they *correspond* to reality—i.e., to “facts”—construed as *external* to thought. That is, it may look like McDowell’s endorsement of answerability to the

constitutively to make the content of one’s experience…depend on the existence or otherwise of the relevant objects in one’s perceptual environment, so that if no appropriate object exists, no experiences with the relevant singular content…are available” (Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 33). Gaskin also says that, “the veridical case [of experience] is the metaphysically basic case, in the sense that the content of an appearance, whether veridical or illusory…is to the effect that things are, in the world, as the appearance represents them as being, that is, things are, in the world, as they would be if the appearance were veridical” (Ibid., p. 98). This footnote is just a quick rendition of one of McDowell’s important and very complex insights: the need for a *disjunctive* account of experience. The point will be elaborated further below. Suffice it for now to offer up contrasting responses to the argument from illusion. One response would be to say that in both veridical and non-veridical cases of perception what one has access to (experiential content)—the object of perception—is the same thing. An alternative response, the one that McDowell endorses, says that nothing is the same in the two cases: either we have access to a fact about the world as it is or we don’t. In the former case we have access to empirical content (and thus the world), whereas in the latter case we do not (it merely appears that we do). The fact that hallucinations and such may *appear* to be indiscernible from cases of true perception cannot compel us to adopt an epistemological position in which veridical cases of perception are placed on a par with non-veridical ones. McDowell’s view is that epistemology should not “suggest that experience always involves a mere appearance which falls short of the facts” (Simon Glendenning and Max de Gaynesford, “John McDowell on Experience: Open to the Sceptic?” *Metaphilosophy*, (January, 1998), p. 23).

\(^{24}\) MW, p. 27.

\(^{25}\) For example, he talks about “facts making themselves manifest,” and says that a “fact itself is directly presented to view” (See e.g., McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 386-7). In *Mind and World* he says that, “exercises of spontaneity can be rationally constrained by facts, when the facts make themselves manifest in experience” (MW, p. 144). Of course, it can sometimes *seem* that we are “presented with a fact” when we are not (in cases of illusions or dreams for example). But again, McDowell’s meta-epistemological point is that we should not let the possibility of illusion dictate that our view must make mere appearings (i.e. when what we think we perceive is not actually the case) just as good as facts (epistemologically speaking).
world amounts to an endorsement of a correspondence theory of truth. This, however, is not the case. The correspondence theory is only one way to cash out the notion of answerability to the world. It states that a linguistic entity like a belief or thought is answerable to the world in the sense that it represents (i.e., fits or corresponds to) a world of non-linguistic or extra-conceptual facts—something that is external to the space of reasons. On the correspondence view, the “facts” must lay outside of the space of reasons in order to make possible the specific relation in which something inside the space of reasons (e.g. a proposition) represents (i.e. corresponds to) something outside of that space (a “fact”). McDowell, however, refuses to countenance a realm of extra-conceptual facts. As Thornton interprets him, McDowell proposes “an identity theory of thoughts and facts.”

Thornton goes on to explain that this “contrasts with…the idea of correspondence between these two sides: between thoughts or sentences, on the one hand, and ‘sentence-shaped piece[s] of non-linguistic reality’ on the other.” As Thornton reads McDowell,

Facts are equated not with acts of thinking but with thinkable contents. Correct judgments have to be accountable to something independent of (acts of) human thinking but not independent of what is thinkable.

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26 Thornton, *John McDowell*, p. 9. Maximilian de Gaynesford, who also provides an eponymous book-length exegesis of McDowell’s philosophy, suggests that attributing an “identity” theory to McDowell is misleading (de Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, pp. 128-31). He recommends instead the notion of “ontological” or “object” dependence. De Gaynesford says that, “the sense of a singular term, and the sense of any proposition in which it occurs, is dependent for its existence and identity on the existence and identity of the particular object it is about or directed on. This is the claim called ‘object dependency’.” And thus, he says, “though he accepts the basic Fregean position, he never espouses identity theory explicitly” (Ibid., p. 128). De Gaynesfords interpretation, however, would seem to be contradicted by McDowell, who says: “On perfectly natural ways of using talk of what one says or thinks and of what is the case, such a remark – which gives expression to the core of the so called identity theory – is beyond the bounds of possible dispute. It is, as I said in *Mind and World* (1994), a truisim” (McDowell, “The True Modesty of an Identity Conception of Truth: A Note in Response to Pascal Engel (2001),” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, (2005) p. 83).


28 Ibid., p. 9.
So for McDowell, the “facts”, though external to our faculty (or capacity) of judgment, are not external to the space of concepts, and so can therefore stand as evidence for our beliefs. It is also in this sense that our beliefs are said to be answerable to the world—and thus to the facts—for their truth or falsity.

So, not only does McDowell present an alternative to the correspondence view of truth, but the correspondence view is ridiculed by both McDowell and his coherentist opponents as hopelessly committed to the sideways-on, or god’s-eye, view of our subjective perspective on the world. According to such a view our thoughts and beliefs, formulated in our natural language, hook on to (and are about) non-linguistic reality only by being able to correctly represent that reality. In which case, the test of “truth” becomes a matter of seeing whether or not that representation (considered as a freestanding or self-standing member of the space of reasons) accurately mirrors or fits the external world (something outside of the space of reasons). The well rehearsed problem with this view is that we cannot be certain that a particular bit of language corresponds to, or correctly represents, the non-linguistic world without taking up a position that is extra-linguistic (i.e. a non-conceptual world-view): a third position (e.g. god’s position) from which one can see both language and reality, and, that a particular bit of language fits that reality. The fact that we cannot take up such a position (e.g., that we cannot describe “reality” without using concepts and a language) is a central motivating idea behind the rejection

29 See for example Rorty’s introduction to Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp. 1-17. Rorty uses the term “God’s-eye point of view” (Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 13) whereas McDowell prefers to use the term “sideways on” (MW, p. 34). Rorty attributes his usage to Putnam (Ibid., p. 6). Here I use the two terms interchangeably.

30 Rorty explains that the “demand is for some transcendental standpoint outside our present set of representations from which we can inspect the relations between those representations and their object” (Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 293). Davidson argues that, “there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own” (Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 185).
of scheme-content dualism. And, according to Rorty’s and Davidson’s interpretation of the rejection of that dualism, since we cannot separate out which part is the pure, scheme-free input from the world and which part provides the schematic representation through the use of concepts, we should give up the idea of a separation between what is given by the world and what is added by the mind.

5. One might still wonder though, if McDowell’s notion of answerability to the world is just another form of representationalism, and so is still committed to a scheme-content dualism. Davidson and Rorty, for example, think that. They suggest that since we cannot make sense of a scheme-content dualism, we therefore ought to give up not only the idea that experience affords us representations (or impressions) of the world, but also with it the idea that we are answerable to the world through experience. According to Davidson’s and Rorty’s understanding of the scheme-content dualism, any notion of answerability to the world depends upon an epistemic relation between a conceptual scheme and a scheme-free world. And, they cite Sellars as having pointed out that this is a form of the naturalistic fallacy. Davidson and Rorty think that rejecting the notion of representations as epistemic intermediaries between the mind and the world thus

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31 Rorty, e.g., says, “This picture [of ‘the dualism of scheme and content’] is the one which suggests that certain sentences in our language ‘correspond to reality’ whereas others are true only, so to speak, by courtesy” (Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism,” in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 116). He also says that, “the picture which Davidson calls ‘the dualism of scheme and content’…pictures…disparate ontological realms, one containing beliefs and the other non-beliefs. The picture of two such realms permits us to imagine truth as a relation between particular beliefs and particular non-beliefs” (Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth,” in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 129). Again, Rorty says that the scheme-content distinction is “the distinction between determinate realities and a set of words or concepts which may or may not be ‘adequate’ to them” (Ibid., p. 9). Finally, Rorty clearly equates scheme-content dualism with the correspondence theory of truth when he criticizes scheme-content dualism as, “the idea that something like ‘mind’ or ‘language’ can bear some relation such as ‘fitting’ or ‘organizing’ to the world” (Ibid., p. 126).

32 Davidson states that the dualism of scheme and content is “the third, and perhaps the last [dogma of empiricism], for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism” (Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 189).
goes hand in hand with rejecting the notion of answerability to the world. And in addition, they argue that their rejection of answerability does not thereby involve having to give up the idea that there is a distinction between the mind and the world (i.e., between self and other), but only the idea that a relation between the two can be epistemic—that is, that experiential impacts from the world can already be meaningful and so can serve as evidence. Rorty and Davidson argue instead that subjects are only causally influenced by the world; and not just by mere intermediaries (e.g. sense data), but by worldly objects. But, for them, since our beliefs are only causally related to the world, our beliefs cannot also be answerable to it.

Although McDowell agrees with Davidson and Rorty that we should reject the dualism of scheme and world, McDowell does not agree that rejecting the dualism of scheme and world means that our empirical thinking cannot be answerable to something independent of thought, viz. the world. Because McDowell rejects the notion that the only relation that experience can afford is a causal relation, he, unlike Davidson and Rorty, does not equate a rejection of scheme-content dualism with a rejection of the possibility that the world can rationally constrain our beliefs about it. In fact, McDowell contends that an attachment to the disenchanted view of nature is what prevents Davidson and Rorty from seeing answerability as even a possibility. Of course, McDowell is fully aware that we cannot hope to cash out the idea of answerability to the

33 Davidson says, “What I have criticized is the introduction of epistemic intermediaries between the world and our beliefs about it” (Donald Davidson, “Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers,” in Interpreting Davidson, eds. Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, Gabriel Segal, (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), p. 285.
34 On their view, in contrast to McDowell’s, impressions cannot already be meaningful. For them, events in the space of nature are not meaningful, only events that take place at the level of beliefs are, i.e. events among card-carrying members of the space of reasons.
35 On this last point, Davidson argues that it is “the distal, not the proximal, stimulus” that plays the causal role in determining the meaning of a belief (Marc Joseph, Donald Davidson, (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), p. 181-2). Davidson uses this distinction to describe how his view differs from Quine’s. He says, “On Quine’s proximal theory, all that matters to meaning (or the contents of thoughts) occurs within the skin of the speaker, and so this is all [the evidence] with which an interpreter need be concerned….On a distal theory, causes external to the speaker matter directly to meaning, and so must be taken into account by an interpreter” (Donald Davidson, “Meaning, Truth, and Evidence,” in Perspectives on Quine eds. Robert Barrett and Roger Gibson, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), p. 77).
world in terms of a comparison between non-linguistic items (like physical objects) and linguistic ones (like sentences). And so, he argues that we can only avoid the need for intermediaries between mind and world by offering a new conception of experience as “openness to reality.” In contrast to the correspondence theory of truth, McDowell’s openness view offers what has, alternately, been called an “identity theory of truth.” For, as McDowell diagnoses the problem, it is only when empirical beliefs are viewed as rationally isolated from empirical content (and so not “open” to it) that any thought about the need for intermediaries arises; for only then can it look like we need to bridge a gap between our beliefs and our impressions of the world. But, if the objects of experience themselves can enter into rational relations with what a thinker thinks and believes, then, as McDowell suggests, there will simply be no need for justificatory intermediaries: our perceptual experience of the world will already be in the space of reasons. We will return to this point in the final section.

6. For now, the important point is that McDowell thinks that the one virtue of traditional empiricism is that it recognizes the need for experience to function as a tribunal. That is, traditional empiricism claims that sensory experiences—i.e., “impressions”—are what disclose the world to one, and, that it is through these experiences that one is thus answerable to the

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36 Again, Thornton describes McDowell’s view as an “identity theory of thoughts and facts.” And he says that “It contrasts with, for example, the idea of correspondence between these two sides: between thoughts or sentences, on the one hand, and ‘sentence-shaped piece[s] of non-linguistic reality’ on the other (Rorty 1991: 4)” (Thornton, John McDowell, p. 9). Julian Dodd also attributes an identity theory of truth to McDowell; one which, as he argues, commits McDowell to the “incoherent” view that, “the world is made up of Thoughts” (Julian Dodd, “McDowell and Identity Theories of Truth,” Analysis (July, 1995), p. 164). De Gaynesford however argues that McDowell’s ontological dependency thesis obviates the need for him to hold an identity theory (de Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 131). My account here makes no distinction between the “identity theory of truth” and the “world dependency of content”, so I do not engage in this particular debate.

37 McDowell says: “I take it to be intuitively obvious—if only philosophy did not distort our thinking—that empiricists are right to want what they do” (McDowell, RMW, p. 285). McDowell means that they are correct insofar as they pursue a minimal empiricism. He says that, “empiricism, in the interesting sense, captures a condition for it to be intelligible that thoughts are otherwise than empty” (McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” in Interpreting Davidson, p. 150).
world. McDowell agrees that our natural encounter (or contact) with the empirical world comes by way of sensory experiences, and he too calls these “impressions”\(^{38}\). In this spirit McDowell asks, rhetorically: “How can we understand the idea that our thinking is answerable to the empirical world, if not by way of the idea that our thinking is answerable to experience?”\(^{39}\) Of course, as we have seen, traditional empiricism fails to secure the notion of experience as a tribunal. And, that is because traditional empiricism tries to view answerability as a relation that requires adopting a sideways on perspective, with impressions serving as intermediaries. Furthermore, because traditional empiricism takes impressions, i.e., what’s Given in experience, to be a form of non-conceptual, merely sensory content, impressions (so construed) cannot factor in the order of justification. That is, such content (i.e. a non-conceptual impression of the world), even if it were to exist,\(^{40}\) would be incapable of entering into rational relations with beliefs and judgments.

Thus, there are two main differences between traditional empiricism and McDowell’s minimal empiricism. The first is that traditional empiricism conceives of impressions as intermediaries, whereas McDowell sees them as access (openness) to the world itself—a “glimpse” of “the layout of reality”. The second is that traditional empiricism conceives of impressions as non-conceptual, whereas McDowell sees them as already conceptually contentful.

At any rate, focusing on empiricism may make the concern over our answerability to the world look like just an epistemological issue, i.e., a question concerning our knowledge of the empirical world. But McDowell focuses on something deeper than that. According to

\(^{38}\) See e.g., *MW*, pp. xv-xviii; pp. 9-10; and pp. 139-46. In “Experiencing the World,” McDowell explains that, “I introduced impressions, in the relevant sense, as cases of how things are impressing itself on a perceiving subject” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” *RN*, p. 12).

\(^{39}\) *MW*, p. xii.

\(^{40}\) McDowell argues that there can be no such thing as non-conceptual content because he agrees with Kant’s statement that, “Thoughts without content are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind” (*MW*, pp. 3-4)
McDowell, both traditional empiricism and anti-empiricist coherentism fail to notice that it is “the capacity of our mental activity to be about reality at all, whether knowledgably or not,” that is really at issue.\(^{41}\) McDowell thinks that the fundamental problem here is transcendental, not epistemological.\(^{42}\) It is a question about intentionality or “aboutness”—a question about the possibility of content, not knowledge.\(^{43}\) As de Gaynesford explains, “since ‘intentionality’ is the technical term used for the relation of directedness or ‘aboutness’ that obtains between our experiences, thoughts, language and the world, it is appropriate to describe McDowell’s challenge [to traditional empiricism and coherentism] as fundamentally concerned with intentionality.”\(^{44}\)

The challenge or question is this: “How is empirical content so much as possible?”\(^{45}\) The answerability question (i.e., how can we have knowledge of the objective world?) turns out to be question about “content” itself—what it is in experience that we are answerable to. McDowell thinks that both the traditional empiricist and the coherentist are for the most part oblivious to the import of this deeper question and so are not equipped to deal with it. They basically assume that empirical content (belief) is possible and then move on to the epistemological question of when and how such content is justified. (And, we have seen that McDowell diagnoses a resulting interminable oscillation between the two: one side says experience can justify a belief, the other says that it cannot.)

So, if the question over answerability were just an epistemological question, if a non-problematic notion of empirical content were already at our disposal, then there would indeed be


\(^{42}\) In fact, McDowell even labels his own view “transcendental empiricism” (McDowell, *RMW*, p. 287).

\(^{43}\) Richard Gaskin says, “Traditionally empiricism has been understood…as a doctrine intended to account specifically for the possibility of knowledge; McDowell corrects and expands this conception, so that in his hands empiricism becomes a doctrine about the possibility of content” (Gaskin, *Experience and the Worlds Own Language: a Critique of John McDowell’s Empiricism*, p. 2).


no controversy here at all.  But, the question of aboutness, according to McDowell, underlies and is more fundamental than the epistemological question: it is a question about our very access to empirical content. What gives one the right to say that we have meaningfully contentful states in the picture at all, let alone justified or true ones? McDowell believes that one’s answer to that question will depend upon how one conceives of experience. And he thinks that both traditional empiricism and coherentism err in this regard: both sides conceive of experience as an occurrence that takes place outside of the (normative) conceptual sphere, in the space of causal, law-governed happenings. And events in that space are to be contrasted with events in the normative space of reasons. McDowell argues further that once our experience of the world is conceived of as occurring outside of the conceptual sphere—and so outside of the space of reasons—then the very possibility that our thoughts and beliefs can be about the world is put in jeopardy.

7. For McDowell, in order to be answerable to the world in experience, (veridical) experience must (truly) disclose the world to one. That is, defending the answerability relation requires that experience be seen as genuinely about the world—i.e., experience must provide access to objective empirical content. The trouble with traditional empiricism in this regard, according to McDowell, is that it conceives of experience in a way that makes it incapable of providing such access. It conceives of sensory experience as access merely to non-conceptual content. And, we have already seen arguments (from both sides) to the effect that it is a naturalistic fallacy to assume that something non-conceptual (e.g. a mere cause) can stand in a

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46 If there were no question over our access to world-involving conceptual content, then we could just get on with the epistemological business of figuring out which of those empirical beliefs are to count as true or known. But, as it stands, according to McDowell, we cannot yet even engage in that business; nor could we engage in the pragmatist’s business of sorting out which beliefs are the most beneficial or useful ones to hold on to. This latter claim is the more controversial one. It will be addressed later.
justificatory relation to something that is conceptual, like a belief.\textsuperscript{47} Non-conceptual content cannot rationally ground—that is, be a reason to hold—an empirical belief, since such content, if it exists at all, can only be conceived of as lying outside of the space of reasons. And, it looks like impressions, at least as conceived of by traditional empiricism, are in fact thought of as such non-conceptual deliverances from the world. Thus McDowell says: “Traditional empiricists want experience to serve as the rational basis of knowledge. The trouble about an empiricism that falls into the Myth of the Given is that it conceives experience in a way that will not cohere with that desideratum.”\textsuperscript{48} In other words, traditional empiricism fails on its own terms because it fails to secure even a minimal empiricism, the idea that we are answerable to the world through experience. McDowell argues that this failure is due to a particular view of experience, i.e., the reception of impressions, as an access to a form of content that is incapable of being about anything. McDowell however, as we have seen, revises traditional empiricism so that received impressions are already conceptually contentful and thus can factor in the order of justification.\textsuperscript{49}

So-called “traditional” versions of empiricism can thus be identified by their failure to avoid the naturalistic fallacy.\textsuperscript{50} Anti-empiricists, like Rorty and Davidson, jump all over this particular failing and link the entire enterprise of empiricism, spelled out in terms of impressions,

\textsuperscript{47} McDowell says, “The notion of the world’s making an impression on a possessor of sensibility is on the face of it the notion of a kind of natural happening. As such it can seem to be excluded, on pain of naturalistic fallacy, from the special logical space—what Wilfrid Sellars calls ‘the logical space of reasons’—that we would have to be moving in when we take things to be related as tribunal and respondent” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” RN pp. 4-5).

\textsuperscript{48} McDowell, \textit{RMW}, p. 284.

\textsuperscript{49} As McDowell says, “I aim to defend a non-traditional empiricism that retains the thought, inchoately present in traditional empiricism according to me, that the possibility of empirical objective content depends on a rational connection between experience and empirical belief” (McDowell, \textit{RMW}, p. 284).

\textsuperscript{50} That is, they continue to give accounts of how mere causal happenings, like light particles irradiating our sensory nerve endings, can also count as reasons to believe a proposition, like “there is a piece of paper in front of me.” McDowell insists that propositions like “there is a piece of paper in front of me” are about movements in the space of reasons, whereas propositions that pertain to causal interactions are about movements or events in the space of causal law.
with the confusion of causation with justification. They think that any notion of answerability to the world is hopelessly reliant on a dualism of scheme and world and so is bound to run afoul of the naturalistic fallacy. And, in turn, they take it that any notion of so-called “impressions”—i.e., deliverances from the world on our sensory organs—must be thought of as something that impinges on the space of reasons from outside. And, in response to this, they argue that we ought to reject the need for even a minimal empiricism, that is, they reject the notion of answerability to the world. The coherentist’s alternative is an argument to the effect that the only way to avoid the naturalistic fallacy is to reject the thought that experience itself can be in the order of justification. Our empirical beliefs can be justified, they argue, just not on the basis of experience: experience cannot be a tribunal. Experience exerts a causal constraint on our beliefs they say, but not a rational one. Thus, any effort to avoid the naturalistic fallacy, in the coherentist’s eye, must exclude experiences from the order of justification and so must look for justification elsewhere (e.g., in a coherence relation among beliefs).

8. It is important to note a similarity: the coherentist rejects traditional empiricism for the same reason McDowell does: both reject the dualism of scheme and content (Given). As such, both McDowell and the coherentist agree that our conceptual thought (our beliefs about the

51 For example, Rorty paraphrases McDowell’s position thusly: “he [McDowell] sees these three philosophers [Sellars, Davidson, and Brandom] as so infatuated with the need to repudiate the Myth of the Given—to avoid the British empiricists’ traditional confusion of causation with justification—as to be willing to give up world-directedness and rational answerability to the world” (Rorty, “John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” p. 141).

52 Davidson says that if we give up the dualism of scheme and content, “it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism” (Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” p. 189).

53 McDowell says, “Donald Davidson, for instance, in effect retains the...thought, that impressions could not constitute a tribunal, and discards...that empirical content depends on answerability to impressions. That is to say: he discards empiricism, in one obvious sense” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” RN, p. 6).
world) cannot be answerable to something non-conceptual.\textsuperscript{54} That is to say, both positions subscribe to a principle that has been labeled “psychological nominalism”. The basic moral of psychological nominalism is that only a belief (or something with conceptual structure\textsuperscript{55}) can stand as a reason to hold a belief. Hence, psychological nominalism is offered as a sure-fire way to avoid falling into the naturalistic fallacy: once it is demanded that all awareness is conceptual awareness, then there is simply no chance for a non-conceptual element to enter into awareness as a justifier. Traditional empiricism is refuted on these grounds.

But, although both McDowell and the coherentist agree that we ought to reject the dualism of scheme and content and subscribe to a form of psychological nominalism, they disagree over the implications of doing so. The coherentist thinks that we must renounce answerability to the world (i.e. even a minimal empiricism) while McDowell thinks that we cannot possibly give up answerability (because we would thereby give up experiential content altogether). Thus the fundamental disagreement, as McDowell sees it, turns on the issue of how to conceive of experience: either as a conceptual or as a non-conceptual impact. As we have seen, McDowell argues for the notion that experiences (i.e. impressions) must, themselves, already be conceptual.

According to McDowell, because the coherentist continues to view perceptual experiences (impressions) as non-conceptual, the coherentist also finds it necessary to give up

\textsuperscript{54} McDowell rejects the dualism because, “the dualism of scheme and content makes…rational accountability impossible” (Thornton, \textit{John McDowell}, p. 10). The reason for the impossibility is summed-up by McDowell’s twist on Davidson’s slogan: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts” (\textit{MW}, p. 143).

\textsuperscript{55} This is an important aside, since McDowell considers experiences to possess “conceptual structure” whereas Davidson and Rorty permit only beliefs, not experiences, to possess “conceptual structure”. Davidson differentiates himself from McDowell along these line when he says, “I hold that the thoughts with which we are presented by nature are beliefs. We look, hear, feel, smell, and touch, and we are caused to believe there is an elephant before us. Where McDowell introduces epistemic intermediaries between nature and belief, what I have called ‘appearances’, I do not” (Davidson, “Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers,” in \textit{Interpreting Davidson}, p. 289).
the idea that we are answerable to (those non-conceptual impacts from) the world at all.\textsuperscript{56}

McDowell, by contrast, wants to save the idea of answerability to the world, and he thinks that we can only do so by defending the idea that our sensory experience is received as already conceptual. In making his case, McDowell must also defend against the coherentist’s attempt to discount the answerability relation altogether. He must show why such a relation is necessary and required to account for the justification of our empirical beliefs, indeed, why it is necessary for there to be empirical content at all. Before coming to that discussion however, it will help to start from a point upon which both McDowell and the coherentist agree: viz. on the principle (of “psychological nominalism”) that justification can only occur between conceptually structured items.

**Psychological Nominalism and the Naturalistic Fallacy**

1. According to Sellars, psychological nominalism amounts to the view that “all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair.”\textsuperscript{57} Sellars here describes psychological

\textsuperscript{56} As we will see, however, a coherentist defender may attempt to replace answerability to the world with the idea that we are answerable to each other.

\textsuperscript{57} Wilfrid Sellars, *EPM*, p. 63. Sellars also states that, “as I am using the term, the primary connotation of “psychological nominalism” is the denial that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, the acquisition of a language” (Sellars, *EPM*, p. 66). In the introduction to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Rorty summarizes the passage by saying, “In other words, knowledge is inseparable from social practice—the practice of justifying one’s assertions to one’s fellow-humans” (Sellars, *EPM*, p. 4). See also Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 182-8 for a discussion of psychological nominalism. Richard Gaskin considers the use of the term “nominalism” in “psychological nominalism” to be somewhat of a misnomer. Gaskin says, “The realization that all awareness is a linguistic affair in fact tells against the doctrine of nominalism” (Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s own Language*, p. 145). Gaskin here cites Brandom, who in his “Study Guide” accompanying *EPM* describes Sellars as arguing “for what he calls ‘psychological nominalism (not the best imaginable name), according to which all awareness of repeatables (whether determinate or determinable) is a linguistic affair, and hence may not be presupposed in one’s account of the acquisition and functioning of language. Sellars is proposing a linguistic, social theory of language” (Brandom, “Study Guide,” in *EPM*, p. 150).
nominalism in terms of “awareness.” But McDowell, as well as Davidson and Rorty, take Sellars’s point to imply also that all aboutness (or intentionality) is a “linguistic affair”. As McDowell puts it (in his Kantian way), “it is only because experience involves capacities belonging to spontaneity that we can understand experience as awareness, or apparent awareness, of aspects of the world at all.” The idea is that in order for a thought or belief to be about something (i.e. to have intentional content) it must have the form that such and such is the case, that is, it must have conceptual structure. My belief that “the cup is made of plastic,” for instance, cannot be formulated, let alone be about a cup, if I have not yet mastered the concepts “cup”, “plastic”, “made of” and much more. Such linguistic structure is, on this view, necessary to see our thoughts and beliefs as meaningful and therefore as within the space of reasons, where they can function as premises or conclusions in the game of giving and asking for reasons. The reason that I use the term “psychological nominalism” here is to emphasize that the origin of the consensus view, shared by McDowell, Davidson, and Rorty (that “aboutness is a linguistic affair”) can be traced to Sellars.

To be clear then, when I attribute psychological nominalism to McDowell, Sellars, Davidson, and Rorty I mean to attribute to them the view that the space of reasons and the space of concepts coincide. Nothing can count as a reason that is not also inside the conceptual

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58 For example, McDowell states that, “Having things appear to one a certain way is already itself a mode of actual operation of conceptual capacities” (MW, p. 62). Sellars too seems to think that psychological nominalism refers to aboutness when he states that, “the categories of intentionality are, at bottom, semantical categories pertaining to overt verbal performances” (Sellars, EPM, p. 94, emphasis added). Sellars also says that, “to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it (Sellars, EPM, p. 87). Consider also what Rorty says: “I read Sellars and Brandom as pragmatists, because I treat psychological nominalism as a version of the pragmatist doctrine that truth is a matter of the utility of a belief rather than of a relation between pieces of the world and pieces of language. If our awareness of things is always a linguistic affair, if Sellars is right that we cannot check our language against our nonlinguistic awareness, then philosophy can never be anything more than a discussion of the utility and compatibility of beliefs” (Rorty, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices,” in Truth and Progress, p. 127).

59 MW, p. 47.

60 Of course this is stated in the language of McDowell. In fact it was stated to me explicitly in a personal correspondence. One key insight behind psychological nominalism is its recognition that the space of reasons is sui
sphere. Another way to put the point would be to say that, whenever you have rational relations, you have the employment of concepts. And, I take both McDowell and the coherentist to be in agreement on this point. But, once one adopts this principle of psychological nominalism, it matters greatly where one decides to draw the boundary of the conceptual sphere. For, if our sensory experience of the world is conceived as outside of the conceptual sphere, ipso facto, it cannot rationally ground a belief.

2. Another one of Sellars’s well quoted statements of psychological nominalism is the following: “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.” This statement is important in its acknowledgement of the sui generis character of the space of reasons as contrasted with what Sellars calls “empirical description”. And, one important lesson to be drawn from this, according to Sellars, is that it is a naturalistic fallacy to confuse, or to run generis, requiring a special sort of explanation (appeal to reasons). Another idea associated with psychological nominalism, viz. that we must acquire a concept of a thing before we can identify that thing, is taken to be a part of the “key insight” just mentioned. Hence, one can put the point of psychological nominalism like this: the shape of the space of reasons is entirely conceptual. Davidson has a similar sort of point in mind when he asserts that, “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory,” p. 416). In that article Davidson also quotes Rorty, from Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature, as saying “nothing counts as a justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence” (Ibid., from Rorty (1979) p. 178).

61 Recall, for instance, that McDowell amends Davidson’s slogan slightly to read as follows: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts” (MW, p. 143). McDowell intends this alteration to allow him to bring the world into the conceptual sphere.

62 As we will see later, McDowell argues that the coherentist places experiences outside of that boundary and that that is their mistake. He says, “Davidson thinks experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons” (MW, p. 14). He also says, “Davidson shares [with Quine] that view of experience: for Davidson, receptivity can impinge on the space of reasons only from outside, which is to say that nothing can be rationally vulnerable to its deliverances” (MW, p. 139). McDowell, by contrast, argues for a position in which the conceptual is unbounded.

63 Moreover, as McDowell sees it, if experience is held to be an occurrence that takes place outside of the conceptual sphere then experience cannot be about anything at all. This is McDowell’s primary complaint against any view of experience as offering only a causal relation to the world.

64 Sellars, EPM, p. 76.
together, these two types of description. The “space of reasons” marks off a space of normative relations whereas the “space of nature” construes things in term of cause and effect relations. In Sellars’s statement, part of what it means to adhere to “psychological nominalism” is for one to respect the distinction between the two types of explanation: causal descriptions and intentional or rational ones. The psychological nominalist, therefore, recognizes that in this sense the space of reasons is *sui generis* in comparison with the space of nature.

“Bald naturalists” (in McDowell’s terminology), by contrast, are those that refuse to acknowledge that the space of reasons—the practice of giving and asking for reasons—is *sui generis* as compared with the realm of causal law. Their motivating idea is that what we call the space of reasons involves, at root, states or events that can be fully accounted for in terms of causal laws. Moreover, according to the bald naturalist, *that* type of (reductionist) explanation is what any *naturalistic* description requires. That is, according to bald naturalism all talk about the space of reasons—that is, all talk about mind, intentionality, and mental content—ought to be (at least in principle) reducible to talk of law-like cause and effect relations. Sellars spearheaded an attack on this position by arguing that it is a naturalistic fallacy to think that the normative relations that characterize the space of reasons can be reduced to non-normative terms. In the introduction to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Rorty summarizes Sellars’s point like this: “we cannot…analyze epistemic facts without remainder ‘into non-epistemic facts’.” But,

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65 McDowell says that, “Bald naturalists in my sense…hold that reality does have an intrinsic character, which is captured by one of the candidate vocabularies for describing reality, namely the language of the natural sciences” (McDowell, “Reply to Rorty,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (June 1998), p. 420). Tim Thornton says that, “Brandom’s philosophy shares some important features with McDowell’s. Both philosophers reject reductionist accounts of intentionality: accounts that explain mental content in, for example, causal terms. McDowell describes such approaches as ‘bald naturalism’” (Tim Thornton, *John McDowell*, p. 220).

66 Davidson too can be seen as leveling an attack on this view of reductive physicalism in *Mental Events* when he argues that there is no contradiction (or paradox) involved in holding both (a) the “Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality,” and (b) the “Anomalism of the Mental” (Donald Davidson, “Mental Events,” in *Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David Chalmers, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 116-125).

67 Richard Rorty, Introduction to *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 4.
that is exactly what bald naturalists try to do, according to McDowell. They aim to account for events in the space of reasons entirely in terms of empirical descriptions. But McDowell considers bald naturalism to be a “bad way of opting out” of the debate (over trying to reconcile reason and nature) because its refusal to countenance any meaningful distinction between natural-scientific explanations and explanations in terms of the space of reasons opts out by simply refusing to acknowledge the “reason” side of the dualism of reason and nature.68

(In fact, some “bald naturalists” suggest that we may be able to eliminate intentional descriptions.) And McDowell argues that that way of opting out leaves the intentional directedness of thought still looking mysterious or unexplained.69 But, more to the point, any such attempt at a reduction would be an act of committing what Sellars calls the “naturalistic fallacy.”70

3. McDowell and the coherentist agree, then, that aboutness must be conceptual and that we must avoid the naturalistic fallacy. That is to say, they both subscribe to psychological nominalism as I have roughly described it. The two differ, however, over how to reconcile the idea that aboutness must be conceptual with our desire to avoid the naturalistic fallacy. The coherentist thinks that because our empirical beliefs must be understood as conceptually structured they therefore cannot be answerable to (non-conceptual) experience or to the world,

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68 McDowell says that a bald naturalist “would opt out of this area of philosophy altogether, by denying that the spontaneity of the understanding is sui generis in the way suggested by the link to the idea of freedom” (MW, p. 67).
69 MW, pp. xx-xxiii.
70 To foreshadow a bit, McDowell’s view is that the only way that Sellars can avoid this naturalistic fallacy is to remove experience from the sphere of justification. He says: “On Sellars’s principles, then, to identify something as an impression is to place it in a logical space other than the one in which talk of knowledge—or to keep the general case in view, talk of world-directedness, knowledgeable or not—belongs. On these principles, the logical space in which talk of impressions belongs is not one in which things are connected by relations such as one thing’s being warranted or correct in the light of another. So if we conceive experience as made up of impressions, on these principles it cannot serve as a tribunal, something to which empirical thinking is answerable. Supposing that it can would just be a case of the naturalistic fallacy that Sellars warns us against—a case of taking it that “empirical description” can amount to placing things in the logical space of reasons” (MW, p. xv).
only to other beliefs. McDowell, by contrast, argues that our empirical beliefs must be answerable to the world as a condition of their having content at all.

McDowell points out that, if our sensory experience of the world is conceived of as an occurrence in the space of nature and—given the disenchantment of nature—thus amenable only to empirical description, then experience cannot play the role of being a reason for a belief. In effect, this is the conclusion drawn by Sellars—and later by Davidson and Rorty. So, with the disenchanted view of nature in place, McDowell sees the proponent of psychological nominalism as faced with the following problem: it looks like we must abandon \textit{answerability to the world} if we wish to hold that “all awareness is conceptual.”\footnote{Or, alternately: what is our \textit{relation} to the world like if our awareness of it is entirely conceptual?} This seems like a pressing problem in the face of the assumption that, although our thoughts and beliefs are conceptually structured, relations in the natural world are not. Thus, McDowell says, “the thought is that the risk of a naturalistic fallacy besets reflection about world-directedness as such, whether knowledgeable or not.”\footnote{MW, p. xiv.} How can our \textit{experience} (i.e., our sensory impressions) be (intentionally) about the world if its deliverances merely put us in a causal relation to the world? And, in terms of empirical beliefs, the question is this: how can our \textit{beliefs} be about the world without thereby falling into the naturalistic fallacy of construing a cause as a reason? Here the question has been phrased in terms of the aboutness of empirical beliefs, but, according to Gregory McCulloch, we can also put the dilemma in terms of justification. He says:

\begin{quote}
McDowell approaches ‘thought’s bearing on its object’ by considering the idea of \textit{justification}. According to McDowell, justification can only be understood as a relation between conceptually structured items—think of entailment or
\end{quote}
probabilification—so either the world is conceptually structured or it cannot justify our beliefs.\textsuperscript{73}

As we have seen, the coherentist is willing to respond by cheerfully admitting that the world simply “cannot justify our beliefs.” They say that the only way to avoid the naturalistic fallacy is to refuse to accept the idea that the truth of our empirical beliefs depends upon a relation of answerability to the world.

Thus, as McDowell says, “Sellars and Davidson [and Rorty] think that we are forced to renounce empiricism, in the relevant sense, partly because they think the logical space of reasons is \textit{sui generis}, as compared with the logical space in which Sellars sees ‘empirical description’ as functioning, which I have identified on Sellars’s behalf as the logical space of nature.”\textsuperscript{74} And the other part of the reason that Sellars and Davidson and Rorty think that we must renounce empiricism is that they view sensory experiences (i.e., impressions) as non-epistemic and non-intentional, and therefore as not capable of being about anything—they are not part of the space of reasons. And, the conclusion that they draw is that, once we have ruled out the epistemic import of these “impressions”, empiricism dies off:

McDowell seizes upon the idea that giving up the notion of answerability to the world leaves coherentism open to the skeptical challenge that our empirical beliefs may not even tell us anything about the way the world is. As we will see, he does this by showing that the coherentist struggles to explain away the felt need for a rational relation between (or constraint on) our \textit{empirical} beliefs and the world. The coherentist faces the following sort of question: how can a system of beliefs that is \textit{not} constrained by anything independent of that system of beliefs still

\textsuperscript{73} Gregory McCulloch, “Phenomenological Externalism,” in \textit{RMW}, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{MW}, p. xviii.
manage to be about something that is independent of that system? Adhering to psychological nominalism entails that beliefs cannot be merely causally constrained, but a causal relation is all that Davidson and Rorty allow for sensory experience to afford. Thus, Davidson and Rorty believe that they must deny that our experiences can be rationally constrained by the world; and in turn they argue for a totally different (non-relational\(^75\)) notion of “constraint”, one based on the internal coherence of a system of beliefs. For obvious reasons, McDowell refers to this view as unconstrained coherentism; I think that it may also be illuminatingly labeled a form of “linguistic idealism.”\(^76\)

4. McDowell, as we will see, rejects the route taken by the coherentist in response to the above problem. But, he does not want to grasp the other horn of McCulloch’s dilemma either, viz. that the “world is conceptually structured.” If he grasps that horn then it looks like he is trafficking in a form of idealism too.\(^77\) So the question for him is this: how can we say that our experience is of the world, and that that experience is entirely conceptual, yet deny that the world

\(^{75}\) In saying that Rorty and Davidson hold a “non-relational” view of beliefs I mean that they deny an epistemic relation between beliefs and the world. Of course they allow for epistemic relations between beliefs and other beliefs.

\(^{76}\) This term has been attributed to Andrew Chrucky who used it in interpreting Sellars’ view as expressing the idea that we are trapped in language (See his Critique of Wilfrid Sellars’ Materialism, http://www.ditext.com/chrucky/chru-0.html). McDowell makes an analogous criticism of Davidson when he says that, “Davidson’s picture is that we cannot get outside our beliefs” (MW, p. 16). In lieu of a detailed discussion of what types of theories might be aptly labeled “linguistic idealism”, suffice it to quote from an exposition of Rorty’s view: “For Rorty, Dewey’s ‘experience,’ is replaced by ‘language’—that is to say, ‘communication and deliberate expression.’ Rorty suggests that ‘language’ is a more suitable notion than “experience” for saying the holistic and anti-foundationalist things which Dewey and James wanted to say.” (David L. Hall, Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 83, quotations are from Rorty’s “Comments on Sleeper and Edel,” in Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 21, no. 1 (Winter 1985), p. 40). David Hildebrand also accuses Rorty of linguistic idealism. He says that Rorty is “Unwilling to concede anything beyond language…Rorty uses the distinction between the ‘causal’ and the ‘linguistic’ to rescue his view from accusations of linguistic idealism and does not explain exactly how this attenuated sense of causality is supposed to work. If causal talk is, in the end, just talk, then how can it nullify the charges of linguistic idealism?” (David Hildebrand, Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism, p. 109).

\(^{77}\) For example, Max de Gaynesford says, “If facts are conceived as worldly objects and identified with the employment of the subject’s conceptual abilities, then the claim [that ‘there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world’] suggests idealism” (de Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 124).
itself is conceptual (in the sense that it is not just a product of our thought or scheme)? His answer, as we have seen, is to pack all the conceptual weight (of the world, so to speak) into our passive reception of sensory impressions. You might say that McDowell’s position is one that tweaks Kant’s transcendental idealism into a form of transcendental empiricism. Instead of us projecting a conceptual scheme onto the world, McDowell argues that experience is conceptually open to the world in such a way that neither scheme nor content can be “self-standing”. And so, according to McDowell, we can have subjective states or experiences—i.e., impressions—that are both caused in us by the world and received as already conceptually structured. And, because experiences are caused in us by the world, they are appropriately independent of our thinking in a way that can account for objectivity. The key to the independence of the world, for McDowell, lies in the fact that experiences are passively received: they are, after all, still “impressions”.78 Hence, McDowell claims to have found a different way to escape the naturalistic fallacy than Davidson’s and Rorty’s route. These different strategies for dealing with the threat of the naturalistic fallacy will be examined in what follows.

78 McDowell states that, “The fact that experience is passive, a matter of receptivity in operation, should assure us that we have all the external constraint we can reasonably want” (MW, p. 28). In the next chapter I will argue that the “constraint” that McDowell offers here is no better than the (causal) “constraint” offered by the coherentists.
The Coherentist’s Route: Non-Relational Content

1. Coherentism’s rejection of answerability to the world stems from two tenets. First, the coherentist holds (with McDowell) that aboutness and so too justification can only occur between conceptually structured items like propositions or beliefs. Secondly, the coherentist holds (against McDowell) that experiences, as impacts (i.e., impressions) from the world, are not conceptually structured—they are merely causal occurrences, not also epistemic occurrences.79 Thus, since coherentists take it that sensory experiences are merely causal events, not conceptually structured ones, they go on to conclude that experiences must fall outside of the order of justification. That is to say, they view experiences as occurring outside of the space of reasons.80 In fact, this is their strategy (or route) for avoiding the naturalistic fallacy. A sensory experience, according to coherentism, may cause us to have a belief, but it cannot be the reason for holding a belief. Such reasons can only come from within the system of beliefs, and experiences fall outside of that system. Rorty endorses this conclusion on behalf of Sellars and Davidson when he says that,

Sellars and Davidson both think that adopting psychological nominalism, and thereby avoiding a confusion between justification and causation, entails claiming that only a belief can justify a belief. This means drawing a sharp line between

79 Davidson, for example, says, “As for the entities that get organized, or which the scheme must fit, I think again we may detect two main ideas: either it is reality (the universe, the world, nature), or it is experience (the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, the given)” (“On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” pp. 191-2). The key here is the parenthetical list that follows the term experience, which obviously represents terms that Davidson equates with experience. Rorty says, “They [Sellars, Davidson, and Brandom] can be content with an account of the world as exerting control on our inquiries in a merely causal way, rather than as exerting what McDowell calls ‘rational control’” (Rorty, “John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” TP, p. 140).

80 McDowell says, “Davidson thinks experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons” (MW, p. 14). Davidson himself says, “The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 417). The last line shows that Davidson’s strong stance—that experiences cannot justify—is motivated by his unwillingness to fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy.
experience as the cause of the occurrence of a justification, and the empiricist notion of experience as itself justificatory. It means reinterpreting “experience” as the ability to acquire beliefs noninferentially as a result of neurologically describable causal transactions with the world.  

In this section our attention should be focused on this “reinterpretation of ‘experience’,” in which experiences are viewed as a matter of “causal transactions with the world.” As we will see in the next section, McDowell believes that this view (that our experiences are merely causal transactions) leaves our empirical thinking looking “frictionless”, and thereby threatens the very notion of empirical content. According to McDowell, the problem is that a mere cause can be appealed to only as an exculpation or excuse for holding a certain belief, it cannot be a justification. To claim otherwise would be to commit the naturalistic fallacy.

But the coherentist is definitely not guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy. Instead, he avoids the fallacy in a particular sort of way. Because he acknowledges that experiences are just caused, the coherentist immediately disqualifies experiences from counting as reasons. Thus, the coherentist’s response to the threat of the naturalistic fallacy is to exclude experiences from the space of reasons. On this view, because experiences or impressions are viewed as involving merely a causal relation to the world, they therefore cannot count as evidence about it.

2. As we will see in the next section, however, McDowell thinks that we should be immediately suspicious of this way of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy because it seems to

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82 Davidson says: “sensory stimulations are indeed part of the causal chain that leads to belief, but cannot, without confusion, be considered to be evidence, or a source of justification, for the stimulated beliefs” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 424).
require severing the link between our empirical thinking and the empirical world (i.e., what that thinking purports to be about). As McDowell puts it, the coherentist’s view seems reliant on “confinement imagery”, in which empirical thinking is seen as (epistemically) distanced from its purported topic: the world. This problem occurs because the coherentist asserts that “the only constraint on judgment is coherence with other judgments.” And McDowell’s concern is that this makes our empirical beliefs and judgments look non-world-involving and self-standing.

The most obvious problem with severing the epistemic link between our empirical thinking and the empirical world is that it seems to open the door for a skeptical challenge. If our beliefs about the world are justified not by the world itself but only by the internal coherence of the system of beliefs, then it is in principle possible for there to be an internally coherent (i.e., “true”) system of beliefs that may nevertheless not match up with the way the world is. As McDowell puts it, “Davidson’s picture is that we cannot get outside our beliefs.” And, being confined behind a veil of beliefs, as it were, means that there can be no “friction” (or rational constraint) between our empirical beliefs and that which determines the truth or falsity of them. Hence, McDowell brings up the worry that we may just be brains in a mad scientist’s vat in order to view coherentism in terms of a susceptibility to this type of skepticism. The charge is that even if my empirical beliefs are fully justified in the coherentist’s sense, it may still turn out that I am mistaken about how the world is: I may after all be a brain in a vat.

83 Tim Thornton, John McDowell, p. 212.
84 MW, p. 16.
85 Davidson says, “of course we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 418). As far as McDowell is concerned, this “veil of beliefs” is the counterpart to traditional empiricism’s “veil of sensations”. In both cases what we have access to, when it come to our awareness of the empirical world, is something that falls short of the fact itself, something that is compatible with what we are aware of not being the case at all. The problem, as McDowell sees it, is that in both cases is that they adhere to a view where experience itself cannot count as reason-giving, because both adhere to a DVN. On that view, it looks like it must be a fallacy to attribute justificatory status to experiences themselves.
86 See e.g., MW pp. 16-17. This topic is taken up in greater detail in the next chapter.
To his credit, the coherentist—Davidson at least—is fully aware of this sort of skeptical challenge to his view. And so coherentism comes equipped with a built-in defense against it. The Coherentist seems to think that he can either defeat (i.e., answer) this skeptical challenge or that he can just blow it off (i.e., “quiet” or ignore it). We will look at both of these strategies in what follows.

3. In “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, Davidson says that, “what is needed to answer the skeptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main.”87 His argument has two parts. First, he argues that, “most of a person’s beliefs must be true.” And second, he argues that, “anyone with thoughts…must know what a belief is, and how in general beliefs are to be detected and interpreted.”88 These points are connected by their reliance on the coherentist’s notion of what a “belief” is. Davidson says:

In order to doubt or wonder about the provenance of his beliefs an agent must know what belief is. This brings with it the concept of objective truth, for the notion of a belief is the notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality. But beliefs are also identified, directly and indirectly, by their causes.89

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88 Ibid., p. 420.
89 Ibid., p. 425. Notice the tinge of a Cartesian argument sounded in Davidson’s use of “in order to doubt…” Consider also this more recent passage from Davidson: “I argue that if we have doubts, we have thoughts, and if we have thoughts, it follows that we know there are other people with minds and that there is an environment we share with them. Granted that we do have doubts (or beliefs), and the subsequent argument, it follows that skepticism is false” (Davidson, “Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers,” in Interpreting Davidson, eds. Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, Gabriel Segal. (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), p. 288). In a 1995 paper Davidson admits, “Ironically perhaps, my starting point is the same as Descartes’: what I know for certain is that thought exists, and then I ask what follows. Here, however, the similarity with Descartes ends. For I see no point in pretending to doubt most of what I think I know” (Davidson, “The Problem of Objectivity,” in Problems of Rationality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5). At any rate, it is important to note that this incipient Cartesianism looks like evidence of McDowell’s charge that Davidson’s coherentism comes “too late to quiet the skeptic” because Davidson has already admitted “freestanding” inner states (viz. beliefs) into his picture.
Davidson makes two points about “beliefs” here. First, he says that we must “take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.” And secondly, he says that beliefs are “states that may or may not jibe with reality.” Of course on top of this, in order to answer the skeptic and secure a notion of “objective truth”, Davidson must also assert that most of our beliefs are true, i.e., that “belief is in its nature veridical.” And it is with this crucial step that Davidson claims to have answered the skeptic. In his early paper, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, Davidson thinks that he has answered the sceptic by showing that “coherence yields correspondence,” and that we can have “correspondence without confrontation.”

But, the problem for Davidson (at least in his 1983 “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”93) is that he is clearly trafficking in a notion of “truth” that does in fact depend upon the notion of correspondence. When Davidson says that “beliefs are states that may or may not jibe with reality,” and, that “our beliefs are mainly true,” he means: beliefs are true because they (“mainly”) jibe with reality. And that does indeed sound like a correspondence theory of truth. Furthermore, it sounds like it runs afoul of the rejection of scheme-content dualism. We were supposed to have been given a notion of justification that does not depend upon a relation between a belief and the independent reality that it purports to be about. Davidson’s difficulty in providing such an account, to McDowell, reflects the fact that some notion of answerability to the world is epistemically necessary or “transcendently compelling.” For even though coherentism claims to give up answerability to the world, because it retains a notion of aboutness

91 Ibid., p. 420. Thus, in response to a brain-in-a-vat case, McDowell says of Davidson that, “The Davidsonian response seems to be that if one were a brain in a vat, it would be correct to interpret one’s beliefs as being largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment” (MW, pp. 16-17).
92 Ibid., p. 413. McDowell responds by asking: “is that the reassurance we need [i.e., to be told that our beliefs are mainly true] if we are to be immunized against the attractions of the Given?” (MW, p. 17).
93 See below for an explanation of how his view changes.
(though now as *intrinsic* to the system of belief), it struggles to explain “truth” without appealing to the idea that our beliefs should be answerable to the world. (Again, witness Davidson’s slogan: “correspondence without confrontation”). That is, the coherentist finds it difficult to explain away the attractions of a *minimal empiricism*, a picture of our beliefs as answerable to the world. Because of this, McDowell thinks that the specter of skepticism still hangs over the coherentist’s position.

4. Davidson’s initial claim was that he had refuted (or “answered”) the skeptic, but he later changes his mind about this.94 Richard Rorty seems to have been the one to have set him straight on this issue; he convinced Davidson to say (In his “Afterthoughts, 1987”) that, “…I should not pretend that I am answering the skeptic when I am really telling him to get lost.”95 This is the other strategy (or route) that the coherentist, or in Rorty’s case the neo-pragmatist, might employ as a response to the skeptic. Rorty thinks we should simply assert that the skeptic is dealing with a discredited version of truth and justification (a representationalistic, correspondence view), and that his skeptical challenges are only good if we too adopt that same bankrupt notion of truth and justification.96 According to Rorty, any talk of correspondence or answerability to the world involves a commitment to a representationalistic, sideways-on (“God’s-eye”) perspective. Rorty

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94 His answer was supposed to be that we can have “correspondence without confrontation”. In his “Afterthoughts” he goes on to say that, “I thought then that the fact that in characterizing truth for a language it is necessary to put words into relation with objects was enough to give some grip for the idea of correspondence; but this now seems to me a mistake” (p. 426).


96 Rorty interprets Davidson’s answer to the skeptic as this: “you are only a skeptic because you have these intentionalistic notions floating around in your head, inserting imaginary barriers between you and the world. Once you purify yourself of the ‘idea idea’ in all its various forms, skepticism will never cross your enlightened mind. If this is his [Davidson’s] response to the skeptic, then I think he is making exactly the right move” (Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth,” p. 138).
thus urges that we should stand firm and simply reject any talk of an external, rational constraint on our beliefs.97

Richard Rorty is probably the staunchest critic of the notion of answerability to the world.98 He argues that no such conception of our relation to the world is required; we can simply do without it. He says: “I take the linguistic turn in philosophy, the turn that made it possible for Sellars to envisage his doctrine of psychological nominalism, to be a turn away from the very idea of human answerability to the world.”99 Rorty seems to think that the key coherentist insight is this: we can take care of the notions of “truth” and “justification” simply by talking in terms of language-use and inference—i.e., *without* invoking the idea of a rational relation between beliefs and the world.100 Rorty argues that it is the notion of answerability that requires us to think of beliefs as justified in terms of non-beliefs, i.e., something that is independent of our (system of) beliefs.101 In fact, on Rorty’s view, thinking of justification in terms of answerability to the world is precisely what motivates skepticism.

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97 For example, he says, “I see nothing worth saving in empiricism. I think that saving the notion of answerability to the world saves an intuition that clashes with the romanticism which animated both Dewey and Nietzsche. For this notion retains the figure of ‘the world’ as a nonhuman authority to whom we owe some sort of respect” (Rorty, “John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” *TP*, p. 150).

98 In fact, McDowell says, “A clearer target for my criticism than Davidson himself would be Rorty’s reading of Davidson, in “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth”. There Rorty singles out for commendation precisely the aspects of Davidson’s thinking that I have objected to” (*MW*, p. 146).


100 It is this aspect of Rorty’s neo-pragmatism that especially invites the appellation (or charge) of “linguistic idealism.” Consider the following distinction between classical pragmatism (CP) and neo-pragmatism (NP) made by David Hildebrand: “Rorty’s NP parts company with CP and becomes linguistic pragmatism or NP by doing two things. First, he advocates revising pragmatism by renouncing classical pragmatists for attempts to reconstruct what should not be reconstructed: ideas such as experience, reality, and inquiry. (Rorty’s complaint is that these words are so encumbered by…[traditional epistemology]…that pragmatists cannot make any progress by working with them. If philosophers such as Dewey had left such sterile projects alone, he could have made a more powerful case against the tradition.) Second, he [Rorty] believes that once CP gets rid of the traditional foundations…classical pragmatists should accept the idea that only language furnishes philosophy’s materials and should adopt instead a linguistic approach” (David Hildebrand, “Pragmatism, Neopragmatism, and Public Administration,” *Administration and Society*, (July, 2005), p. 348).

101 Rorty asks, rhetorically, “Shall we take ‘S knows that p’… as a remark about the status of S’s reports among his peers, or shall we take it as a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror?” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 175).
Upon reflection, Davidson again concurs with Rorty’s interpretation of his coherentism. And, he says that, “the important thesis for which I argue is that belief is intrinsically veridical. This is the ground on which I maintain that while truth is not an epistemic concept, neither is it wholly severed from belief.” Thus, although Davidson is now willing to give up the notion of truth as correspondence, he still retains the point about systems of belief, viz. that they are by nature (i.e. “intrinsically”) veridical. And, Rorty says of Davidson that, his most “striking philosophical doctrine is his claim that most of our beliefs…must be true.” Rorty goes on to claim that, “I think that expounding it [the doctrine] is a good way of bringing out Davidson’s central contribution to the philosophy of mind and language: his insistence that the idea of ‘accurate representation of reality’ is as dispensable a notion as ‘sentience’ or ‘experience’ or ‘consciousness’.”

Now this position does indeed seem to pose a challenge to McDowell’s view. McDowell claims that the truth or correctness of an empirical belief depends upon a rational relation between that belief and the objects or facts that it purports to be about, and Rorty’s coherentist denies this. McDowell insists that the truth of an empirical belief is epistemically constrained by our experience of the empirical world. Rorty’s coherentist denies the need for any such rational relations between experience and empirical belief; for, he believes that countenancing such relations in turn requires adopting what he views as a debunked notion of epistemic intermediaries between the world and our beliefs. Instead, Rorty and Davidson argue that the notion of “truth” can be accounted for simply by appealing to the intrinsic nature of beliefs, not to some supposedly rational relation between our beliefs and something that is external to them.

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To avoid skepticism, Rorty and Davidson must then go on to argue that, even without a rational relation to the world, we are not thus “out of touch” with the world. Their claim is that a merely causal relation to the world is enough to satisfy the need for our beliefs to have “friction” with the world. Rorty says that, “he [Davidson] takes us to be in touch with reality… in a sense of ‘in touch with’ which does not mean ‘representing reasonably accurately’ but simply ‘caused by and causing’.”

Rorty wants to be able to use this strategy to ignore (or quiet) skeptical questions, rather than have to respond to them. His view is that, once we recognize that most of our beliefs must be true, we can refuse to see truth and justification in terms of the sideways-on or representationalist picture. He thinks that then the skeptical problem simply disappears. Furthermore, Rorty views answerability to the world as a notion that can only be given sense if one adopts the sideways-on, God’s-eye point of view. Thus, Rorty’s response to the skeptical challenge is simply to refuse to adopt that perspective and to argue that we should get rid of the notion of “answerability to the world” altogether. Importantly, however, he does not think that we should drop the notion of “aboutness”. He says:

The alternative [view] is to take them [beliefs] as about things, but not as answering to anything, either objects or opinions. Aboutness is all you need for intentionality. Answering to things is what the infelicitous notion of representing adds to the harmless notion of aboutness: it is what differentiates good inferentialists like you and me from the representationalist bad guys. For as long as our beliefs are said to be answerable to something, we shall want to be told more about how this answering works, and the history of epistemology suggests that there is nothing to be said.

Aboutness, like truth, is indefinable, and none the worse for that. But ‘answering’

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104 Richard Rorty, Introduction to Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 9
and ‘representing’ are metaphors that cry out for further definition, for literalization.\(^{105}\)

I take it that when Rorty says that “aboutness is indefinable” he means to suggest that aboutness is non-relational or intrinsic to beliefs and is thus not to be defined in terms of (or reduced to) some relation such as answerability to the world.\(^{106}\)

6. But, if the aboutness of beliefs is intrinsic, i.e., not a matter of a belief’s being rationally related to what it is about, then in what way can our beliefs be said to give us any indication or evidence about what the world is like? This is just the sceptical question coming up again. And, as we have seen, Rorty’s answer to this question is simply to demand that it is okay to have mere causal—not rational—relations to the world in experience, so long as you also hold Davidson’s claim that belief is in its nature veridical. In other words, this time, Davidson’s insight is used by Rorty in an attempt to quiet (and so peacefully ignore) the skeptic. (Recall that initially Davidson thought that the doctrine that most of our beliefs are true could be used to answer the skeptic.) Rorty says that: “Brandom, Sellars, and Davidson can all agree that the space of reasons as we find it is also, by and large, the shape of the world. Because most of our beliefs must be true, we can make no sense of the idea that a great gulf might separate the way the world is and the way we describe it.”\(^{107}\) And, I take it that it is by way of an appeal to this different, non-relational character of the aboutness of beliefs that Rorty thinks he is entitled to the claim

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\(^{106}\) Often the term “intrinsic” when applied to intentional states is meant to be contrasted with a notion of “derived” intentionality. On this view, mental states are intrinsically intentional, whereas sentences, pictures, signs, etc. are intentional in a derived sense—they are parasitic on the intentionality of mental states. (See, e.g., Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 5 & 27-8).

\(^{107}\) My use of the term “intrinsic” as applied to beliefs is meant to be a synonym for “non-relational”. The idea is that the intentionality (or directedness) of an empirical belief does not depend upon a rational relation with what that belief is about (i.e. its “object”).

that linguistic or semantical talk is “all the intentional talk you need.” Moreover, Rorty tends to imply that any talk of rational relations that incorporate the “world” as one of its *relata* must be a sideways-on type of representational or correspondence view that depends for its viability on countenancing a scheme-content dualism. Thus, Rorty charges McDowell, or anyone else who endorses a notion of answerability to the world, as indulging in a sideways-on view that’s committed to representational intermediaries. But this is clearly not McDowell’s view; for McDowell, as we will see in the next section, like Rorty, explicitly denies intermediaries and the sideways-on picture.

To reiterate, instead of trying to answer the sceptic Rorty thinks that the coherentist should instead respond by ignoring (or “quieting”) the skeptic’s assumption that a sideways-on picture of our relation to the world is needed to account for the justification of our beliefs. And, Rorty thinks that we can only ignore this assumption if we reject the notion of answerability to the world and instead appeal to a notion of aboutness that is non-relational or intrinsic to beliefs. That is why he says that we can take beliefs as being “about things, but not as answering to anything.” Rorty’s view can thus be summed up by the claim that our empirical beliefs are *caused* in us by the world, but that any *rational* import (i.e., epistemic significance) that those beliefs may have comes as a result of interactions with other beliefs and believers, not through epistemic interactions with the cold, dead world—that “world” is the world well lost.

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108 Rorty says, “Sellars’s psychological nominalism paves the way for his claim that if you have semantical talk you have all the intentional talk you need. For, as Sellars says, “the categories of intentionality are, at bottom, semantical categories pertaining to overt verbal performances.” (Rorty, “Brandom on Social Practices” quoting EPM sec. 50, TP, p. 125). Aboutness is indefinable and intrinsic to beliefs. This claim seems to sum up nicely in just what way Rorty is, as he says, a “linguistic idealist”.

109 In fact, McDowell asserts that, “it is possible to go that far with Rorty [i.e. to reject the sideways-on, god’s-eye view] and still dissent from his suggestion that, in order to avoid entanglement in that familiar unprofitable epistemological activity, we need to discard the very idea of being answerable to something other than ourselves” (McDowell, “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity,” in, *Rorty and his Critics*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2000), p. 110.

states: “if we have causal relations...holding between the World and the Self, as well as relations of justification (‘being a reason for’) internal to the Self’s network of beliefs and desires, we do not need any further relations to explain how the Self gets in touch with the World.” Rorty’s quietism is thus an attempt to shift emphasis away from the quest for an experiential relation to an “objective” reality and toward a notion of human solidarity. That, in any case, is what I take to be the coherentist’s response to the threat of the naturalistic fallacy. It is a view that can as well be seen as the most direct competitor to McDowell’s own view in that it offers a rival account of how to quiet the skeptic while at the same time avoiding the naturalistic fallacy.

McDowell’s Route: Experiential Openness

1. McDowell admits that the coherentist position that Rorty and Davidson defend definitely offers a way of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy, but he argues that their route cannot successfully quiet the skeptic. Coherentism claims to avoid the naturalistic fallacy simply by insisting that descriptions of causal relations and descriptions of justificatory relations must be kept separate.

111 Richard Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism,” in, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 120, emphasis added. Davidson pretty much concurs with this when he says, “our experimentation [scientific observation] bears no epistemological fruit except as it causes us to add to, cling to, or abandon our beliefs. This causal relation cannot be a relation of confirmation or disconfirmation, since the cause is not a proposition or belief, but just an event in the world or in our sensory apparatus. Nor can such events be considered in themselves to be evidence, unless, of course, they cause us to believe something. And then it is the belief that is properly called the evidence, not the event” (Davidson, “Empirical Content,” Grazer Philosophische Studien (1982), p. 486).

112 Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21-34. This position is one that Rorty defines as a pragmatist tenet. He says: “those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity—call them ‘pragmatists’—do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James’ phrase, what is good for us to believe. So they do not need an account of the relation between beliefs and objects called ‘correspondence’” (Ibid., p. 22). He also says that, “If one reinterprets objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity,...then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with ‘mind-independent and language-independent reality’.” (Ibid., p. 13). But as McDowell says, “The idea of answerability to the world is central to the discourse of objectivity. So Rorty’s call is to abandon the discourse, the vocabulary, of objectivity, and work instead toward expanding human solidarity” (John McDowell, “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity,” in Rorty and his Critics, ed. Robert Brandom (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 110).
But, McDowell argues that this route does not address the root causes for why modern philosophers have typically felt the need to run the two explanations together (in order to describe phenomena in the space of reasons). McDowell, in contrast to Rorty and Davidson, traces the root cause of the tendency to fall into the naturalistic fallacy to a particular conception of naturalism: viz. the disenchanted view of nature. McDowell’s route is thus an attempt to overcome the disenchanted view of nature by working towards a re-enchantment of nature. And, according to McDowell, it is because Rorty and Davidson are themselves committed to a disenchanted conception of nature that they fail to even consider McDowell’s route for avoiding the naturalistic fallacy.

2. When it comes to describing empirical content, coherentism—with the disenchanted view of nature running in the background—rejects the idea of appealing to some epistemic or rational relation between self and world, and instead it puts forward the notion that the world-directedness or aboutness of beliefs is an intrinsic or non-relational feature of beliefs themselves. Human beings, they say, are causally related to the world, but rational relations can only occur between beliefs and other beliefs, not between beliefs and bits of the world.

Although the coherentist’s strategy obviously avoids confusing causation with justification (and so avoids the naturalistic fallacy), McDowell argues that conceiving of beliefs in non-relational terms leaves us with a conception of “beliefs” as being out of touch with the world (i.e. “frictionless”); and, such self-standing “beliefs” would be incapable of being about the world. In fact, McDowell argues that the coherentist’s route leaves the following transcendental question unanswered, or un-quieted: “how is it possible for there to be thinking directed at how things
This deep-rooted form of skepticism challenges our very access to the objective world.\textsuperscript{114}

McDowell’s complaint against Davidson’s coherentism is encapsulated in the following quotation.

The only motivation for the Myth of the Given that figures in Davidson’s thinking is a shallow scepticism, in which, taking it for granted that one has a body of beliefs, one worries about their credentials. But the Myth of the Given has a deeper motivation, in the thought that if spontaneity is not subject to rational constraint from outside, as Davidson’s coherentist position insists that it is not, then we cannot make it intelligible to ourselves how exercises of spontaneity can represent the world at all. Thoughts without intuitions are empty, and the point is not met by crediting intuitions with a causal impact on thoughts; we can have empirical content in our picture only if we can acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions are rationally connected. By rejecting that, Davidson undermines his right to the idea that his purportedly reassuring argument starts from, the idea of a body of beliefs.\textsuperscript{115}

We can see here that McDowell views coherentism in the context of a response to a traditional empiricism that falls into the Myth of the Given. But, McDowell complains that Davidson’s response merely addresses a “shallow skepticism”, which takes for granted that we already have contentful states, viz. “beliefs”. The only question from this vantage point is: “what are the sources of justification for those beliefs?” And, to avoid the naturalistic fallacy, the coherentist simply answers this question by disqualifying experiences (which they view as involving only a

\textsuperscript{113}MW, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{114}Thornton says that, “McDowell thinks that what makes the relation of mind and world seem problematic is a deeper dualism between norms and nature” (Thornton, \textit{John McDowell}, p. 25). McDowell attempts to escape this dualism by invoking the idea of second nature.
\textsuperscript{115}MW, p. 17.
causal relation to the world) from constituting such a source of justification for beliefs. But this move—saying that experience cannot be a source of justification for beliefs—looks like it yields a form of skepticism (in which our beliefs may fail to map onto, or match up with, the world). And, in their effort to quiet this “shallow skepticism”, the coherentist offers the “purportedly reassuring argument” that most of one’s beliefs are true.  

But, McDowell’s point is that this response simply comes “too late” to meet the “deeper motivation” behind the Myth of the Given. At this “deeper” level, the issue is not yet about what can justify beliefs or world-views, but rather how these mental states, viz. “beliefs”, can obtain this special character of seeming to represent or be about the world at all. Thus the deeper question that coherentism fails to address, in McDowell’s view, is: “What is the source of the content of our empirical beliefs?” And in regard to this question, as McDowell argues, Davidson’s point about our beliefs being mostly true comes “too late”. Davidson assumes that the content of a belief is to be determined not by what it is about—i.e. the object(s) or event(s) it’s directed at—but rather by its position in relation to other beliefs. But, McDowell argues that Davidson is not entitled to the view that empirical beliefs can have the “aboutness” or (representational) content that they do have independently of the way the world is; for, “if spontaneity is not subject to rational constraint from outside, as Davidson’s coherentist position

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116 Of course McDowell argues that this addendum to their view cannot provide cover from the skeptic since their notion of “beliefs” is a notion of states that do not rationally engage with the world they purport to be about. Such a notion of beliefs is, in McDowell’s view, a blind play of concepts in which spontaneity is frictionlessly employed. And the coherentist does not even deny that this is a consequence of their view: in fact they insist that beliefs do not rationally engage with the world. Their slogan is: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.” So, instead of denying the consequence, the coherentist attempts to use the claim that “most of our beliefs must be true” to allay the worry that not being in rational touch with the world must inevitably lead to skepticism. But again, McDowell’s point is that, once that consequence has been accepted, i.e. once we have renounced a rational connection between empirical beliefs and the world, everything that comes after that comes “too late” to quiet the skeptic, because then there can be no way to have contentful states in the picture at all. McDowell says, “When Davidson argues that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, he helps himself to the idea of a body of beliefs, a body of states that have content. And that means that, however successfully the argument might work on its own terms, it comes too late to neutralize the real problem for this horn of the dilemma” (MW, p. 68).
insists that it is not, then we cannot make it intelligible to ourselves how exercises of spontaneity can *represent* the world at all."

3. I highlight the point about “how spontaneity can *represent* the world” here to emphasize the connection that McDowell sees between aboutness or intentionality and representations. McDowell takes representational states or “impressions” to be states that at least purport to be revelatory of the world: i.e. they have the essential feature of being world-involving or world-directed.\(^{117}\) Of course, Davidson and Rorty also wish to say that beliefs (non-relationally construed) can also be revelatory of the world; that is what they mean to retain by claiming that non-relational beliefs can still have “aboutness”. But, according to McDowell, insofar as mental states are world-directed, they must be seen as *relational* states in which one thing (a belief or thought) purports to be about, or represent, another (the world or a state of affairs). The problem here is this: what are we to make of this property or relation of “world-directedness”? It is not to be found in any nomological description of the natural order (as a “bald naturalist” would hold).\(^{118}\) And so the real difficulty comes when we see that world-directedness, as such, seems necessary to account for what happens in terms of the order of justification—for example, to explain why I am justified in thinking that *that* cup is made of plastic. And so, if we wish to locate sensory experience in the causal order, as the dominant, *disenchanted*, modern-scientific worldview seems to incline Davidson and Rorty to do, then world-directedness itself (not just our knowledge of the world, but our very awareness of it) can seem to be threatened by the

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117 Beliefs or judgments, in turn, involve endorsing or withholding the endorsement of the claims that these representations purport to make about the way the world is. We decide whether or not to takes things at “face value” (see, e.g., *MW*, p. 26). Most of the time, by default, you might say, we simply take things to be as they are, i.e., we take experience at face value.

118 Davidson states this clearly in “Mental Events,” when he endorses the “anomalism of the mental” in the face of the “nomological character of causality”. The back cover of *Interpreting Davidson* states that “Anomalous monism shows how mental events and processes can be bona fide occupants of the physical world, while retaining their autonomy and sui generis nature.”
naturalistic fallacy. (That is, my belief or thought cannot be about the cup simply in virtue of my causal relations with it; for that description leaves out the normative dimension in which my belief is correct or incorrect in light of the constitution of the cup, i.e., the facts.) So the problem is this: with a disenchanted view of nature in place, we find that descriptions of things in terms of the space of reasons cannot be reduced to descriptions in naturalistic terms.\textsuperscript{119}

This difficulty in reconciling the normative space of reasons with the law-governed conception of nature reflects the deeper threat of skepticism that McDowell thinks Davidson’s coherentism actually exacerbates—viz. the dualism of norm and nature. For if, with Davidson and Rorty, we invoke the strategy of simply holding apart justification and causation, while placing experiences (intuitions) on the causation side, it becomes impossible to get a notion of empirical content into the picture at all. Intentionality itself, according to McDowell, requires a rational relation to, or constraint from, the world.\textsuperscript{120} We cannot just drop the idea of such a rational relation because it seems problematic, as Davidson and Rorty do, for doing so, according to McDowell, “ensures that we cannot refuse to find a mystery in the bearing of belief…on the empirical world.”\textsuperscript{121} So in contrast to Davidson and Rorty, McDowell argues that “we can have

\textsuperscript{119} That is…without violating the naturalistic fallacy. As McDowell explains, “concepts are \textit{sui generis} precisely in that it is not by virtue of their location in the realm of law that things instantiate those concepts. So if we go on equating something’s place in nature with its location in the realm of law, we are debarred from holding that an experience has its conceptual content precisely as whatever natural phenomenon it is” (\textit{MW}, p. 72).

\textsuperscript{120} Brandom puts McDowell’s point like this: “The concept of conceptual or intentional content, like the concept of meaning, is a normative concept” (Brandom, “Perception and Rational Constraint,” p. 246).

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{MW}, p. 144. The continuing “mystery” results from the coherentist’s particular way of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy, which involves rejecting the idea that experience involves a relation of answerability to the world. They construe experiences as merely caused in us by the world and in turn reject the idea that such impacts from the world (viz. “impressions”) can be meaningful in the way that the traditional empiricists conceived of them, viz., as constituting evidence for beliefs. And since Rorty and Davidson are committed to avoiding the naturalistic fallacy, they hold that evidence cannot come from outside the space of reasons (or system of beliefs). Specifically, on their view, evidence cannot come from the deliverances of receptivity, i.e., experience conceived of in terms of impressions. Impressions, on their view, can only be impacts from outside the space of reasons and so cannot factor in the order of justification. But McDowell argues that without a notion of impressions (that can function as justifiers) the coherentist has no way of getting content into the picture. Simply claiming that we are just caused to have the contentful beliefs that we have cannot account for their rational directedness to the world. Thus, McDowell claims that this way of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy still leaves the skeptical question alive and seemingly pressing, i.e., not yet \textit{quieted}. 
empirical content in our picture only if we can acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions are rationally connected.” But this is exactly what the coherentist, armed with the notion of non-relational beliefs, refuses to do.

Of course, when the coherentist asserts that sensations or intuitions cannot enter into rational relations with thoughts or beliefs, they at the same time (purport to) reassure us that a mere causal constraint is all that’s needed between experience and empirical beliefs. Beliefs, they say, can still be about the world and so can provide all the so-called “friction” that McDowell says is required. The slogan, “aboutness without answerability,” epitomizes the fact that Rorty and Davidson are committed to (as I put it) this non-relational notion of the aboutness of beliefs. Their idea is that there can be friction (or external constraint) enough if we resort to just talking about the causal origin of beliefs and of beliefs being made true or false by other beliefs, rather than by experience or by the world. But they insist that there can be no rational constraints on beliefs from “outside”: that is, “only a belief can justify a belief.” For example, Rorty says that, “although there are causes of the acquisition of beliefs, and reasons for the retention or change of beliefs, there are no causes for the truth of beliefs.” And Davidson

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122 Brandom labels this idea McDowell’s “rational constraint constraint.” And, he adds that, “Meeting that constraint is a criterion of adequacy...for giving due weight both to the dimension of receptivity (in virtue of which thought must be constrained from without) and to the dimension of spontaneity (in virtue of which the constraint must be rational) that are essential aspects of the contents of empirical thoughts” (Robert Brandom, “Perception and Rational Constraint,” Philosophical Issues Perception, (1996), p. 245).

123 Rorty, TP, p. 133. In McDowell’s view this statement would be an out-and-out contradiction. It may also be seen as of a piece with one of Davidson’s slogans, viz., “correspondence without confrontation” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 413).

124 Although he puts the point in terms of “knowledge” rather than “belief”, Rorty says that his preferred version of “Pragmatism views knowledge not as a relation between mind and an object, but, roughly, as the ability to get agreement by using persuasion rather than force” (Rorty, “Texts and Lumps,” ORT, p. 88, emphasis added).

125 McDowell adds: “and he [Davidson] means in particular that experience cannot count as a reason for holding a belief” (MW, p. 14).

says that, “I think the world causes us to perceive and believe things, and that this is the direct source of the ‘friction’ between world and mind that McDowell wants to accommodate.”

But, to the contrary, according to McDowell, this strategy (viz. confining experience to the casual order) cannot provide the “friction” or external constraint on our beliefs that the skeptic’s deeper challenge demands. The necessary external “friction”, according to McDowell, applies not just to justification but to intentionality as well, i.e. to the very aboutness of our beliefs. This requires that beliefs are capable of entering into a rational relation with (and so as being constrained by) something independent of those beliefs. But this is impossible for the coherentist to hold. Since they conceive of experience as merely a causal relation, an experience of the world, for them, cannot justify a belief. But then—and this is the important point—beliefs would not be “about” the world either, they would be “self-standing” in relation to the world. Thus, the real problem with the coherentist’s view, according to McDowell, is that it involves “the renunciation of rational control from independent reality.” McDowell says of Davidson that:

He thinks a merely causal, not rational, linkage between thinking and independent reality will do, as an interpretation of the idea that empirical content requires friction against something external to thinking. But it will not do.128

Because they place experience solely in the law-governed causal order, McDowell argues that Rorty and Davidson are not entitled to view what they call “beliefs” as content bearing states that purport to represent the world. The reason, according to McDowell, is that they deny that those states—those beliefs—depend upon answering to experience and thus to the world for their truth.

127 Davidson, “Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers,” in Interpreting Davidson, p. 289, emphasis added.  
128 MW, p. 68.
or falsity. McDowell argues that it is the relation of answerability to the world (a rational relation) that supplies the needed “friction”—the external, normative constraint on belief formation—that Davidson’s and Rorty’s position simply rules out. But, a fortiori, without that rational or normative friction from something external (viz. the world), according to McDowell, beliefs, so construed, would therefore also not be answerable to the world for their content either—they would be “empty”. Thus, McDowell’s point, in direct contrast to Rorty’s slogan, is that it is simply impossible to have “aboutness without answerability”.

4. McDowell’s argument that Davidson’s and Rorty’s position does not allow the requisite normative friction between beliefs and intuitions is Kantian. He says,

Thoughts without intuitions would be empty, as Kant almost says; and if we are to avert the threat of emptiness, we need to see intuitions as standing in rational relations to what we should think, not just in causal relations to what we do think.

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129 McDowell says, “This required answerability to the world can be realized only as an answerability to the way the world puts its mark on us; that is, an answerability to the deliverances of our senses” (John McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” in Interpreting Davidson, (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), p. 149).

130 The fact that the coherentist admits causal relations to the world does no good once they have rejected the rationality of the relation. If it is not the type of thing that can enter into the order of justification then it cannot count as contentful either. Thus, spontaneity would be a “frictionless” play of concepts; the deployment of those concepts would be “self-standing” in relation to the world. (I think that McDowell’s term “frictionlessness” applies to his epistemological complaint that the truth or falsity of an empirical belief can be determined independently of the way the world is whereas the term “self-standing” applies to his transcendental complaint that, without a rational relation in experience, our beliefs would lack content.)

131 As we will see, McDowell, in contrast to Rorty and Davidson, insists that aboutness cannot be merely an intrinsic property of beliefs (or mental states, or experiences, etc.) but rather must involve a rational relation to an object or event or state of affairs (something independent of the belief). Empirical content, according to McDowell, requires rational contact with something external or independent. This position can seem difficult to hold in the face of the fact that the dominant conception of nature is one in which everything gets described in terms of the causal order—reasons are to be left out, or reduced to causes. And thus it seems that we are forced, under threat of the naturalistic fallacy, to place the concept of experience outside of the space of reasons. But, this move sets up the dualism of nature and reason. And the disenchanted view of nature inclines one to respond to that dualism with the idea that everything natural must fit into the space of causal law. McDowell admits that, “It is ironic that I can put things like this….But Rorty’s own thinking is organized around the dualism of reason and nature, and that means he can be at best partly successful in being a pragmatist in his own sense. No wonder his attempt to dissolve traditional problems has the aspect of refusing to listen to questions that still stubbornly look as if they ought to be good ones, rather than supplying a way of thinking within which the questions genuinely do not arise” (MW, p. 154).
Otherwise the very idea of what we think goes missing. The items that were meant to be thoughts are still without intuitions in the relevant sense, and so empty. Davidson manages to be comfortable with his coherentism, which dispenses with rational constraint on thinking from outside it, only because he does not see that emptiness is the threat.\footnote{MW, p. 68.}

McDowell’s complaint against Davidson is that he is blind to the (anti) Kantian implications of his move to coherentism and so is “comfortable” holding that the system of beliefs is rationally insulated from the impacts of receptivity. Rorty too, for his part, brags that he “exalts spontaneity at the cost of receptivity.”\footnote{Richard Rorty, “Texts and Lumps,” ORT, p. 81. Rorty also claims that his “realist opponent did the reverse.” But, McDowell too is a “realist” opponent, and he claims not to exalt one or the other. Rather, he claims that spontaneity and receptivity are inextricably interrelated, such that one cannot be coherently understood in isolation from the other.} But the dire consequence of this, according to McDowell, is that if what the deliverances of receptivity afford cannot be the type of thing that can serve as evidence for beliefs, then neither can those deliverances be construed as conceptually contentful. And then, it likewise seems wrong to say that such deliverances could even constitute an “input” into the system at all, for, as it stands, they are not yet about anything.

In contrast, McDowell insists, with Kant, that the impacts on us from the world—i.e. sensuous intuitions—must provide the content required to see our conceptualizations of the world as non-empty. But the only way for that to be possible, according to McDowell, is if experiences (i.e. impressions) are the type of thing that can enter into rational relations with beliefs. And the only way for experiences to enter into rational relations with beliefs is if they are already conceptual. But Davidson’s and Rorty’s causal view of experience—due to their adherence to a disenchanted view of nature—rules this possibility out. Hence, McDowell “re-enchants” nature to allow him to endorse the Kantian notion of experience as involving “a co-

operation between receptivity and spontaneity. McDowell’s claim is that Kant’s view can afford us a notion of receptivity which is already conceptual and therefore capable of justifying beliefs.

5. We have seen that one of McDowell’s main contentions in Mind and World is that a prevalent disenchanted view of nature is responsible for the failure to see how receptivity and spontaneity can be integrated in a way that makes meaningful empirical content possible. McDowell connects this faulty assumption to Davidson’s and Rorty’s interpretation of scheme-content dualism, in which they take it that it is simply a (case of the) naturalistic fallacy to allow for any sort of epistemic or rational relation between spontaneity and receptivity. On their view, there are causal transactions, and there are rational transactions, but there can be no intermediaries (like experiences, or impressions, or appearances) that connect or bridge the two. So from their perspective, the very idea of countenancing a rational relation between belief and experience leads to skeptical worries, since the intermediaries thought to be required

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134 MW, p. 9.
135 Actually McDowell wants to perform a slight corrective to Kant to rid his view of the notion of a supersensible, “noumenal” realm lying outside the realm of possible experience (See MW, pp. 95-9).
136 And as De Gaynesford explains, McDowell’s response to this disenchantment is that, “We should retain the possibility of rational relations as our goal, and achieve it by regarding the capacities belonging to spontaneity as inextricably implicated in the operations of receptivity. Our current view of nature blinds us to the possibility of this move; revised nature awakens us to it” (Maximilian de Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 105).
137 We can trace their position with regard to scheme-content dualism by seeing that they take any notion of receptivity to imply an adherence to the Myth of the Given. And, as McDowell says, “It can seem that if we try to confer a position in the order of justification on experience conceived as receptivity in operation, we must be falling into what Sellars attacks as the Myth of the Given. What Sellars attacks under that label extends more widely than this, but the main form of the Myth he discusses is precisely the attempt to give merely natural phenomena a position in the order of justification. It is common to read Sellars as holding precisely that as soon as one begins explicating a concept of experience by invoking something on the lines of receptivity, one is doomed to fall foul of the Myth of the Given” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” RN, p. 9).
138 As Davidson says, “Since we can’t swear intermediaries to truthfulness, we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world. Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 418).
to complete that relation, in their view, could only “close us off from the world”. And that is because, for them, the link that receptivity provides to the world can only be a causal link. They think (mistakenly, according to McDowell) that any attempt to find a rational relation running between mind and world will fall prey to the myth of picturing representations as intermediaries between the mind and the world. In fact, that’s why the coherentist maintains that we must strictly hold apart descriptions about world-world relations (causal descriptions) from descriptions about the normative, inferential relations that hold between the utterances of human language-users (word-word relations). That is, they do in fact “exalt spontaneity at the cost of receptivity.” For the coherentist thinks that beliefs are merely caused by experience, and that that disqualifies them from being rationally constrained by the deliverances of receptivity. This conclusion, however, according to McDowell, relies upon the faulty premise that nature can only be understood as disenchanted, that is, that natural relations can only be accurately described in law-governed, causal terms.

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139 Davidson himself explicitly frames the issue in these terms, saying, “I have now stated my problem as well as I can. The search for an empirical foundation for meaning or knowledge leads to scepticism, while a coherence theory seems at a loss to provide any reason for a believer to believe that his beliefs, if coherent, are true. We are caught between a false answer to the sceptic, and no answer” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 420).

140 Rorty says that, “the ‘dualism of scheme and content’—[is] the idea that something like ‘mind’ or ‘language’ can bear some relation such as ‘fitting’ or ‘organizing’ to the world” (Rorty, ORT, p. 126).

141 McDowell explains that, “Rorty puts the point of Davidson’s coherentism, which he endorses, like this: we must hold apart the view of beliefs ‘seen from the outside as the field linguist sees them (as causal interactions with the environment)’ and the view of beliefs seen ‘from the inside as the pre-epistemological native sees them (as rules for action)’ (p. 345). We must ‘abjure the possibility of a third way of seeing them—one which somehow combines the outside view and the inside view, the descriptive and the normative attitudes’ (p. 345). The outside view, the field linguist’s view, is descriptive; it links beliefs with objects and circumstances in the believer’s environment, in a structure whose constitutive relations are causal. (In the outside view, beliefs are ‘seen…as causal interactions with the environment’. ) The inside view is normative: it is ‘the…point of view of the earnest seeker after truth’ (p. 347), a point of view in which beliefs are linked with what is taken to give them their rational credentials, that is, located in the space of reasons” (MW, p. 147, McDowell’s quotations all come from Rorty’s “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth”). For his own part, Rorty tells us that philosophers who want to debunk false dualisms should “do so by patiently explaining that norms are one thing and descriptions another” (Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth,” p. 142).

142 In the context of Davidson’s philosophy, McDowell sees his commitment to this premise in his adherence to what McDowell calls “The Prejudice of the Nomological Character of Causality” (John McDowell, “Functionalism and Anomalous Monism,” in Mind, Value, and Reality, p. 338). In “Mental Events” Davidson swears allegiance to
So as McDowell sees it, the underlying problem with the coherentist’s strategy for avoiding the naturalistic fallacy (i.e. refusing to allow rational relations between experiences and beliefs) is that it fails to avoid what McDowell calls the dualism of reason and nature. 

McDowell says: “I find the dualism [of reason and nature] operative in Davidson’s thinking: it accounts for his attitude to the idea that spontaneity interacts rationally with receptivity.” 

In fact, Rorty and Davidson take it that the rejection of the dualism of scheme and content goes hand in hand with the rejection of a dualism of receptivity and spontaneity. For them, receptivity—what McDowell also refers to as “experience”—cannot factor in the order of justification. 

Hence, the space in which meaningful, contentful occurrences have their home, i.e., the space of reasons, must be isolated and self-standing in relation to descriptions of natural events. 

This view of the content of beliefs as segregated from the world comes out clearly in this “Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality,” which he sums-up thusly: “where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws” (Donald Davidson, “Mental Events,” p. 116). McDowell disputes the implication that all so-called descriptions of nature must likewise be totally comprised of references to causal law. Consequently McDowell aims to “remind” us of “second nature” and its attendant form of natural description that can incorporate human life with regard to reasons for belief and action.

McDowell sums up the deforming effect that this disenchanted view of nature has on our conceptualization of our experiential relation to the world in terms of the dualism of reason and nature. He says that, “the idea of the world’s impacts on us is the idea of something natural. And we moderns now see clearly how the structure of rational linkages contrasts with the structure of the natural, the topic of natural-scientific understanding. Hence, given that the domain of the conceptual is the domain of rational interrelatedness, it must be that intuitions as such are without concepts” (McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” in Interpreting Davidson, p. 151).

He means to say that Davidson’s “attitude” is one that rejects the idea “that spontaneity interacts rationally with receptivity”. McDowell however adds that, “in my reading, Davidson’s vulnerability to the dualism is a defect; it is out of line with his better thinking on interpretation, and it ensures failure in the aim of exorcizing traditional philosophical anxieties. In contrast, Rorty centres his reading of Davidson on the dualism, and he applauds it as what it exactly is not, a way to escape from the obsessions of traditional philosophy” (MW, pp. 153-4).

Of course, at this point, McDowell could just end the discussion by explaining that there is then no way to get empirical content into the picture. But instead, McDowell presses on in an attempt to diagnose, or see what motivates, what he takes to be a deeply troubling conclusion to draw: that the world cannot factor in as a rational constraint on (even) our empirical thinking. Plus, in light of McDowell’s rejection of “constructive philosophy,” we are supposed to understand his aim as clearing away the misconceptions of other theories rather than constructing his own rival theory; hence, “diagnosis” or “therapy.”

The point come to this: the space of reasons is sui generis, or, as Davidson puts it, anomalous. But, if one adopts the disenchedanted view of nature, then it looks like the only way to avoid both scheme-content dualism and the naturalistic fallacy is to say that internal (epistemic) relations are one thing, and that external (causal/natural) relations are another. Thus, Davidson’s and Rorty’s response is to isolate (i.e. enshrine the distinction between) the

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the coherentist’s slogan that beliefs are only answerable to other beliefs. McDowell describes this response to scheme-content dualism as follows:

Davidson’s objection to the third dogma of empiricism is this: even as it tries to make out that sensory impressions are our avenue of access to the empirical world, empiricism conceives impressions in such a way that they could only close us off from the world, disrupting our ‘unmediated touch’ with ordinary objects. Now Rorty generalizes that thought into rejecting a whole array of candidate intermediaries between us and the world, on the ground that to accept them is just to saddle ourselves with pointless anxieties about our hold on the world. He speaks of such tertia as, in Davidson’s words, ‘a conceptual scheme, a way of viewing things, a perspective’ (or a transcendental constitution of consciousness, or a language, or a cultural tradition).147

Here McDowell is chiding Davidson and Rorty for failing to see that there can be more to “sensory impressions” than just that they stand in the way of, and “close us off” from, the world. They associate any idea of rational constraint on our beliefs by the world with the illicit attempt to import epistemic intermediaries between minds and the world. Blinded by the dualism of reason and nature implicit in the disenchanted view of nature, Davidson and Rorty can only picture receptivity in a causal light.148 But, McDowell complains that then our sensory encounter with the world—i.e., the deliverances of receptivity—can at best be “opaque”. That is, as he two types of relation and insist that “justifications” are denizens of the one and “causes” denizens of the other. This comes out in Davidson’s conclusion that there can be no “psycho-physical laws.”

147 MW, p. 155
148 McDowell says that, “it is one thing to acknowledge…in Sellarsian terms…a logical space that is to be contrasted with the logical space of reasons. It is another to equate that logical space, as Sellars at least implicitly does, with the logical space of nature. That is what makes it seem impossible to combine empiricism with the idea that the world’s making an impression on a perceiving subject would have to be a natural happening” (MW, p. xx). The thrust of McDowell’s criticism of Davidson and Rorty is that their notion of the non-relational character of beliefs positively exacerbates this dualism between reason and nature.
says, “if one knows enough about one’s causal connections with the world, one can argue from them to conclusion about the world, but they do not themselves disclose the world to one.”\textsuperscript{149} By contrast, according to McDowell, if we see reason and nature coming together, i.e., as united—at least in the form of a cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity, then the deliverances of receptivity can in fact be said to “disclose the world to one”.\textsuperscript{150} He says that the Kantian “idea of conceptually structured operations of receptivity puts us in a position to speak of experience as openness to the layout of reality.”\textsuperscript{151} Hence, in contrast to the coherentist, McDowell argues that, “in my picture impressions are, so to speak, transparent.”\textsuperscript{152}

6. The idea that the deliverances of receptivity—i.e. “impressions”—can be “transparent” and can “disclose the world to one” brings us back to a point that I emphasized earlier about how McDowell conceives of intentionality in terms of a representational relation. Of course the notion of representation looks problematic insofar as it seems to require a notion of self-standing mental states or intermediaries. And Davidson and Rorty reject the notion of experience as an intermediary. McDowell does not disagree that representations, if construed as intermediaries, would in fact require a scheme-content distinction. But, unlike Rorty and Davidson, McDowell does not see this fact as impugning the entire idea of representational relations between minds and the world. He thinks that Davidson and Rorty go too far by taking impressions, i.e., states

\textsuperscript{149} MW, p. 145.

\textsuperscript{150} The idea of reason and nature coming together is what McDowell means by “second nature.” McDowell thinks that being blinded by a disenchanted view of nature results in taking first nature to be all the nature there is. But, he says that, “once we remember second nature, we see that operations of nature can include circumstances whose descriptions place them in the logical space of reasons, 	extit{sui generis} though that logical space is. This makes it possible to accommodate impressions in nature without posing a threat to empiricism. From the thesis that receiving an impression is a transaction in nature, there is now no good inference to the conclusion drawn by Sellars and Davidson, that the idea of receiving an impression must be foreign to the logical space in which concepts such as that of answerability function” (MW, p. xx).

\textsuperscript{151} MW, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{152} MW, p. 145.
that purport to represent the world, as capable only of standing in the way (i.e., being
intermediaries) between us and the world.\textsuperscript{153}

Rorty famously parodied the representationalistic theory of knowledge as picturing the
mind as a \textit{mirror}.

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great
mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable
of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as
mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have
suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and
Kant—getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing
the mirror, so to speak—would not have made sense.\textsuperscript{154}

Rorty views the entire modern epistemological enterprise of conceiving of certainty and
knowledge in terms of the “accuracy of representations” to reality as resting on a mistake. The
“picture which holds traditional philosophy captive,” as Rorty understands it, is a certain
conception of the \textit{experiential relation} as a three-object (or three-term) relation. The objects
involved are the objective world on the one hand and the mind or beliefs (the faculty of
spontaneity or judgment) on the other, with experiential intermediaries—viz., representations—
as the third element, conceived of as providing \textit{reflections} of the world to the mind. These
representations supposedly facilitate and mediate the deliverance of content from the world to
beliefs, i.e., from the causal (non-conceptual “content”) side to the conceptual, normative

\textsuperscript{153} McDowell says that, “it is possible to go that far with Rorty [i.e. to reject the notion of intermediaries] and still
dissent from his suggestion that, in order to avoid entanglement in that familiar unprofitable epistemological
activity, we need to discard the very idea of being answerable to something other than ourselves” (John McDowell,
“Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity,” in \textit{Rorty and his Critics}, p. 110). When Rorty and Davidson reject the
dualism of scheme and content, what they reject is the very idea of an epistemic relation between the non-conceptual
world and our beliefs about it.

Rorty and Davidson take it that scheme-content dualism is propped up by the notion of representational intermediaries. But, if these so-called representational intermediaries ("impressions") are just caused to be there by the world, as the disenchanted view of nature has it, then they cannot perform the function of purporting to be about—i.e. "disclosing"—the world and thus cannot stand as evidence for beliefs about the world. Rorty and Davidson thus conclude that a rejection of scheme-content dualism also requires a rejection of the very idea of a rational relation between mind and world. As they see it, any theory that invokes "impressions" or representations leads to the dualism of scheme and content.\(^{155}\)

But, although Rorty and Davidson (rightly, in McDowell's view) do-away with self-standing intermediaries, they don't do-away with the self-standing realm altogether.\(^{156}\) In fact that notion remains in their view of the "system of beliefs": viz., the idea that beliefs can purport to represent the world even though the world can only ever enter in as a causal (non-conceptual) impact on the space of reasons. The problem lies in thinking that beliefs are intrinsically contentful states, such that occurrences on the scheme side—the side of meaning and language use—can have a determinate shape or representational content without constraint from anything outside. In "Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism," McDowell puts his disagreement with Davidson politely by saying that his "diagnosis of the dualism's attractions does not go to the roots." But, to put it more bluntly, McDowell accuses Davidson’s own coherentist position (aided and abetted along the way by Rorty) of falling into scheme-content dualism itself. For, to

\(^{155}\) The "moral" of the renunciation of scheme-content dualism, according to Rorty, "is that if we have no such tertia, then we have no suitable items to serve as representations, and thus no need to ask whether our beliefs represent the world accurately" ("Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," p. 139). McDowell protests vigorously against this conclusion that, "it is not just 'the representationalist,' someone who thinks we need to climb outside our own minds [and get a sideways-on look] in order to understand how thought and speech relate to reality, who can be expected to recoil from the denial of this [viz. 'the thought that things really are a certain way']" (McDowell, "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity," in *Rorty and his Critics*, p. 118).

\(^{156}\) Tim Thornton argues that McDowell’s overarching goal is to attack what he calls the “master thesis”: the idea “that the mind is populated by intrinsically non-relational items” (*Thornton, John McDowell*, p. 173).
countenance a realm of content-bearing states that, nonetheless, are not answerable to anything independent, is, in McDowell’s view, an act of invoking a scheme-content distinction. That is, scheme-content dualism involves an act of endowing one or both (in this case one) of these sides with a determinate reality unto itself and independently of the other. But, if that is what invoking the scheme-content distinction means, then we cannot overcome it as Rorty and Davidson attempt to do, by just bypassing experience, the so-called intermediary, and going straight to talk about language-use and inference; for then, “language-use and inference” is self-standing and disconnected in relation to the world.157

McDowell’s argument, by contrast, is that the very idea of a dualism of scheme and content is incoherent. His point is that we cannot conceive of one side without the other: it is their independent existence that is illusory. Rorty and Davidson however, in spite of their better judgment, wind up latching onto the idea that one side of that dualism—viz. the scheme side—can have a determinate shape apart from the deliverances of the world (i.e., the content side).158

McDowell, however, objects that,

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157 The coherentist’s move can be put like this: we can have conceptually structured representations, viz. “beliefs”, which are nonetheless not rationally constrained by what they purport to be about. But, in making this move, the coherentist retains the self-standing character of mental states, but this time it is beliefs, rather than impressions or experiences, that are self-standing. As McDowell sees it, the coherentist gets representations to come in at the right level, that is, at the conceptual level, but those representations are still removed from the sphere of rational contact with the world and so are unconstrained by it. McDowell emphasizes, on the grounds that otherwise thought is empty (void of content), that the world must constrain our beliefs. They cannot possess world-involving content without such constraint. This is especially clear in the case of singular thoughts, which is why McDowell primarily focuses, in mind and World at least, on “thinking that is answerable to the empirical world; that is, answerable to how things are in so far as how things are is empirically accessible” (MW, p. xii).

158 McDowell says that, “Davidson’s protest against what he calls 'the Myth of the Subjective' is directed against a symptom, the tendency to postulate intermediaries, rather than against the underlying malady, which infects Davidson himself, even though he contrives to free his thinking from the symptom” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” RN, p. 15-16). The point is summed up by Rorty himself when he states that he “exalts spontaneity at the cost of receptivity.”
If abstracting it [the adoption of determinate stands or commitments as to how things are in the world] from content leaves a scheme empty, what can be the point of identifying this side of the dualism as the conceptual?¹⁵⁹

The answer, of course, is that there would be no point. The conceptual cannot stand alone. It is world-dependent. But, at the same time, world-views, that is, views of “the world” (i.e. contentful states), must also depend upon experiencing selves; for it takes a concept-user, and only a concept-user, to have a perspective on that objective world. So, as Tim Thornton puts it, “although [McDowell] rejects the dualism of scheme and content, he does not reject the ‘duality.’ That is, he is happy to talk of the faculties of receptivity and spontaneity but he denies that they can be understood in isolation from one another.”¹⁶⁰

7. McDowell’s notion of “representation” is thus very different than Rorty’s and Davidson’s. In fact, McDowell does not think that the representational character of our beliefs and thoughts, understood correctly, requires positing self-standing (opaque) intermediaries. Instead, he argues for a notion of impressions as something more akin to presentations rather than re-presentations.¹⁶¹ These “presentations” or “impressions” cannot be self-standing intermediaries (as the traditional conception of representations has it¹⁶²) since they are object-

¹⁶⁰ Tim Thornton, John McDowell, p. 213. Thornton references McDowell 1999, p. 88. De Gaynesford describes the point like this: “even though we can distinguish what receptivity is from what spontaneity is, we cannot look at the properties of experience and divide out those which come from one and those which come from the other” (De Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 92).
¹⁶¹ For example, McDowell says that, “the appearance that is presented to one in those [veridical] cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer” (McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality, p. 387). See also, John McDowell, “The Content of Perceptual Experience,” The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 44, (April, 1994), p. 205. For the most part McDowell continues, confusingly in my view, to use a representationalist idiom to discuss his presentationalism.
¹⁶² This conception has long been thought necessary to respond to the argument from illusion. McDowell attacks it as the “highest common factor” view (see, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” MKR, pp. 369-394). It (HCF) is the idea that an illusionary perception has the same content as a veridical perception, namely, a sense-datum or some other intermediary representation. True perception is then defined as a case in which the perceptual content, which
dependent or world-dependent (and thus “transparent”). According to McDowell, what we
directly confront (or are presented with) in experience, is not a mere image or appearance of the
world, an intermediary, but the world itself.

Thus McDowell, like Rorty and Davidson, rejects the notion of impressions as “opaque”
intermediaries. But, unlike Rorty and Davidson, he does not also reject the very idea that the
mind and the world can enter into rational relations. Instead, McDowell argues that there are
two things that are required for beliefs to be about (or to represent) the world in this way. The
first is that an empirical belief must be conceptually structured, and the second is that an
empirical belief must be rationally constrained by what it is about. The second requirement is

is the common factor in both veridical and illusory cases (of seeing, and seeming to see, e.g., a plastic cup), actually
matches-up with reality. The “common factor” (the image of a plastic cup, e.g.) is the self-standing element here: it
is what it is—it’s exactly the same—whether it turns out to reflect objective reality or not.

163 McDowell speaks of the “object-directedness” of empirical thought, and he says that, “a perceptual
demonstrative thought surely homes in on its object…by virtue of the way this sort of thinking exploits the
perceptible presence of the object itself” (MW, p. 105).
164 That is, McDowell would add: in cases of veridical perception. We can still make mistakes, but when we don’t
there is nothing in between us and the truth about reality. McDowell’s route, in this way, avoids conceiving of
experiences in terms of intermediaries, but without, thereby, relinquishing the idea that empirical beliefs can be
rationally constrained by the way the world is. As McDowell sees it, “the real trouble with conceiving experiences
as intermediaries is that we cannot make sense of experiences, so conceived, as purporting to tell us anything,
whether truthfully or not.” But, he says, “When we take receptivity itself to impinge rationally on belief, we equip
ourselves to understand experience as openness to the world. And now the problem of making it intelligible that
experience is endowed with content lapses” (MW, p. 143). As McDowell sees it, if we take the Kantian fusion
seriously, we can start to understand receptivity as conceptual intake (or uptake) and so as capable of standing in
rational relations in the space of reasons. Spontaneity is involved in those receptions, according to McDowell, and
so there’s no scheme-content dualism re-appearing. There is a quite ordinary dualism between the world and the
thinker (who thinks about the world); and it is this that Davidson and Rorty wind up rejecting along with the
scheme-content dualism. McDowell rejects the dualism between conceptualizing scheme and intuitions (sensory
content) too, but he does so only because receptivity and spontaneity are integrated in experience and cannot be
understood separately. Of course McDowell sees spontaneity as also operative apart from its connection with
receptivity, and so it is still capable of passing judgments on or endorsing received experiential content
(impressions). That content, McDowell insists, is already conceptually structured. But it is also about the world; it
has content: representational content. The given (small “g”) then, as McDowell conceives it, can justify beliefs.

165 In fact, McDowell argues, again in direct contrast to Rorty, that, “the essential point is that, whatever the details,
an acceptable world-picture consists of articulable, conceptually structured representations. Their acceptability
resides in their knowably mirroring the world; that is, representing it as it is” (McDowell, “Two Sorts of
Naturalism,” in Mind, Value, and Reality, p. 178, emphasis added). Here McDowell acknowledges Rorty’s
Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature in a footnote, and adds that, “Rorty suggests that mirror imagery is suspect in
its own right; but I think what follows accommodates his good point without jettisoning such imagery.” I take it that
by this McDowell means to preserve the idea of “representing it [the world] as it is” by shifting from an image of
experience as a mirror to an image of it as a conduit, that is, by moving from a three-term to a two-term conception
of the experiential relation.
that the concept of intentionality (i.e., world-dependency) must be understood as a *relational* concept. That is, a belief must be rationally constrained by what it is about.\(^{166}\) And, it is this second requirement that the coherentist refuses to allow, on the grounds that countenancing such a relation would re-introduce the notion of intermediaries. But that only follows if one accepts a particular conception of experiences (i.e. “impressions”) as self-standing states. But, if nature is re-enchanted with concepts at the level of human receptivity, as McDowell advocates, then there can be representational content without intermediaries standing in the way. So, “representational content”, for McDowell, cannot be conceived as self-standing. Instead, McDowell conceives of experience as an “openness” to the way things manifestly are. This openness view is meant to directly contrast with the picture of the mental as self-standing. As Thornton puts it, for McDowell, “the mind is not an enclosed inner space; it is instead constitutively or essentially open to the world.”\(^ {167}\) For McDowell, in contrast to Davidson and Rorty, experience cannot be seen as playing an intermediary role. Rather, our empirical beliefs must be directly answerable to the world. And so McDowell says that, “We can take it that spontaneity is rationally vulnerable to receptivity without the unwelcome effect that receptivity seems to get in the way between us and the world, if we reject the framework that is the real source of the problems of traditional empiricism, namely, the dualism of reason and nature.”\(^ {168}\)

8. Overcoming this dualism, according to McDowell, requires a form of direct realism in which impressions literally *present* us with the layout of reality. For McDowell, impressions are

\(^{166}\) McDowell says that his “main point” in the first lecture of *Mind and World*, “is to bring out how difficult it is to see that we can have both desiderata: both rational constraint from the world and spontaneity all the way out. The Myth of the Given renounces the second, and the Davidsonian response…renounces the first” (*MW*, p. 8, fn. 7. I have reversed the order of the desiderata above.)


\(^{168}\) *MW*, p. 155.
thus not to be characterized as intermediaries, but rather as “glimpses of the world”. That is what he means when he says that impressions are “transparent” and that experience is an “openness” to the way things are. He explains: “receiving an impression, on my account, is (or at least can be) a case of having an environmental state of affairs borne in on one. It is already an entitlement to beliefs about what is ‘out there’, not some inner occurrence from which one might hope to move to an outward entitlement.” Accordingly, McDowell changes the character of the experiential relation from a three-term relation to a two-term relation, with the two terms being the mind and the world. Experience no longer factors in as a third (and intermediary) element in the relation, but rather it is the relation itself. Experience is the “conduit”, as Richard Gaskin puts it, connecting mind and world. The metaphor of a conduit is intended to capture what McDowell means by referring to the experiential relation as “openness” to the world. Gaskin reads McDowell as

…offering, in the first instance, a complex model of empirical content which is articulated into three relata—world, experience, and judgement—with both rational and causal relations running both between world and experience and between experience and judgement. With that model in place, we are entitled, so McDowell proposes on my reconstruction, to move to a simple model of empirical content, in which experience is conceived not as a relatum, as the complex model had it, but as a relation, mediating between the world and judgment: it is constitutive of that relation that it is both rational and causal in nature.

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170 Hence the title: Mind and World.
171 Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language: A Critique of John McDowell’s Empiricism, pp. 11-19. As Gaskin puts it: “experiences lie along a line whose end-points are the world and minds” (Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 13).
172 Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 65.
I agree with Gaskin that we should understand McDowell as taking experience to be the relation between “the world and judgment.” But how exactly are we to understand this relation? Gaskin’s reconstruction of McDowell’s view brings out what may seem to be a troubling point: viz. that McDowell wants to conceive of the experiential relation as “both rational and causal in nature.” The reason I say that this seems troubling is because it sounds an awful lot like the naturalistic fallacy (of confusing causation and justification); and, we know that it is one of McDowell’s desiderata that any view of the experiential relation not fall into that fallacy. McDowell is not entirely clear about the exact nature of the experiential relation in his texts. Thus, I suggest that the most charitable interpretation of his view—or perhaps a corrective to it—is to say not that the relation is both rational and causal, but rather that it is both rational and passively received. That, at least in my view, would be a much less question-begging response to the threat of the naturalistic fallacy. The idea is that it is the passivity and not the causal (law-governed) nature of the relation that allows the relation to count as a worldly or external “constraint” on our thinking. And, I think that the notion of experience as a passive, rational relation does a good job of capturing McDowell’s direct realist conception of impressions as (conceptually structured) presentations or “glimpses” of the world.

173 Gaskin describes McDowell’s “minimal empiricism” as the view (of the mind-world relation) that takes it that there are not “three relata—world, experience, and empirical thought,” but rather “just two relata—world and empirical thought—linked by two distinct relations—a causal one and a rational or normative one—with experience conceived not as a further relatum in this picture bat as the relation connecting the two posited relata” (Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 11). Jérôme Dokic backs Gaskin and I up on this point. He says that for McDowell, “Perception is a dyadic relation between a perceiver and a perceived fact, rather than a triadic relation between a perceiver, a content and a fact which merely happens to correspond to that content” (Jérôme Dokic, “Perception as Openness to Facts,” *Facta Philosophica*, (2000), p. 96).

174 For example, he claims that his view “does not require that we blur the contrast between the space of reasons and the realm of law” (*MW*, p. 78).

175 After all, McDowell repeatedly stresses the importance of the “distinctive passivity of experience” (see e.g. *MW*, p. 29).
Thinking and judging are “active”, as McDowell conceives them, they are acts of spontaneity. But, if our conceptual activity, our spontaneity, is only employed in its active function, then, as McDowell believes (and argues against coherentism), it cannot play a role in experience, the deliverance of content. In that case, judgment would be disconnected from the world (i.e., “frictionless”). And for that reason, McDowell argues that spontaneity, if it is to factor in experience, must also be *passively* employed in receptivity.\(^{176}\) As McDowell says, “this makes room for a different notion of givenness [viz. conceptual givenness], one that is innocent of the confusion between justification and exculpation.”\(^{177}\) And, it is because the idea of passive, conceptual episodes is “innocent” in this way, that it represents a successful strategy for overcoming the naturalistic fallacy. The passive employment of concepts is, in McDowell’s view, exactly what is needed to ensure the rational “friction” with the natural world that Rorty and Davidson fail to allow for.\(^{178}\) As McDowell says, “it is precisely because experience is passive, a case of receptivity in operation, that the conception of experience I am recommending can satisfy the craving for a limit to freedom [i.e. a rational constraint] that underlies the Myth of the Given.”\(^{179}\)

My suggestion, then, is that McDowell should have emphasized the passivity of experience rather than its causal basis. Gaskin, by contrast, reads McDowell as sharing out two notions of cause: one that carries content and one that does not. I agree with Gaskin that drawing

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\(^{176}\) McDowell emphasizes the point that, “when we enjoy experience conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity, not exercised on some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity.” He goes on to clarify that, “it is not that I want to say they are exercised on something else. It sounds off key in this connection to speak of exercising conceptual capacities at all. That would suit an activity, whereas experience is passive” (*MW*, p. 10).

\(^{177}\) *MW*, p. 10.

\(^{178}\) Dokic says that, “The other central component of the image [of openness] is the passivity of experience; in experience, conceptual capacities are passively drawn into operation, whereas in thinking, they are exercised in a free and responsible way. Passivity is supposed to give us the external constraint necessary for our thought to be about an objective, independent world” (Jérôme Dokic, “Perception as Openness to Facts,” *Facta Philosophica*, (2000), p. 98). The “other” necessary component to “the image of openness”, according to Dokic, is “the identity theory of truth”. Dokic states that, “McDowell introduces the image of openness…to differentiate perceiving from thinking” (*Ibid*, p. 97).

\(^{179}\) *MW*, p. 10.
a distinction between types of causation would certainly be one way of getting empirical content to fit in with a certain (new) understanding of natural relations. That is, it would be one way of “re-enchanting” nature (insofar as “nature” is to be understood (as unified) strictly in terms of causal relations). The thought is that there are “first nature” causes and “second nature” causes: the latter carry content (because they are occurrences in the space of concepts) whereas the former do not (because they are occurrences in the realm of law). Gaskin states this explicitly: “There are two species of causation in play—realm-of-law causation and space-of-reasons causation.”\(^\text{180}\) And, he is able to marshal a good deal of support from McDowell’s texts to back up his interpretation. In fact, in at least one place, McDowell baldly states that,

> The concept of receptivity is implicitly causal. The receptive actualization of conceptual capacities in perceptual experience would have to be caused by environmental circumstances, and Heßbrüggen-Walter asks what theory of causality is in play here. To this I respond, no doubt frustratingly, that I see no need to embrace any particular theory of causality. The concept of something’s being caused to happen is perfectly intuitive.\(^\text{181}\)

As I see it, if this is in fact McDowell’s final answer—his official story—then he is being more than just a little “frustrating”: he is contradicting himself. He is falling into the very naturalistic fallacy that he claims to avoid. In light of this, I offer the following, mild corrective to McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature: conceive of what Gaskin calls “space-of-reasons causation” not as just another species of causal relation but rather as a new kind of relation: a passive, conceptual one. The appearance that McDowell himself falls into the naturalistic fallacy could thus be dispelled quite simply if he refused to call “space-of-reasons causation” a

\(^{180}\) Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 31.

form of “causation” at all. For, it is part of Sellars’ phrasing of the naturalistic fallacy that it involves confusing a cause and a reason; and the very term “space-of-reasons causation” wears this confusion on its face.

10. Since Gaskin does not contemplate the corrective I offer, he rightly (it seems) finds it shocking that “McDowell tells us next to nothing about how we are to conceive of these ['second nature'] causal relations, and how they relate to realm-of-law causality.”182 And, adhering to the interpretation of McDowell as endorsing the idea of “space-of-reasons causation”, Gaskin goes on to criticize McDowell for falling into the same Davidsonian position that McDowell himself explicitly attacks, viz. anomalous monism.183 McDowell attacks Davidson’s “anomalous monism” for its monism.184 Accordingly, Gaskin points out that “it is presumably a feature of space-of-reasons causation, and something that distinguishes it from realm-of-law causation, that it is not nomological.” “That,” Gaskin continues, “seems to be an implication of McDowell’s rejection of what he calls ‘the Prejudice of the Nomological Character of Causality’, combined with the fact that realm-of-law causation is by definition nomological.”185 But Gaskin’s point is that, if indeed McDowell wants to share out two notions of causation (as Gaskin’s reconstruction has it), then he needs to draw a distinction between the two, or else lapse into the same sort of monism (about causation) for which he criticizes Davidson. Of course that monism, I am suggesting, is troublesome precisely because it is an instance of falling into the naturalistic

183 Gaskin asks, “how can…the very same entity…be linked both by realm-of-law and by space-of-reasons relations to the world? Is that not just Anomalous Monism, a position which McDowell officially abjures?” (Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 24)
185 Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 32, emphasis added.
fallacy of allowing (now only some) causes to count also as reasons. Thus, the very idea of acknowledging the threat of a naturalistic fallacy seems to imply that it is exactly not the case that “the concept of something’s being caused to happen is perfectly intuitive.” And, that is the reason that Gaskin thinks that McDowell must be required to give a separate account of “space-of-reasons causation.”

Although I agree with Gaskin’s interpretation of McDowell, I do not think that McDowell needs to spell out the sort of relations that take place in the space of reasons in terms of causation at all in order for his project of avoiding skepticism and the naturalistic fallacy to go through. Instead, I would suggest that, given the fact that he is re-enchanting nature anyway (a rather radical move in itself), he does not need to remain beholden to the same sorts of concepts that the objectionable naturalism uses to frame-up (its) reality. Thus, McDowell should not have to re-enchant the notion of “causation” in order to re-enchant the notion of nature as he does. The two notions should not be seen as inseparable. After all, McDowell focuses on the sui generis character of those (human) relations that advert to a space of reasons. And, it seems that the very idea of adverting to that space is supposed to point up a contrast with what McDowell takes to be the way that philosophers have traditionally characterized natural relations. Thus, as I see it, it shouldn’t really matter whether these so-called “natural” relations

186 McDowell says that, “Naturalism assures us, we might reasonably say, that the whole of objective reality (in the relevant sense) can in principle be dealt with by the ‘physical’ sciences. If mental states are irreducibly mental by virtue of an ineliminable subjectivity, there is no violation of that tenet of naturalism in crediting them with a complete and self-sufficient reality. We can conceive the mental as simply a different aspect of (what else?) the world of nature. That is why the phrase ‘naturalistic fallacy’ is ultimately misleading as a description of what blocks ‘physicalist’ reduction, although its historical resonances are useful” (McDowell, “Functionalism and Anomalous Monism,” MVR, p. 338).

187 Saying so seems to undermine an idea that McDowell takes to be fundamental, viz. that the space of reasons is sui generis in comparison to the realm of law.

188 Of course McDowell recognizes this when he says that, “Given the prevelance…[of a disenchanted spin on Aristotle], it is difficult to get Aristotle’s picture into view in the way I want, as a model for a radical rethinking of nature” (MW, p. 79).

189 In fact, that is exactly the sort of feeling that one seems to come away with after reading McDowell’s “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” (in Mind, Value, and Reality). And, that is why I use the term “sorts” here.
have *traditionally* been labeled “causes” or not, the key to McDowell’s re-enchantment lies in his offering an alternative kind of *natural relation*.\(^{190}\) And that “alternative kind of natural relation” can be understood as a passive, rational relation.

So, as I said before, countenancing the idea of a *cause* that “carries content” seems to be unnecessary for McDowell’s project; and, in fact, it only invites the very confusion between causation and justification that is objectionable as a violation of the naturalistic fallacy that McDowell insists we avoid. Thus, if Gaskin is correct, and McDowell is in fact adverting to the notion of a kind of “cause that carries content,” then McDowell’s position fails to achieve the goal that it sets for itself: viz. to avoid the confusion between causation and justification. And, because McDowell makes it explicit that we must avoid that sort of confusion, in my view it seems more charitable *not* to accuse him of it. Hence, I offer what I take to be a mild corrective of McDowell’s view, in which what is appealed to—in following McDowell’s route—is not a causal relation (which, nonetheless, carries content) but rather a rational (conceptually contentful) relation that is *passive*. Evidence for this sort of interpretation might be read into the following comment made by McDowell: “if we are to avert the threat of emptiness, we need to see intuitions as standing in rational relations to what we should think, not just in causal relations to what we do think.”\(^{191}\) Of course the “not just causal relations” part leaves it open that McDowell might allow for relations that are both causal and rational, which is more in line with Gaskin’s reading. But, in either case, McDowell is offering a notion in which experience

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\(^{190}\) Thus, it is important to note that I am *not* disputing the fact that we can mean different things by the word “cause”. It is clear that we can say, for example, that “his belief in God (etc.) *causes* him to go to church on Sundays” just as we can say that “the gravitational pull of Earth *causes* objects to fall at a rate of 9.8 m/sec\(^2\).” In fact, as Roger Scruton puts it, “There are as many types of cause as there are ways of explaining things” (Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994) p. 173). My discussion, however, is focused on contrasting *relations* not on the word “cause” and its sundry meanings. The contrast in relations that I am talking about comes out clearly in McDowell’s contrast between the normative and the descriptive. The problem is that, as it stands, it looks like only the latter get to count as “natural” relations.

\(^{191}\) *MW*, p. 68.
involves being passively “saddled” with contentful states. At any rate, my reconstruction of McDowell’s view makes it clear that he can definitely avoid the naturalistic fallacy. And, there is simply no doubt that McDowell wants us to understand the notion of experiential openness as a passive relation. This point is in no way diminished even if, as Gaskin thinks, that relation is to be understood as a variant causal relation; for, causal relations are typically understood as passive relations, in which one thing is acted on by another. McDowell says, for example, that, “to bring the image [of openness] into play, we need to appeal to the distinctive passivity of experience.”192 The idea is that, if openness is a passive relation that nonetheless employs concepts, then, in McDowell’s view, it can provide a natural and a rational constraint on belief formation. McDowell’s appeal to passive openness is thus a better way of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy than the route offered by Rorty and Davidson because it does not involve giving up rational constraints when countenancing natural constraints. Giving up rational constraint by experience, as Rorty and Davidson do, leaves our empirical beliefs frictionless and thus empty. According to McDowell, their “misunderstanding is to suppose that when we appeal to passivity, we insulate this invocation of the conceptual from what makes it plausible to attribute conceptual capacities in general to a faculty of spontaneity.”193 By contrast, McDowell argues that the experiential relation can indeed provide both a natural and a rational constraint on the formation of beliefs. And, because the experiential relation is passive it can provide the friction—the limit on our freedom to deploy concepts—that Rorty and Davidson do not allow for, and so, the experiential relation can stand as an objective constraint: hence we can have answerability to the world.

192 MW, p. 29.
193 MW, p. 29. In contrast, McDowell says that, “Crediting experience with ordinary empirical passivity meets our need: it ensure that when we invoke spontaneity in connection with the employment of concepts in empirical thinking, we do not condemn ourselves to representing empirical thinking as rationally unconstrained, a frictionless spinning in a void” (MW, p. 42).
Although I think that McDowell’s view offers an advance over the view of Davidson and Rorty in that it is more successful in achieving the two goals mentioned at the beginning of the chapter—viz. avoiding skepticism and the naturalistic fallacy—I do not think that McDowell’s view is successful overall. I admit that McDowell’s view is better than the views of Rorty and Davidson because he rightly sees the need for a revised conception of nature. Nonetheless, McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature continues to view natural relations as passive relations. It is this aspect of McDowell’s re-enchanted view of nature that I will criticize in the following chapters.
CHAPTER III

A CRITIQUE OF MCDOWELL’S RE-ENCHANTMENT OF NATURE,

PART I: NATURALISM AND EXPERIENTIAL AGENCY

Introduction: Two Sorts of Naturalism

1. When we use the term “nature” we are talking about everything. Thus “naturalism”, by extension, stands for an intellectual approach that one can take toward the examination and description of everything. And, by “everything” we don’t just mean the stuff that’s out there (i.e., the furniture of the universe), but rather also the relations in nature, i.e., how it operates dynamically. Thus naturalism inquires: how does it (nature) work? But that question, as put, can reflect a certain bias toward the idea that nature ought to (be found to) operate, i.e. “work”, like a “machine”. Of course scientific naturalism is guided by the insight that the “machine”—i.e. nature—is not designed but is rather a manifestation of naturally existing forces—viz. the laws of physics. Thus scientific naturalism stands in direct opposition to supernaturalism, which posits supernatural forces. And as we well know, science and religion have long been at odds about the nature of nature.

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1 The fact that machines break or stop may seem to pose quite a sharp dis-analogy with nature, in which the conception of it breaking down has no possible application, save metaphorically. In addition to being operational, a machine needs energy to work; nature, by contrast, is energy—it’s “everything.”

But, when we frame the issue this starkly, it can look like anyone who dares to challenge scientific naturalism must be motivated by a bias toward supernaturalism. This, however, is not the case at all. In fact, the key feature of recent attempts to articulate a new “more relaxed” naturalism is that they try to steer a course between a rigid, scientistic\(^3\) naturalism, which views all events as determined by (and reducible to) causal law, and a supernaturalism, which sees the governance of events as directed by forces from outside of nature. I think that it is one of McDowell’s most valuable contributions to the philosophy of nature that he demonstrates the necessity of charting just such a (middle) course.\(^4\) He shows clearly that a blind adherence to a scientistic, disenchanted picture of nature can lead to an “interminable oscillation” in our thinking about the mind’s relation to the world.\(^5\) McDowell responds by attempting to articulate a different, non-threatening naturalism in contrast to the dominant form of scientistic naturalism: a “middle” way, which he calls a “naturalism of second nature.”\(^6\) McDowell thinks of this naturalism of second nature not as a bit of philosophical theory building (on par with coherentism and traditional empiricism), but rather as an innocent “reminder”—in the spirit of

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\(^3\) I think that this term is somewhat commonplace. I know, for example, that David Macarthur uses it when he says that, “An exhaustively scientific (call it scientistic) conception of nature sets many of the central problems and projects of contemporary metaphysics” (David Macarthur, “Naturalizing the Human or Humanizing Nature: Science, Nature, and the Supernatural,” p. 30). McDowell too uses it when he says that “I aim to show…that there is nothing but a scientistic prejudice in the view that a naturalism of natural science has…default status” (McDowell, “Response to Graham Macdonald,” McDowell and His Critics (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006) p. 237, emphasis added).

\(^4\) Here I am contrasting three positions: scientistic naturalism, supernaturalism, and a third, more relaxed or liberal, new naturalism. But, supernaturalism ought to be seen as an anti-naturalism and thus as no naturalism at all. So, when I discuss “two natures” or a “plurality” of naturalisms I am not forgetting to include supernaturalism, rather both McDowell and I are working within a space of options that rejects the very possibility of forces existing outside of “nature”. Thus it is wrong to say of McDowell, as Akeel Bilgrami does, that he is an “anti-naturalist” (Bilgrami, “Some Philosophical Integrations,” McDowell and His Critics, p. 64). That presupposes the idea that the hard sciences like physics have a monopoly on “naturalistic” descriptions of the world. But they do not; and that is McDowell’s point. He says that “Both restrictive and liberal naturalism aim to avoid supernaturalism by finding a way to see knowing and thinking as natural phenomena” (McDowell, “Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind,” NIQ, p. 96).

\(^5\) He says: “I trace the oscillation between coherentism and the Myth of the Given to an inability to see how anything natural, as operations of sensibility would have to be, could be shaped by conceptual capacities conceived as sui generis, in the sense that their actualizations, so described, resist subsumption under the laws of the natural sciences” (McDowell, RMW, p. 297).

\(^6\) MW, p. 91.
quietism—that it is simply not problematic to picture nature as comfortably housing a *sui generis* region, one in which things are organized not by law but rather by the space of reasons, leaving a place for normative (or rule-governed), as opposed to nomological, events.⁷ In this regard, as Graham MacDonald says, “McDowell has stood out in bold relief in recent philosophy for resisting the siren call of science, arguing for an alternative naturalism, one that sees only a limited role for the natural sciences.”⁸

2. In this chapter I am going to critique McDowell’s “alternative naturalism”. But, although I aim to criticize McDowell’s particular revision of naturalism, i.e. his “re-enchantment” of nature, I do not wish to criticize the very idea of revising (by way of loosening) the restrictive conception of naturalism which has been the philosophical orthodoxy of the last half of the twentieth century.⁹ As I said before, I think that McDowell is correct on this point and that that is why he can articulate a view of the experiential relation as openness to the world which looks like an advance over coherentism and traditional empiricism. And, I applaud McDowell for his

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⁷ *MW*, p. xx. Also, McDowell says that we get the “threat of supernaturalism if we interpret the claim that the space of reasons is *sui generis* as a refusal to naturalize the requirements of reason” (*MW*, p. 78). But McDowell argues that we can see the space of reasons as *sui generis* without lapsing into supernaturalism by expanding the picture of what’s natural to include second nature. And, he says that, “This should defuse the fear of supernaturalism. Second nature could not float free of potentialities that belong to a normal human organism. This gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science” (*MW*, p. 84).


⁹ McDowell states: “If we can rethink our conception of nature so as to make room for spontaneity, even though we deny that spontaneity is capturable by the resources of bald naturalism, we shall by the same token be rethinking our conception of what it takes for a position to deserve to be called ‘naturalism’” (*MW*, p. 77). Also, I restrict the charge of bad naturalism specifically to the second half of the century to acknowledge that the Pragmatists, especially Dewey, had advocated a more inclusive sort of naturalism. Thus McDowell is not the first one to have articulated a broader conception of nature. Due in part to their proximity to the Darwinian revolution, the classical American pragmatists endorsed a more tolerant version of naturalism (See e.g. John Ryder, “Reconciling Pragmatism and Naturalism,” pp. 55-78, in *Pragmatic Naturalism & Realism*).
excellent idea that there needs to be “Two Sorts of Naturalism.”\textsuperscript{10} My only disagreement here has to do with where to draw the line between these two naturalisms.

McDowell draws the line (between the two natures) between the space of reasons and the realm of law. As he sees it, if “nature” is viewed or conceived as entirely exhausted by occurrences in the realm of law, then the space of reasons becomes excluded from “nature”. And so, McDowell says that “our philosophical anxieties are due to the intelligible grip on our thinking of a modern naturalism,” and that, “we can work at loosening that grip.”\textsuperscript{11} The “grip” is the (scientistic) temptation to see nature as exhausted by the realm of law. And for McDowell, “loosening that grip” involves expanding the scope of the natural (i.e., the “space of nature”) beyond the realm of law to also include events in the space of reasons. He says that his “re-enchantment” of nature “requires that we resist the characteristically modern [disenchanted] conception according to which something’s way of being natural is its position in the realm of law.”\textsuperscript{12} Instead, he thinks that “We need to bring responsiveness to meaning back into the operations of our natural sentient capacities as such, even while we insist that responsiveness to meaning cannot be captured in naturalistic terms, so long as “naturalistic” is glossed in terms of the realm of law.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus he draws the dividing line between the two natures between human, conceptual (rational) relations in the space of reasons, on the one hand, and meaningless “law-

\textsuperscript{10} Misleadingly, McDowell’s locution “re-enchanting nature” evokes an aura of mystical or supernatural enhancement, but in point of fact McDowell mainly means by it that descriptions of experience and intentionality need not lapse into supernatural descriptions—for they are already (naturally!) “enchanted” with meaning or conceptual structure. It often looks like we must be faced with a stark choice when it comes to nature: either everything is causally determined in a mechanistic sort of way (so that freedom vanishes), or else—to account for freedom and human agency—supernatural forces are posited. (Here, as elsewhere, “supernatural” can simply be interpreted to mean: “not determined by natural forces”). In direct opposition to such a stalemate, McDowell’s project is to fit freedom into nature without going supernatural. The “interminable oscillation” can thus be seen, in these terms, as a conflict between the idea that our thinking is causally determined by the world—\textit{i.e.} just \textit{Given}, or that it doesn’t engage with the world at all but rather involves a freedom divorced from nature and “frictionlessly spinning in the void.”

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{MW}, p. 177.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{MW}, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{MW}, p. 77.
governed processes” on the other. “This is a contrast,” as he also puts it, “between the realm of law and the realm of freedom.”

McDowell’s division of natures is Kantian in that it contrasts human freedom with constraint by law-governed nature and it equates “freedom” with the use of concepts. But in McDowell’s view Kant’s problem was that he failed to overcome the disenchanted view of nature. McDowell says that,

For Kant, nature is the realm of law and therefore devoid of meaning. And given such a conception of nature, genuine spontaneity cannot figure in descriptions of actualization of natural powers as such.

Kant saw a division between the imposition of a conceptual order on things (the phenomena) and things-in-themselves (the noumena). McDowell thinks that this aspect of Kant’s view goes wrong by making the real world (i.e., the thing-in-itself) look like it is something that is “supersensible” or beyond experience; McDowell’s naturalism of second nature aims to correct Kant’s mistake by allowing for a conception of experience as conceptual openness to the world. Nonetheless, McDowell agrees with Kant when he says that “there is a deep connection between reason and freedom,” and that “this is to represent freedom of action as inextricably connected with a freedom that is essential to conceptual thought.” And, because McDowell sees the line between freedom and constraint by law as a line between conceptual thought and mechanical, law-like determination, he confines the sphere of activity of second nature relations (i.e. experiences) to the “space of reasons”. A notable (problematic) consequence of this view is that non-linguistic—non-conceptual—beings cannot be free agents and cannot even partake of

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14 McDowell, “Naturalism and the Philosophy of Mind,” NIQ, p. 94. And, he goes on: “…to put it in a way that makes Sellars’s Kantian roots explicit.”
15 MW, p. 97.
experience. In fact on McDowell’s view only language-using adult humans can acquire a second nature, and with it, freedom and experience.¹⁷ All other things (including animals and infants) are confined to first nature’s “realm of law”. Nonetheless, McDowell suggests that the two natures are not completely unrelated, but rather are unified by the structure of causal relations in nature. Specifically McDowell’s re-enchantment “makes room” for causal relations that are also conceptual. This way of unifying nature, is in my view, the primary problem with McDowell’s account. He simply does not question the causal structure of nature; he only “makes room”, as he says, for the idea that second nature relations can fit into this causal structure.¹⁸

3. In my view, in contrast to McDowell’s, the trouble with the overly-restrictive, scientistic picture of nature lies not with the idea that nature is devoid of concepts, but rather with the idea that only an account that adverts to a specific type of relation, viz. an impersonal (i.e. non-agential) cause-effect relation, can stand as a valid naturalistic account or explanation of life and reality. McDowell’s new (re-enchanted) picture of nature still remains committed to a view of nature as exhausted by cause-effect relations. And since McDowell adopts this “causal view of

¹⁷ There are two senses of “second nature” at work in McDowell’s texts. In one sense, “second nature” represents a contrasting space of nature, as in, “two sorts of naturalism” (See e.g. McDowell’s “Two Sorts of Naturalism”). McDowell also employs the term “second nature” in connection with an Aristotelian notion of acquiring an ability (habit) to see the world in an ethical (or virtuous) way, effortlessly. McDowell extends Aristotle’s idea from ethics to epistemology when he suggests that we acquire an ability to effortlessly perceive the world conceptually when we are initiated, through linguistic practice, into the space of reasons (See e.g. MW, pp. 78-85). In this latter sense, conceptual perception—experience, for McDowell—comes as naturally as riding a bike once one has learned to ride a bike; that is, it becomes “second nature”. McDowell also sometimes blends these two senses for philosophical effect. For example, he says that “liberal naturalism enables us, like medieval Aristotelians, to take in stride the idea that our capacities to acquire knowledge are natural powers. But, unlike medieval Aristotelians, we can combine that idea with a clear appreciation of the sui generis character of the conceptual framework within which the concept of a capacity to acquire knowledge operates” (McDowell, “Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind,” NIQ, p. 95).

¹⁸ McDowell says that in the face of a “naturalism that leaves nature disenchanted…We tend to be forgetful of the very idea of second nature. I am suggesting that if we can recapture that idea, we can keep nature as it were partially enchanted, but without lapsing into pre-scientific superstition or a rampant Platonism. This makes room for a conception of experience that is immune to the philosophical pitfalls I have described” (MW, p. 85.). He also says that “I aim to make room for the required combination of freedom and naturalness by rejecting the equation between what is natural and what can be made intelligible in terms of its conformity to natural law” (McDowell, “Responses,” Reason and Nature, p. 100).
nature” his picture of second nature relations cannot adequately account for the active, agential relations of living beings. McDowell does not contrast active, agential relations with impersonal, causal relations. Instead he assumes that agential relations can be understood as a species of causal relation. But I think that the real problem with the restrictive naturalism’s conception of natural relations as exhausted by causal relations is not that it excludes concepts from nature but rather that it excludes the very sorts of active relations that all living beings constantly engage in. Hence, in my view, the strategy of restricting “natural” relations to cause-effect relations is the central aspect of the scientistic conception of nature that a proper relaxed naturalism should aim to overcome. In my view, the failure to avoid this aspect of scientism results in a trend in philosophy—including McDowell’s philosophy—toward a physicalism that finds agency and mentality problematic, in the sense of being recalcitrant to (causal) reduction. That is why, in my view, a successful re-enchantment must take the form of adding to our stock of “natural” relations. The point is not that there is something wrong with cause-effect relations per se; rather, it is only that it is wrong to paint a monistic, metaphysical world-picture in which these causal relations exhaust all natural relations.

As I will argue in this chapter, causal relations are passive, and therefore they cannot be constitutive of agential relations. Indeed, it is agential relations, not conceptual ones that stand in direct contrast to the impersonal, law-governed causal forces of first nature. That is why the more liberal naturalism that I recommend takes active relations between living things and their environment to be sui generis in comparison to cause-effect relations. In order to truly overcome

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19 As David Macarthur puts it, an “ambiguity affects the term ‘naturalism’. In spite of the variety of its uses, it is typically used within contemporary analytic philosophy to indicate a scientific naturalism that identifies nature with the scientific image of the world – even in spite of the fact that there is substantial disagreement about what exactly constitutes the scientific image” (David Macarthur, “Naturalizing the Human or Humanizing Nature: Science, Nature, and the Supernatural,” Erkenntnis 61 (2004), p. 29).
the disenchanted view of nature one must accept that agential relations, because they are active, stand in direct contrast to (passive) cause-effect relations. McDowell does not do this.

In McDowell’s view, there is nothing wrong with restricting naturalistic accounts to accounts in terms of cause-effect relations. Rather, for McDowell, the problem just lies in thinking that it is a fallacy to hold that meaningful, conceptual relations (like human experiences) can be fully compatible with explanations in terms of physicalistic, cause-effect relations. Thus, his re-enchantment merely involves a “reminder” of our second nature, a kind of “intelligibility” that is supposed to stand in contrast to first nature, the subject of the hard sciences. So McDowell’s naturalism is more liberal or “relaxed” only in that it allows a second sort of “logical framework” for the causal relation to operate: causal relations in second nature can also have the force of reasons (because they are conceptual). My complaint is that McDowell’s allegiance to a view of nature as exhausted by cause-effect relations warps his conception of experience; he is forced to conceive of it as a passive relation.

In sum I want to argue, in contrast to McDowell, that what needs to be re-enchanted, and thus contrasted with a “first” nature, is the whole world of the living, not just a small slice of it (viz., the concept users). The distinction that I have in mind is thus broader than McDowell’s: it is the distinction between inanimate objects and animate (living) organisms. The objects of the latter (i.e. organisms) enter into relations that are sui generis in comparison to the former. The thing that separates us from disenchanted, inanimate (first) nature is not the use of concepts but

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20 For example, he says that, “According to this naturalism, moves of the sort Sellars stigmatizes as committing the naturalistic fallacy are indeed naturalistic, but not thereby shown to be fallacious” (MW, p. xviii-xix).

21 He says that “We must sharply distinguish natural-scientific intelligibility from the kind of intelligibility something acquires when we situate it in the logical space of reasons….The logical space of reasons is the frame in which a fundamentally different kind of intelligibility comes into view” (MW, p. xix-xx, emphasis added). And he says: “We tend to be forgetful of the very idea of second nature. I am suggesting that if we can recapture that idea, we can keep nature as it were partially enchanted, but without lapsing into pre-scientific superstition or a rampant Platonism” (MW, p. 85).
rather more fundamentally, the fact that we are alive. Thus my critique of McDowell comes to the complaint that he “re-enchants” too narrow a segment of nature.

4. Ultimately, the aim of this dissertation is a negative one: it involves a critique of McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature. Nonetheless, I hope to at least provide a rough sketch of an alternative sort of re-enchantment, i.e., to recommend a broader, more inclusive naturalism. Accordingly, in this chapter, I think that the flavor of my positive account can be seen in the arguments that I direct against McDowell’s own recommended re-enchantment. I critique the way in which McDowell’s re-enchantment fails to challenge the dominant, monistic conception of natural relations as cause-effect relations. I trace this failure to the fact that McDowell still takes nature to be exhausted by passive relations, i.e. (“mere”) happenings. So part of my argument depends upon exploiting a contrast between McDowell’s naturalism, which is inclusive only in granting special powers to passive relations, and an even more inclusive naturalism which adds a new, active relation, distinct from passive, causal relations, that applies only to living organisms. The idea is that nature includes more than just passive relations; it can contain relations in which organisms do and undergo things (occurrences that are not just happenings in a chain of causes and effects). In this regard, I think that my distinction between types of naturalisms should be understood as one between “naturalists” like Darwin and “naturalists” like Newton. Newton’s naturalism represents an investigation solely into first nature (e.g. physics), while Darwin’s naturalism represents an investigation into second nature—the world of the living.22 Both naturalisms are equally valid (and so can share the title “naturalism”) because they

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22 Darwin himself begins his introduction to *On the Origin of Species* with the line: “When on board H.M.S. ‘Beagle,’ as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America, and in the geological relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent” (Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, emphasis added). The focus of Darwin’s type of naturalism is on, as he says, “organic beings”, i.e., in
each deal with separate segments of nature; and they do not make appeals to supernatural forces.

The naturalism that I am rejecting is simply a scientistic bias toward the worldview that all of nature can be reduced to explanations in terms of the cause and effect relations employed in the scientific observation of first nature (a la Newton).

**McDowell on Naturalism, Causation, and Passivity**

1. One way to understand McDowell’s overall goal in *Mind and World* is as the project of making it (i.e. our naturalistic world-view) safe for intentionality. The biggest obstacle that he sees standing in the way of this project is a certain conception of nature. McDowell calls this obstinate conception the “disenchanted view of nature”, or similarly “bald naturalism”, and he characterizes it as “nature conceived as the realm of law.” For him, this view is what makes it impossible to accommodate the sui generis character of the space of reasons into “nature”. That view sees occurrences in the space of reasons as incompatible with operations in the realm of

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23 Most philosophers want to be naturalists, but they also seem to assume that the operations of intentionality fly in the face of what scientific naturalism tells us reality should be like. I sloganize the idea with an “it” simply to emphasize the fact that it is agreed on by all sides that as philosophers we ought also to be naturalists. What we don’t want to say is that intentionality must have supernatural origins. So the question is: what must nature be like for intentionality to be possible? McDowell says, on behalf of Sellars, that, “no one has come closer than Kant to showing us how to find intentionality unproblematic, and there is no better way for us to find intentionality unproblematic than by seeing what Kant was driving at” (McDowell, “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality,” p. 431).

24 McDowell states that this view of nature “arises at a particular period in the history of ideas, one in which our thought tends, intelligibly, to be dominated by a naturalism that constricts the idea of nature” (*MW*, p. 85). Dingli explains that, “McDowell’s attempt to refashion the concept of naturalism is part of his endeavor to account for spontaneity, that is, the presence of mind in the natural world” (Sandra Dingli, *On Thinking and the World: John McDowell’s Mind and World*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005) p. 10).

25 *MW*, p. 73.
law. So, in order to make it safe for intentionality—and likewise the space of reasons—
McDowell sees that he must first clear aside the obstinate disenchanted naturalism. Of course,
he does not actually want to get rid of that variety of naturalism altogether, he just wants to
“make room”, as he says, for a second sort of naturalism. McDowell’s more “relaxed”
naturalism acknowledges a second nature that can (supposedly) safely admit intentional states in
addition to, or alongside, law-governed first nature.26 The disenchanted view of nature is more
“restrictive” in that it allows only law-governed, first nature relations to count as natural
relations. This view however extrudes freedom from nature—including our nature. In response
McDowell tells us that he aims “to make room for the required combination of freedom and
naturalness by rejecting the equation between what is natural and what can be made intelligible
in terms of its conformity to natural law.”27 For McDowell, the very point of the move toward a
more liberal or relaxed naturalism is to show how naturalism can be compatible with freedom
and intentionality, occurrences that seem out of place (and potentially eliminable) in a strict
“realm of law” naturalism.

2. When I say that McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature aims to articulate a naturalism that
is safe for intentionality, I mean that he wants to make it safe for a certain, specific conception of
the experiential relation. He argues that the experiential relation is non-problematically
“natural” because it involves a passive relation to the world: in experience one receives

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26 McDowell admits that “It was an achievement of modern thought” when a disenchanted, scientific world-view,
which describes things solely in terms of the realm of law, was “clearly marked off” (MW, p. 71). But, he says that
a “rethinking [of nature] requires a different conception of actualizations of our nature. We need to being
responsiveness to meaning back into the operations of our natural sentient capacities as such, even while we insist
that responsiveness to meaning cannot be captured in naturalistic terms, so long as “naturalistic” is glossed in terms
of the realm of law” (MW, p. 77).
conceptual impressions, impacts from the world upon sensibility (which, because of their conceptual structure, can be “facts made manifest”). He says,

I have stressed that experience is passive. In that respect the position I have been recommending coincides with the Myth of the Given. The passivity of experience allows us to acknowledge an external control over our empirical thinking, if passivity will cohere with an involvement of spontaneity. But it is difficult to see how the combination is possible.28

Overcoming this “difficulty”, as McDowell sees it, involves reconciling “passivity” and “spontaneity”. That is what traditional empiricists wanted to do too, but they were instead lured into the Myth of the Given. But, McDowell argues that it is only the disenchanted view of nature that makes the passivity of natural occurrences seem incompatible with “the understanding as a faculty of spontaneity.”29 Hence, the problem with traditional empiricism, in McDowell’s view, is that it conceives of its “impressions”—because they are passive—as brute, extra-conceptual impacts from the world. McDowell’s conception of impressions, by contrast, holds that the passivity of impressions does not thereby rule out that they may also be conceptual in nature; in fact it is the conceptual nature of our impressions—our experiences—that reflects and reveals our essentially human (i.e. Kantian) freedom.

McDowell blames the disenchanted view of nature for forcing us to see passively received impacts from the world as incompatible with the (active) employment of concepts. He thinks that that view of nature is what makes it look like it’s a “naturalistic fallacy” to try to put the two—receptivity and spontaneity—together. So McDowell’s re-enchantment aims to find some measure of compatibility (or continuity) between the activity of the human spontaneity to

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28 MW, p. 89.
29 MW, p. 5.
employ concepts and the \textit{passivity} of natural relations. \textcolor{red}{(I will presently emphasize that McDowell, following Kant, equates freedom with concept use, or “spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{30})} McDowell claims to find this compatibility in the idea of “second nature” or \textit{“Bildung”}\textsuperscript{31}. The idea is that a proper upbringing affords human beings entry (or initiation) into the space of reasons and, in conjunction, the ability to enter into passive, rational relations with the world: states or occurrences in which one “finds oneself saddled with content.”\textsuperscript{32} Of course traditional empiricism, too, says that in experience one is saddled with content, but traditional empiricism’s adherence to the disenchanted view of nature makes that content seem incapable of being \textit{conceptual} content.\textsuperscript{33} McDowell’s non-traditional empiricism, by contrast, conceives of the experiential relation as a case of the world impressing itself \textit{conceptually} on the experiencing subject.

\textsuperscript{30} For example, McDowell says that, “rational necessitation is not just compatible with freedom but constitutive of it. In a slogan, the space of reasons is the realm of freedom.” (\textit{MW}, p. 5) He also says that, “The idea of spontaneity is an idea of freedom” (\textit{MW}, p. 66).

\textsuperscript{31} McDowell says that “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 \textit{Bildung}” (\textit{MW}, p. 87).

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{MW}, p. 10. David Macarthur explains that second nature is still “nature” because “it is the unsurprising everyday fact of our requiring nothing more than a normal upbringing in order to find ourselves responsive to, say, reasons and rational demands that establishes their naturalness”. McDowell says that, “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” (\textit{MW}, pp. 87-8). J. M. Bernstein says that “Relief will come, McDowell avers, if we can loosen the grip of the scientistic conception of the natural, since only so doing will allow an overcoming or dissolution of the separation of the conceptual from the natural. If another conception of nature were permitted, a nature of second nature, then it in turn would allow a notion of experience as the actualization of conceptual capacities in sensory consciousness. Hence the sensible would be both natural and normative, belonging to nature and the space of reasons: nature would be re-enchanted” (Bernstein, \textit{RMW}, p. 218). And, Dingli explains that, “McDowell’s concept of ‘second nature’ is a brave effort to broaden the meaning of that which is normally conceived as ‘natural’ in order to accommodate spontaneity and thought—in other words, to accommodate the space of reasons” (Sandra Dingli, \textit{On Thinking and the World}, p. 11).

\textsuperscript{33} For McDowell, “non-conceptual content” is an oxymoron. This view stems from McDowell’s Kantian picture of experience as a cooperation of receptivity and spontaneity: “intuitions without concepts are blind.” And, McDowell says, “the fact that thoughts have representational content, emerges out of an interplay of concepts and intuitions” (\textit{MW}, p. 4).
One of the aims of this chapter is to call into question McDowell’s notion of experience as “the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects.”34 In the next section I am going to argue that McDowell’s conception of the relation of experiencing subjects to the world as merely a passive relation (an “impression”) is inconsistent with real experiential agency. In this section, though, I want to emphasize that the notion of “the world impressing itself on an experiencing subject” is in keeping with a certain picture of the operations of nature, viz. the idea that natural relations are to be understood as, exclusively, causal relations. I will call this the “causal picture of nature.”35 It is the view that nature is exhausted by causal relations.36 In a moment I will draw a connection between causal relations and passive relations, but first I want to remind the reader that McDowell does in fact think of experiential relations and relations in the space of reasons generally, as a species of causal relation.

34 MW, p. xvi. I should point out that a rejection of McDowell’s notion of experience as “the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects” is not necessarily a wholesale rejection of empiricism. This is so, in so far as it is possible—and I think that it is—to articulate an empiricism that does not conceive of experience in terms of passively received impressions. The “radical empiricism” of James and Dewey, for example, was in part an attempt to work with a concept of experience as an activity rather than as a passive faculty.

35 An alternative label for what I here call the “causal picture of nature” is the “causal closure of nature.” Jaegwon Kim calls it “the causal closure of the physical,” which is the idea that “Every caused physical event has a physical cause” (Thomas Crisp & Ted Warfield, “Review of Mind in a Physical World,” Noûs, 35:2 (2001), p. 304). Consider the following quotation from the recent anthology Naturalism, Evolution, and Mind: “One common way to cash out the presumed unity in naturalism is to appeal to causal closure. Everything that is natural, it is commonly supposed, comprises a domain which is causally closed and complete. To make a case that putative entities of a certain kind constitute part of the natural world one simply has to show their role in the causal structure of the world. The way to demonstrate that intentional states are natural is to show how they are realized in the world by states susceptible of strictly physical description. The way to demonstrate the autonomy of the intentional sciences seems to require that intentional states play some irreducible causal role in the closed causal structure of the physical world. But the rub is that the causal closure of the physical world is incompatible with the causal efficacy of mental states. If we insist that the mental must be realized in the physical we risk either the causal exclusion of the mental or causal over-determination in the sense that every event with a mental cause also has a sufficient physical cause” (D. M. Walsh, “Editor’s Introduction,” Naturalism, Evolution, and Mind, ed. D. M. Walsh, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 4).

36 Here I am echoing McDowell’s characterization of the DVN as “nature exhausted by the realm of law” when I describe the causal picture of nature (CPN) as “nature exhausted by causal relations.” The CPN however does not yet extrude agency from nature (as saying that “nature is exhausted by the realm of law” would) for it is still open for there to be some form of agent causation. I will argue in the next section however that “agent causation” is an oxymoron.
3. Richard Gaskin points out that McDowell offers “a number of different causal locutions for the [experiential] relation in question.” And Gaskin goes on to list such locutions from McDowell’s texts. He says:

In phrases redolent of the British empiricists, experiences are variously styled ‘impressions’, ‘impacts’, or ‘impingements’ (of the world on our senses), ‘upshots’ (of facts), ‘the way the world puts its mark on us’; or the Kantian language of intuitions, sensibility, and receptivity is exploited. At one point sensing is said to be ‘a way of being acted on by the world’; elsewhere we are told that impressions are ‘receptivity in operation’, and it is confirmed for us, lest there be any doubt on the matter, that ‘the concept of receptivity is implicitly causal’.37

Given these locutions, well catalogued by Gaskin, it seems clear that the goal of McDowell’s new naturalism is not to overcome or avoid descriptions of nature in terms of causal relations. Rather, the point of McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature lies in the suggestion that we ought to see concept use as fully compatible with the exclusively causal structure of nature. In fact, McDowell says that “I follow Davidson in thinking…reasons both efficiently cause actions and beliefs and justify them. The reason why experience as Davidson conceives it cannot justify belief is not that its relation to belief is causal, but simply that it is extra-conceptual.”38

As Gaskin puts it, for McDowell there are “two kinds of causation, realm-of-law causation and space-of-reasons causation.”39 These two sorts of causation definitely correspond with McDowell’s two sorts of naturalism.40 In fact, we can say that the contrast between the two

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38 McDowell, *RMW*, p. 293.
40 In fact, being both species of causation is what seems to unify them, for McDowell, under the title “natural”. Gaskin notices this point too when he says the following. “We must ask: what is the non-trivial common genus under which both species of causation are to be found? This is essentially the same problem as the problem how first and second nature fit together. In that case too, we are impelled to ask: what is the non-trivial common genus
natures, for McDowell, is not one between the space of reasons and the space of causes but rather one between space-of-reasons causation and realm-of-law causation; that is, a contrast between two sorts of causation. McDowell says that,

Some followers of Sellars, notably Richard Rorty, put the contrast as one between the space of reasons and the space of *causes*. But I think it is better to set the space of reasons not against the space of causes but against the space of subsumption under, as we say, natural law. Unlike Rorty’s construal of the contrast, this version does not preempt the possibility that reasons might *be* causes. We need not see the idea of causal linkages as the exclusive property of natural-scientific thinking.41

These comments seem to confirm Gaskin’s contention that McDowell’s naturalism admits a new, special class of space-of-reasons causation. In light of this, Gaskin wonders: “what *is* space-of-reasons causation?” And, as Gaskin notes, “On this important point McDowell is silent.”42 I will try to answer this question for McDowell in a moment. But before coming to that, I suggest that we can draw an even deeper conclusion concerning McDowell’s treatment of causation, and that is that McDowell sees his “second” sort of naturalism as still being a form of “naturalism” (even though it is not “in” first nature, i.e. the realm of law) precisely because it does not fly in the face of the very idea of cause-effect relations. If this is so, then McDowell indeed adopts what I have just referred to as the “causal picture of nature”. And as Gaskin amply shows, for McDowell causal relations hold pride of place in both sorts of naturalism. The only difference between these two types of causal relations seems to be that the causal relations of second nature are not to be construed as “law-governed” and therefore necessarily devoid of

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meaning. Rather, some causal relations—viz. impressions—are to be understood as already conceptual. In this sense, McDowell’s new naturalism just amounts to being more flexible, or “liberal”, with the concept of causation: some causes are “brute”—mere happenings, while other causes (are “happenings” that) carry empirical content—i.e. “impressions”. This gibes well with the idea of the “causal picture of nature” in which the unity of nature is said to be found in the ubiquity of the cause-effect relation. The only difference between McDowell’s re-enchanted “causal picture of nature” and a more disenchanted, scientistic “causal picture of nature” is that McDowell allows for a second sort of causation, one that does not amount to placing all causal events in the “realm of law”.

I want to emphasize the fact that McDowell wants to achieve a unity of nature through a separation of different sorts of causation. Realm-of-law causation is the proper target of

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43 McDowell says that “We should understand…experiential intake…not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content” (MW, p. 9). Gaskin notes that “When McDowell has the…realm-of-law kind of causation in mind, he sometimes talks of ‘mere’ or ‘brute’ causation” (Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 34). Gaskin cites, among other texts, MW, pp. 8, 71, & 133.

44 See e.g., MW, pp. 75-6. “Placing events in the realm of law” is given no further elaboration by McDowell other than that so placing events is to be contrasted with another, sui generis, way of placing (or describing) events, viz. descriptions that appeal to the space of reasons and to the use of spontaneity.

45 McDowell considers an analogue to what I have called the “causal picture of nature” (he calls it: “the naturalistic picture of the causal nexus”) when he says that “The naturalistic picture of the causal nexus that underlies Davidson’s monism stands in tension with the idea that intentional items are causally efficacious in their own right. We should not drop the idea that intentional items are causally efficacious at all…Rather, we should extract the idea that intentional items are causally efficacious from the setting Davidson puts it in, the monistic picture of the causal nexus.” (John McDowell, “Response to Akeel Bilgrami,” McDowell and his Critics, p. 69). As I read this passage, McDowell is saying that there is a causal nexus but that we cannot speak of it as “the causal nexus” because causes can come in different sorts. The idea of a causal nexus allows for sui generis space-of-reasons causation. Of course I am here reading into McDowell a bit, specifically, when I assert that he finds the unity of his naturalisms to consist in sharing the causal relation (i.e. its doing double-duty). McDowell himself, however, says that “I want to sidestep the demand for a substantial unification.” In spite of that, he goes on to add that “I think the only unity there needs to be in the idea of the natural, as it applies, on the one hand, to the intelligibility of physical and merely biological phenomena (themselves needing to be differentiated for some purposes…), and, on the other, to the intelligibility of rational activity, is captured in the contrast with the idea of the supernatural—the spooky or the occult” (John McDowell, Reason and Nature, p. 99). At the start of the introduction to this chapter I claimed that there must be more than just a contrast between nature and supernatural. I said that a properly new naturalism had to steer a course between traditional naturalism and supernaturalism, since supernaturalism wasn’t really any sort of naturalism at all. And, although McDowell adds to what I have quoted him as saying the parenthetical claim that, basically, biology and physics can sometimes be detached from one another, the main idea stands: viz. that there is a division, as Graham Macdonald puts it, “between the space of reasons and everything else” (McDowell and His Critics, p. 224).
scientific naturalism, whereas space-of-reasons causation is the target of the naturalism of second nature.\textsuperscript{46} They are both, however, forms of causation according to McDowell; and that is what, I am suggesting, gives McDowell the idea that the two have enough in common to be unified under the title “nature”. McDowell reassures us that, although the events in the space-of-reasons are sui generis, they should not be seen as “spooky” or supernatural because they do not stand outside the causal order of nature.

Gaskin however complains that “McDowell tells us next to nothing about how we are to conceive these [space-of-reasons] causal relations, and how they relate to realm-of-law causality.”\textsuperscript{47} Gaskin notes that McDowell attempts to fob off the issue, when asked, when McDowell responds that “the concept of something’s being caused to happen is perfectly intuitive,” and that, “we acquire it [the concept of causation] at our mothers’ knees, when we acquire concepts such as those of dropping, breaking, denting, wetting.”\textsuperscript{48}

I think that Gaskin is right to object to McDowell’s claim (or anyone who claims) that the concept of causation is “perfectly intuitive.” Aristotle, for example, gave us no less than four such concepts, and more recently John Haldane has been famously quoted as saying that there are “as many kinds of cause as there are senses of ‘because’.”\textsuperscript{49} Additionally, Lakoff and Johnson assert that “there is neither a single, literal concept of causation nor a single logic of causation that characterizes the full range of our important causal inferences.”\textsuperscript{50} But then why

\textsuperscript{46} Shortly I am going to argue that, since McDowell sees nature in terms of the ubiquity of causation, his separation of the two natures is wrongly drawn between the realm of law and the space of reasons. McDowell’s distinction is not in line with a separation between Newtonian naturalism and Darwinian naturalism. The “realm of law” seems as good an appellation as any for a Newtonian conception of nature, but the “space of reasons” (i.e. McDowell’s second nature) indicates only a tiny slice of the picture of nature that Darwin presents. Therefore, the space of reasons, in my view, cannot stand as the appropriate contrast to first nature (the realm of law).

\textsuperscript{47} Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 30.


\textsuperscript{49} Haldane is quoted by Hilary Putnam, who says that “neither he nor I can remember the place!” (Hilary Putnam, The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World, pp. 77 & 138).

\textsuperscript{50} Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 171.
would McDowell think that he owes no explanation for why he thinks that the concept of causation is “perfectly intuitive”? One reason, I suggest, might be that he is an adherent of the “causal picture of nature” and so simply assumes that causal relations are the same as natural relations.

At any rate, Gaskin complains that McDowell cannot hold that there is one intuitive conception of causation while at the same time rejecting Davidson’s monism about causation.51 McDowell criticizes anomalous monism for holding that the “satisfiers of the sui generis concepts can be causally linked only if they are also occupants of the realm of law.”52 The point of McDowell’s criticism is directed at Davidson’s monism about causation: the idea that all causes are the same, viz. realm of law events. By contrast, McDowell wants to say that sui generis concepts can be causally linked to the world even though they are not occupants of the realm of law. McDowell says that, “One can reject the prejudice about explanation while retaining the picture of causation.”53 Of course McDowell here is careful to frame his rejection of Davidson’s monism as a point about “explanation” (causal explanation).54 McDowell objects

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51 Gaskin says that “There are two species of causation in play—realm-of-law causation and space-of-reasons causation—and we have seen that, if McDowell is to avoid an unattractive Anomalous Monism which threatens his position (and to which indeed, in at least one unguarded moment, he appears to succumb), he must insist that the causal relation between world and experience, in virtue of which experience enjoys an exogenous constraint on its content, is a space-of-reasons phenomenon and not a realm-of-law one” (Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 31).

52 MW, p. 75.


54 But McDowell too, rather furtively in my view, sometimes tries to frame the discussion in terms of two different “modes of understanding”, or two “styles of explanation”, as if the dispute was not about the relations in the world themselves but rather only about our way of talking about them. For example, he puts it as a “contrast between two modes of understanding: one that involves placing phenomena in the framework of natural law, and one that involves placing things in the domain of rational interconnectedness” (John McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 151). Of course, it makes perfect sense to think that there can be more than one way to talk about the same thing. But that is not what’s at stake here. And the problem of making it safe for intentionality cannot be avoided by simply “placing phenomena” in different “frameworks”. Perhaps McDowell thinks that this is where his “quietest” philosophy can terminate, or rest, but it seems like an unsatisfying resting place to me and to others as well, like Gaskin, Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter, Crispin Wright, and Graham Macdonald. As Gaskin puts it, “Merely assuring us that the rational, as well as the nomological, ought to be regarded as—or is anyway—natural goes no distance at all towards addressing the underlying problem” (Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 38).
to the idea that there is just one relation, viz. causation, which can be described in two different ways: now as a realm of law event, now as a space of reasons event. This is sort of double-aspect view of causation, and the difference (between anomalous and law-governed causation) seems to be merely one of explanation. The other option is that there are two kinds of causal relation (realm-of-law causation and space-of-reasons causation); and Gaskin’s point is that McDowell commits himself to this view. Thus one is led to the question: what is the difference between these two different kinds of causal relation? Gaskin’s point is that that question—“what is a causal relation?”—cannot be evaded by asking instead: “what is a causal explanation?” And so Gaskin’s query is still live: “what is the non-trivial common genus under which both species of causation are to be found?”

4. I would like now (as promised) to propose an answer to this question on McDowell’s behalf. The “non-trivial common genus under which both species of causation are to be found” (McDowell should have said) is passivity. The idea is that it is the passivity of the relation that,

55 I say this only to make the point that it doesn’t matter whether McDowell is proposing one relation with two different explanations or two separate and distinct relations, what we need to know is what the relation or relations are like.

56 At least I think that that is Gaskin’s point. I will, to clarify, put the point in my own words. In so far as the question is “what is a causal explanation?” I am willing to grant Haldane his point that there are “as many kinds of causes as there are senses of ‘because.’” But that doesn’t inform us one whit about the nature of what is explained. So when it comes to the question “what is a causal relation?” (as opposed to an explanation) I would not be willing to grant that there are “as many kinds of causal relations as there are senses of ‘because’.” For example, someone might try to answer the question “what is the non-trivial common genus under which both species of causation are to be found?” by saying that the common element is that we can state this: “A because B”. That is, anytime we can identify this—“A because B”—then we have a case of causation. But, I would argue that “A because B” sounds synonymous with “B caused A” and so does not really explain what the “common element” of all causal relations is. The answer is weak because it can be accounted for as merely the result of a tight connection that exists (only) in our language between the idea of causation and the idea of explanation. So we can admit that in our ordinary language the distinction is not (usually) made between the exact nature of the relation that underlies a causal description. As far as explanation is concerned the words “cause” and “because” simply indicate a case in which A came before B and A brought about B. (The precise details and circumstances of just how A “came before” (or preceded) B and just how A “brought about” B are not of central importance in a causal explanation. They can, as a separate matter, be the focus of our attention and inquiry, but such a focus is not essential to the deployment of causal explanations.) The point is that, although the form of explanation is the same (or similar in all cases), the underlying nature of the relationship between the explananda is not.

57 Richard Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, p. 37.
for McDowell, unites both kinds of causation. I will call this view the “passive picture of causation”. That McDowell is committed to such a view is shown, in part, by the fact that he repeatedly stresses the passivity of experience. His commitment to this picture is also responsible, I aver, for McDowell’s compulsion to retain the empiricist’s notion of impressions. Impressions just *happen* to us; we are “saddled” with them, as McDowell says. In this sense impressions are (happenings) on a par with the other (non-conceptual kinds of) happenings in nature—the events in the realm of law. But impressions differ from happenings in the realm of law because they are, as McDowell stipulates, conceptual: they are not *just* passive, but also *rational*, happenings. The added “rationality” factor allows McDowell to feel comfortable saying, for example, that in experience one can be struck by the “fact” that *spring has begun*. His point: all natural relations are passive, but some carry conceptual content.

When we combine the “causal picture of nature” with the “passive picture of causation,” as I have just claimed that McDowell (implicitly) does, we wind up with the “passive picture of nature,” in which natural relations are exhausted by passive happenings. As Gaskin puts it, this is the idea of “the natural construed as simply what happens.” But, I will argue that once this picture becomes the default picture of nature, the attempt to accommodate freedom and intentionality in nature is doomed. And McDowell himself has not fully overcome this sort of disenchanted view of nature; that view is retained by him in the form of the “passive picture of natural relations”. This passive picture of nature excludes agential relations, i.e. active relations. And the real problem is that one cannot construct agency out of the materials of passive relations; for once passive relations are taken to permeate nature they at once also permeate the

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mind.\textsuperscript{59} This problem can be seen to infect McDowell’s view. Hence, I will argue that it is the passive picture of nature, not (as McDowell thinks) the view of nature as “without concepts,” that extrudes freedom from nature.

If McDowell does accept this picture of nature (i.e., “nature” construed as simply “what happens”), then it would make sense for him to draw his contrast of natures exactly where he does: not as one between active relations and mere passive happenings, but rather as one between mere (“brute”) passive happenings and another sort of happening, happenings that carry conceptual content, viz. “conceptual impressions”. As McDowell sees it, the problem with the disenchanted conception of nature is that

The fact that something is a happening in nature would be a ground for supposing—at least in itself, viewed as the happening in nature it is—it is ‘without concepts.’

But it is not so. We need not accept what might seem to be implied by the label ‘natural sciences,’ that phenomena are conceived in terms of their place in nature only when they are conceived in terms of their place in the framework of natural law. If we reject that, we make room for supposing that the world’s impacts on us, even considered in themselves as just that, the world’s impacts on us, are not ‘without concepts.’\textsuperscript{60}

It seems that on McDowell’s view the only difference between the happenings in nature that are categorized as “brutely” causal and those other causal happenings that are deemed “free” is that the latter sort of happenings involve concepts. Thus, on McDowell’s picture, human experiential relations are relations that would otherwise be mere happenings were it not for the involvement

\textsuperscript{59} This picture of nature is committed, as David Macarthur says, “to a causal account of the mind.” On this account, “The mind is thought of as nothing but a realm of efficient causal states, events, and processes” (David Macarthur, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” in Naturalism in Question, p. 110).

\textsuperscript{60} John McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 151-2.
of concepts. My point is that this special class of space-of-reasons causation is, given
McDowell’s naturalistic commitments, just the idea of a passive, rational relation. And, it is
merely in countenancing this *sui generis* kind of causation that McDowell’s position diverges
from a traditional empiricism that falls into the Myth of the Given. The Myth of the Given
pictures impressions (caused in us by the world) only as *brute* (i.e. “non-conceptual”)
impingements or happenings, and for that reason McDowell finds them problematic.
McDowell’s own non-traditional empiricism, by contrast, views impressions as conceptual
happenings, happenings that carry content. In other words, McDowell’s commitment to a
monistic picture of natural relations is revealed in the fact that for him, what makes
“impressions” a form of non-threatening “natural” occurrence—i.e. not something mysterious or
alien to the causal order—is that they are still just *happenings*. McDowell states that, “I am
quite happy to suppose there are two kinds of happenings in nature: those that are subsumable
under natural law, and those that are not subsumable under natural law, because freedom is
operative in them.” This statement definitely reinforces the idea that McDowell views nature
as exhausted by events construed as “happenings”, i.e., as *passive*. Indeed, McDowell himself
admits that “I see no opposition between causality and freedom, and there is no question of my
exploiting the idea of causality to explain the distinctively receptive mode of actualization of
conceptual capacities, as if their other actualizations were beyond the reach of causal
understanding.” In the following sections I am going to call into question McDowell’s bland
assurance that there is “no opposition between causality and freedom.”

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61 To describe McDowell’s special sort of causal relation I am using the term “passive, rational” relation. Tim
Thornton adverts to the same McDowellian relation when he uses the term “*conceptualized uptake*” (Thornton, *John
McDowell*, p. 216).
Agency and the Passivity of Causation: The Dogma of Agent Causation

1. I have been claiming that causation is a distinctively passive relation. In this section I want to add detail to that claim by contrasting the notion of a passive relation with the notion of an active (agential) relation. Also in this section I am going to argue that the concept of “agent causation” is an oxymoron.

As far as I know McDowell never specifically uses the term “agent causation,” but it is clear that his view needs the two—agency and causation—to be compatible. He sometimes describes his goal as one of reconciling freedom and nature. But, as I have tried to point out, McDowell continues to view natural relations in a particular sort of way, viz. as passive relations. This view taints McDowell’s so-called “relaxed” form of naturalism and explains why he remains wedded to a causal conception of the space of reasons, drawn-up, a la empiricism, in terms of “impressions”. For McDowell, there must be a “causal continuity” between the space of reasons and the realm of law so that the two can be unified by a passive conception of natural relations. McDowell sees this passive structure as definitive of natural relations. For McDowell, our active thinking must somehow be attached to this passive structure in order for it to be constrained by (and so about) nature; it cannot float free of the external world. So McDowell

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64 One point of clarification may be necessary here. “Agent causation” is typically advocated by defenders of libertarian free will. But, the concept of “agent causation” that I am attacking here is one that specifically attempts to reconcile freedom and determinism. That is, the concept that I am attacking is one that, properly speaking, would be put forward by defenders of compatibilism. So it may seem that I am employing a special notion of “agent causation” here, one perhaps better labeled “passive, agent causation”. Nonetheless, my point is that the concept of “agent causation” wears a confusion on its face—and that’s because causation, properly understood, is a passive relation. My point, then, is that both libertarians and compatibilists court confusion by trying to combine agency (an active relation) and causation (a passive relation).

65 Why might it look like the two—agency and causation—need to be reconciled? One reason would be: if one assumed that natural relations (like causation) are passive relations, and, that passive relations exclude agential relations! McDowell seems to think this way when he insists that experiential relations must be passive relations—cases of being imposed upon or impacted by the world. In other words it appears that he is insisting that true naturalness requires passiveness—a case of being acted upon.
McDowell’s view is uniquely Kantian in this way (i.e. in offering a “synthesis”), but in general, the notion of “agent causation” involves the attempt to accommodate agential or active relations into a passive, causal structure (of relations). And, I think that it is clear that this same type of reconciliation (or “accommodation” or “integration”) is what McDowell advocates in *Mind and World* and elsewhere.

It seems to me that one is only *forced* into accepting the idea of “agent causation” if one also holds that passive relations exhaust natural relations. If one decides to be a monist about natural relations, then how else can one explain what humans and animals do? The typical response has been to say that there must be something *added* to passive, causal relations, something like rationality, or agency, that can animate them and that allows us to distinguish which relations—out of the sum total of passive happenings—in nature get to count as “actions”. This thought has enjoyed a prolific appeal (e.g., Aristotle’s definition of man as a “rational animal”).

But, I want to argue that this thought really rests on a mistaken conception of natural relations—including *experiential* relations—as merely passive relations. In point of fact, there can be *no* such “hybrid” relation that combines the passivity of causality with the agency exhibited in animal activity. Instead, as I will argue, although causal relations are indeed passive, passive relations do not exhaust the space of natural relations. Thus, naturalism need

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66 McDowell says that “We need to recapture the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, but without losing the Kantian idea that rationality operates freely in its own sphere.” And: “we need to see ourselves as animals whose natural being is permeated with rationality, even though rationality is appropriately conceived in Kantian terms [i.e., as a *faculty*]” (*MW*, p. 85). Also, McDowell says that “we can return to sanity if we can recapture the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, with its rationality part of its animal, and so natural, being, not a mysterious foothold in another realm” (*MW*, p. 91).
not be tied down to a passive conception of natural relations. In fact, the very passivity of causal relations shows them to be distinct from another sort of natural relation, an *active* one in which living agents engage (or *interact*) with the environment.

So, in short, my point is that agency and causation are distinct sorts of relations. Agency involves “interactions” (between an organism and its environment) whereas causation involves “transactions” (mere happenings of nomological regularity). We cannot blur this distinction; but the idea that agency and causation are compatible—i.e. the idea that there is a relation called “agent causation” or “space-of-reasons causation” or “intentional causation”—does. In what follows I want to make the contrast between the passivity of causal relations and the activity of agential relations sharper. And, I also want to address why the idea of a combination of agency and causation (i.e. agent causation) *seems* to have had such intuitive appeal: viz., because of a widespread conflation of types of relations with types of explanations.

2. In my view, the reason that agential and causal relations are typically conflated is because of a failure to distinguish between the relations that are described and the description of those relations. Compare the following two sentences:

1. The fall broke the cup.
2. John broke the cup.

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67 This of course also implies that there can be no *reduction* of active relations (interactions) to passive relations (transactions), since the two are distinct types of relations.

68 I take this last term from Searle’s *Intentionality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 112-140. He traces this specific concept to D. Føllesdal, “Quantification into Causal Contexts,” in L. Linsky (ed.), *Reference and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 53-62. Searle says that “Some philosophers have been so impressed by the peculiarities of human action that they have postulated a special kind of causation that goes with agents. According to them there are really two different kinds of causation, one for agents and one for the rest of the universe; thus they distinguish between “agent” causation and “event” causation” (Ibid., p. 115). Apparently Searle agrees “that there are certain sorts of very ordinary causal *explanations* having to do with human mental states, experiences, and actions that do not sit very comfortably with the orthodox [Humean regularity] account of causation” (Ibid., pp. 117-8).

69 As I will discuss later, this conflation has been aided and abetted by the “linguistic turn.”
The first sentence is an instance of a causal explanation. The second is an instance of an agential explanation.\textsuperscript{70} We often use these two types of explanation interchangeably. Causal explanations are readily and easily extended to agents. \textit{That} is a point about explanation or grammar; and I am willing to grant it. But there is a much more important point that I want to focus on, and that is that each sentence actually reflects, or picks-out, a different, \textit{sui generis} sort (or type) of relation.\textsuperscript{71} The former picks out a causal relation and the latter, an agential relation.\textsuperscript{72} Moreover, the former relation is passive and the latter is active (in that it incorporates the activity of a living agent). A good way to put the difference between these two types of relation is to say that the former is a \textit{happening} whereas the latter is a \textit{doing}. Another way to draw the contrast is to describe it as one between \textit{being acted on} and \textit{acting}. This latter locution comes right from McDowell, when he claims that “the experiencing subject is passive, \textit{acted on} by independent reality.”\textsuperscript{73} But my point is that in passive relations nothing is actually \textit{done} (via an agent); rather an event (something) just happens. With an active relation, however, someone or something (an “agent”) \textit{does} something or acts. Considered as relations, causal events, on the view I am advocating, are to be seen as mere passive happenings, whereas the actions of living agents involve doings.\textsuperscript{74} Nothing in the space of causation \textit{does} anything; nothing is \textit{done}; stuff

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} “John” could be the name of an animal, like a dog, but it must be the name of an animate organism.
\item \textsuperscript{71} And, that is, even if the two sentences refer to the same event.
\item \textsuperscript{72} The scientific method calls us to focus our attention on the passive relations between events, i.e. events understood as abstracted away from any element of agency. This is the type of causal explanation that science—most notably physics—aims to provide. Reduction is one such strategy or method (what are the underlying causes of \textit{x}?). But method is different from metaphysics. The problem lies not with the scientific method itself—for it can be adapted to the \textit{social sciences}—but rather with a \textit{scientistic} metaphysics, which views everything as amenable (if not reducible) to the type of description that subatomic physics, for example, exacts. In so far as this is the message of McDowell—and I believe that it is, in \textit{part}—I am in complete agreement with him.
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{MW}, p. 66-7, emphasis added.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Of course it involves “undergoing” as well, but I leave that out for now to emphasize the importance of doing. Without doing there would be no undergoing. Of course the two arrive on the scene together, but undergoing, \textit{awareness}, is not noticed—not \textit{discovered}—until much later on, by humans. Awareness of undergoing is self-awareness. Animals have very little, if any, of this awareness, which is something like the awareness of consequences of action. Animals are more likely just somewhat aware of doing stuff; you might call that mere “consciousness” as opposed to “self-consciousness”.
\end{itemize}
just happens. McDowell does not make this distinction. Instead, he draws a distinction
between types of causal explanations: between causal explanations that are law-like and causal
explanations that are conceptual (and so “free”). In contrast, I want to draw a distinction
between types of relations: causal relations, on the one hand, and agential relations, on the other.

In the first sentence “the fall” is the subject. But there is no subject, in the sense of an
agent, to answer to the verb in a causal relation. The subject and the object—the relata of the
cause-effect relation—are connected by appeal to “forces” not by what agents do or undergo.
Forces are typical non-agential relata. A fall, for instance, cannot perform an action. A fall can
only be the subject (or object) of a causal relation. Here, again, what we are focusing attention
on is the relation in which a fall resulting in a force of impact causes a cup to break. Of course,
if we want to be more scientific, we can discuss the causal relation in this case by appealing to
the force of gravity on earth. But gravity, we can confidently say, is one of the fundamental
forces of first nature; it would be a mistake to think of gravity as an agential relation.

So the second sentence reflects a different kind of relation here, one that does indeed
involve an agent, viz. John. Did John “cause” the cup to break? Well, he is the “reason” that the
cup is broken, as we sometimes say; just as we may also say that “the fall” (a cause) can be the
“reason” that the cup is broken. That is just how we tend to use the language of “reasons” and
“causes”. But, I suggest that we leave out a crucial difference if we fail, as philosophers, to
distinguish between the idea that (breakable) cups break when they fall and the idea that agents
(like John) can do things, like break cups. The first idea appeals to the regularity of the

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75 Consider the following definition from a web site devoted to “naturalism”: “The causal view: From a naturalistic
perspective, there are no causally privileged agents, nothing that causes without being caused in turn. Human
beings act the way they do because of the various influences that shape them, whether these be biological or social,
 genetic or environmental. We do not have the capacity to act outside the causal connections that link us in every
respect to the rest of the world. This means we do not have what many people call free will, the ability to cause our
(impersonal) cause-effect relation and the latter appeals to relations in which things can be done or undergone. Breaking something is something that is done—even if by complete accident (e.g. without intending or thinking of doing it).

Now there are two points of note here. First, I am saying that the agential relation is *sui generis* as compared with the causal relation. The difference is that the agential relation is *active* whereas the causal relation is *passive*. (It is between these two types of relation that I draw my contrast between first and second nature.) The second point is that the agential relation does not depend upon a consciousness of the “action,” or an intention (or even *awareness*) on the part of the agent.76 A dog’s wagging tail, for example, may have been the “reason” for the broken cup. (Later we will see that this further contention allows us to include animals and infants in the class of “agents”.)

3. The two kinds of *explanation*—appeal to causal forces and appeal to agency—are for the most part seamlessly integrated in our ordinary language. This is what makes the notion of “agent causation” seem so tempting to us; and it is also what makes it difficult to recognize that there are two distinct *relations* underlying the similarity of our use of causal and agential locutions. It seems that we could easily replace the verb in the second sentence to say that “John *caused* the cup to break” without any explanatory loss of meaning. That is, in so far as *explanation* is concerned, we can substitute an active, agential verb with a passive, causal one. This is what makes the two (types of explanation) so hard to disentangle.

But, underlying our explanations, we should be careful to recognize that we are witnessing (i.e. observing) two fundamentally distinct kinds of *relations*: those relations in which

76 This makes room, as we will see later, for the idea that non-concept-using animals can be agents too. Doing does not require knowing. Rather, just the reverse is true.
actors are involved and those relations in which things just happen. (McDowell sees a
distinction only in kinds of “intelligibility”.) Physics attempts to isolate what happens, i.e. it
attempts to home in on the regularity of “what happens”, i.e. passive, causal relations. This
forms a paradigm for the type of explanation that science aims at. But, we get a distorted picture
of the relation between human intentionality (or agency generally) and nature when we view
those agential relations on physic’s model of “what happens.” Jennifer Hornsby makes this point
when she says that,

There is alienation of an unthinkable sort when an agent is portrayed as if she were
merely an arena for events. And I have also claimed that the project of looking for
an agent amid the workings of a mind could never assist in getting rid of such
alienation. No one ever does anything in Nagel’s picture, and it could hardly make
any difference to this which particular kinds of states and events are supposed to be
present from the external perspective. From that perspective, the events that are
actions are missing, and they cannot be introduced by postulating a special kind of
cause for them.

4. I want to extend Hornsby’s complaint to McDowell. His picture of the experiential
relation, in which we are passively presented with facts or states of affairs, is one in which, like
Nagel’s, “actions are missing” and they “cannot be introduced by postulating a special kind of

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77 As Jaegwon Kim puts it: “The causal relation is a paradigmatic case of what I shall call relations of “dependency”
or “determination” between events and states; in fact, it is the only relation of this sort that has been explicitly
recognized and widely talked about.” He goes on to say that “The dominant place accorded to the causal relation is
evident in the fact, for example, that the thesis of universal determinism is most often stated in some such form as
‘Every event has a cause’” (Jaegwon Kim “Noncausal Connections” Nous Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 41). The implicit
assumption in such a formulation is that being determined comes to the same thing as being caused (i.e., passive).
78 Jennifer Hornsby, “Agency and Alienation,” NIQ, p. 186. She is here picking on Nagel’s The View from
cause for them.” Now I have provided an explanation for why this is so. The reason that a “special kind of cause” (viz. “agent causation” or “space-of-reasons causation”) will not do, in place of an action, is because the notion of causality is the notion of a passive relation, and actions are not passive relations. We must not conflate active and passive relations. But McDowell implicates himself in this very imbroglio when he says that:

The difference between causes that impugn freedom and causes that do not is that the causes that do not impugn freedom are rational causes, causes whose operation is constituted by actions aimed at furthering the projects of their agents in the light of how they see the situations in which they act.

McDowell combines causation and agency here when he speaks of “rational causes”; and that, in turn, means that he assumes the truth of agent causation. But, I have been arguing that causal relations exclude agential relations, and that puts me at odds with McDowell’s notion that there are causes “that do not impugn freedom.” I will expand upon this disagreement presently.

But, there is also the reverse sort of tendency, in which we attribute agency to (i.e. we use the “intentional stance” to describe) inanimate objects. For example, thermostats turn on the

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79 Of course the point is not that passive, causal relations are segregated from agential relations or vice versa. Causal relations are ubiquitous and agential relations occur wherever there is life. The point is simply that the two are different relations. Again, this is not to deny that agential relations can extend into the world of causation, it is just that there is no such relation that is at one and the same time both causal and agential—as in McDowell’s notion of “rational causes”. Thus it is a mistake to take the term “causal agent” literally.

80 John McDowell, “Response to Akeel Bilgrami,” *McDowell and His Critics*, p. 69. Interestingly, I think that this passage (referencing “rational causes”) also reveals a symbiosis between arguments for the compatibilism of agency with causation and arguments for the compatibilism of freedom with determinism. The two types of compatibilism seem to be sides of a single coin. “Freedom” pairs up with “agency” and “determinism” pairs up with “causation”.

81 We would not want to say, for example, that “John Dewey caused the book *Experience and Nature* to exist.” Rather, we say that “John Dewey wrote that work.” In fact, in an early paper Dewey proclaims that “we have come upon a force of entirely a different order—an independent ego as entity in itself” (Dewey, “The Ego as Cause,” *The Philosophical Review*, (May, 1894), p. 339). Of course identifying the “ego” as the source of activity may be problematic, but Dewey correctly (in my view) holds apart agency from causation and identifies them as distinct relations.

82 In fact Lakoff and Johnson have argued that embodied agency shapes or infects all of our concepts, including causation. They say that “What we take to be the central case is human agency. One might decide that one likes one type of causation better than another, but as far as the cognitive unconscious is concerned, they all count as causation” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 224). They give an example: “According to this
heat, computers remember things, clocks keep time, etc. I want to argue that we should view these commonplace locutions as only metaphorical. The only sense in which we can see any agency in these events is in so far as they are described in terms of what they “do” for us (humans). It is obvious that many man-made, inanimate items are literally designed to perform a task that a human would otherwise be required to perform (e.g. turning on/off the heat). That ought to be a staple of common sense. And in this sense it is true, as Lakoff and Johnson point out, that “verbs expressing actions by a human agent—bring, send, push, pull, drive, thrust, propel, give, take—can express causation by natural phenomena.”

But, literally extending agency to “natural phenomena” cannot be made innocent (in the sense of inconsequential) by adverting to our embodied metaphorical conceptualization of the matter. Adverting, as they do, to merely conceptual or metaphorical differences does nothing to explain the underlying literal conflict between agential relations and causal relations. Try to take, for example, the notion of a first mover quite literally. Here we must combine (conflate) an agential relation (the idea of an actor or “mover”) with the idea of an impersonal causal chain. But what we get, when we do this, is the strange idea that there must have been an unmoved mover at the beginning of an infinite, impersonal chain.

metaphor, the natural event of the door opening in the wind is conceptualized as follows: The wind is a natural phenomenon, which is a metaphorical agent. The force exerted by that agent is a natural cause. The natural event of the door opening in the wind is metaphorically seen as an effect of that force exerted by the agent (the wind). This metaphorical process is so commonplace it is barely noticed” (Lakoff & Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 212). Notice how, in this sentence, Lakoff and Johnson equate “natural phenomena” with non-agential or non-active relations. Anyway, they go on to cite their own examples: “A comet slammed into the surface of Mars. The surface of the earth has taken a beating from meteorites. Meteorites have dug out huge craters on the moon” (Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 212).

That is, the blurring of the relations of agency and causation can work in the reverse direction: not only can it be used to “alienate” agential relations by tying them down to a determined causal chain, but it can also be used to animate the causal relation by modeling it on agential action. This props-up a distorted picture of the universe and its origins; it leads to the puzzle of an unmoved, or first, mover. By picturing first nature relations on the model of an agent that utilizes and exerts energy, the (monistic) chain of causal events is made to seem as if it must have had a beginning, as all agential actions do.
Is this an antinomy? Well, not if we hold strictly to the notion of causation as a passive relation, as I am insisting we should, for then the notion of a first mover (or actor) will have no (literal) place at all. In fact, this view is reflected in the consensus view of modern science: respected scientists advert to a big bang—not a first mover—as the origin of the universe. The big bang is the idea of an impersonal force, one that results in our current universe. Thus, we can have causal closure (though not in the sense of complete causal determination of everything—for there is also a second nature) if we just separate out “causes” as passive relations. But, if we try to think of causes as also constitutive of active relations, that is, if we conflate the two, then we cannot have closure—instead we are led to think of a first actor or action. By contrast, if we take it that causes are just passive relations then we need not think that there must have been a first cause. Why? When we think of active relations we need actors. But causal-scientific descriptions refer to a specific kind of relation in which there are no actors, there are only impersonal forces at work.

5. I have been arguing that causation is a passive relation between things, in which there are no “actors” and things just happen. The concept of “agency”, by contrast, reflects an active relation between things, in which there are “actors” who do and undergo things. When we refer to things that just happen we refer to a passive relation. These relations are what the “hard

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85 A prime mover requires a picture of agent causation. No respectable scientist defends the first mover idea. The big bang stands opposed to that; and here again, it is religion versus science.
86 An implied idea here is that “the big bang” cannot have been the (first and only) big bang; for the “impersonal forces” (of nature) neither originate, nor cease to exist. Origin and cessation are ideas that belong to the course of agential relations; there is no “beginning” to the causal relation, it is ever-present.
87 The idea of the causal closure of nature makes it seem like a true naturalism must fit thinking and intentionality into the causal order. But I am arguing that this would leave out activity, and therefore agency, because the notion of causation is the quintessential notion of a passive relation.
88 But mustn’t there have been a first force? No. Forces, in this sense, are neither created nor destroyed. Imagine the destruction of gravity, for example. The language of impersonal forces is a fairly neutral way to characterize the stuff of scientific observation. With regard to the idea of a first, unmoved actor or mover, we must note that the idea of an “actor” is the idea of something that can also be acted on. This too makes the first mover idea very problematic: we are supposed to accept the idea of an actor that has never yet been acted on.
"sciences" like physics seek to comprehend: the impersonal, natural forces at work, not the actions or undergoings of agents. This point is not just a reflection of our language use (as Lakoff and Johnson think) but is a fundamental fact about the universe. In nature, as Dewey says, “Interactions go on anyway and produce changes. Apart from intelligence, these changes are not directed. They are effects but not consequences, for consequences imply means deliberately employed.”\(^89\) Human intelligence is a distinctive trait among the animals. But, more fundamentally, humans (and animals) are unique members of the universe in that we are alive—we are agents. Causes are events and are mere happenings, while actions, by contrast, regardless of the involvement of intelligence, are things done by (whole) living organisms. The difference between these two types of relation underlies the distinction that I want to draw between two sorts of naturalism. As I will emphasize in a moment, the contrast is not—where McDowell draws it—between two sorts of passive causation: brute, realm-of-law causation and space-of-reasons, conceptual/rational causation.\(^90\) Rather, I argue that the proper contrast is between the very passivity of causation and the very activity of the world of the living—the world of agency.\(^91\) Hence also, as I draw the contrast, it would be a mistake to speak of a special sort of causal relation called “agent causation”. Joseph Margolis makes a similar point when he says that

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\(^90\) This task is taken up in the response to the “third objection” below. Anyway, that McDowell holds such a view is evident when he asserts that, “I work with a contrast between the space of reasons (an image I borrow from Searle) and the realm of law...Blackburn assumes that this is merely my preferred way of describing a contrast between the space of reasons and the space of causes. But I do not set off the space of reasons by distinguishing it from something describable as the space of causes” (John McDowell, “Response to Simon Blackburn,” *McDowell and his Critics*, p. 217).

\(^91\) For now, the idea of an “agent” is just the idea of a living, self-moving organism. Later I will make a distinction between types of agents: mere agents and reflective agents. Obviously mature, enculturated human beings would be the target of the latter category of reflective agency. And as I see it, that is where the “space of reasons” has relevancy: reflective agents act on reasons.
Since reference to persons (or other agents) is...essential to the identification of an
action as an action, without at all entailing agent-causation, we can eliminate such
causation entirely from the explanation of actions.\(^92\)

Agent causation is thus revealed as a (metaphorical) dogma: an assumption tied to a bogus
metaphysical picture of nature in which the distinction between passive relations and active
relations is conflated. Causation, in my view, is passive, and for that reason alone it contrasts,
dramatically, with agency. Dewey says that the proponents of a compatibilist concept of agent
causation “profess themselves quite as devoted adherents of the doctrine of causation as are the
determinists, holding that the sole difference is as to the nature of the cause involved in volition.”

But, Dewey goes on to say, “the idea of ‘causation’ as implying a productive agency or
determining force has no standing whatever in science—it is a superstition.”\(^93\) I think that we
can understand Dewey to mean here that the “determining forces” that do, indeed, “have a
standing in science” (excluding for now the social sciences) have that standing precisely because
they are purged of agency (not because they are purged of concepts). This point can—and
should, in my view—be expanded into a point about a fundamental distinction between natural
relations: there is the world of the living on one hand (with organisms and agents) and there is
the causal world of impersonal happenings on the other. To put this point in terminology that
parallels McDowell’s: I want to say that there is a \textit{sui generis} distinction to be drawn between
the realm of happenings (passive relations) and the realm of doings (active relations).\(^94\)

\(^94\) McDowell, by contrast, wants to draw the contrast between the space of reasons and what I call “the realm of
happenings” (he calls it the “realm of law”). It may be interjected, on behalf of McDowell, that at least the
inhabitants of the space of reasons (viz. mature humans) can be credited with “agency”. And McDowell is not
afraid to admit that on his view non-concept using things cannot be agents. I cannot adequately deal with these
objects here, but I am going to try to refute both of these possible moves in the next chapter.
6. I can think of three initial objections that might be raised against the type of contrast that I am trying to draw between active relations and passive relations. The first objection comes from Lakoff’s and Johnson’s work on metaphor. The complaint is that there cannot be a fierce division between agency and causation, in the way that I am envisaging, and that I am just trafficking in one particular metaphor when there is a sea of other equally legitimate ones. The idea is that both the concepts of “agency” and “causation” gain their content through a metaphorical crossbreeding, and there is no way to break free of our web of metaphors to get at the literal truth of the matter. “Agent causation” is thus vindicated as just another innocent embodied metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson say that “When someone asks, “Does causation exist?” that person usually wants to know whether there is a single unified phenomenon (which is called “causation”) objectively existing in the mind-independent world and operating according to a single logic.” And if that is the question, Lakoff’s and Johnson’s answer is that, “causation as we conceptualize it is not a unified phenomenon.” In contrast, I am claiming that causation is indeed a distinct, single unified phenomenon: it is a (natural) kind of natural relation that contrasts with agency. But, Lakoff and Johnson say the following:

Beyond middle-level physical experience—in the microuniverse of elementary particles and the macrouniverse of black holes—our basic-level concepts utterly fail

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95 I am extrapolating somewhat from their central thesis. They do not specifically focus on the concept of “agent causation.” Rather, they seem to assume it, for example when they say that “the concept of CAUSATION is based on the prototype of DIRECT MANIPULATION, which emerges directly from our experience” (Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, p. 75). Plus they say that “It is conscious volitional human agency acting via direct physical force that is at the center of our concept of causation” (Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 177).

96 Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 232-3, emphasis added. In order to make this statement innocuous Lakoff and Johnson would need to replace “phenomenon” with “conception”. For, if their point is restricted merely to language use, then I agree that there is not one “unified conception”. But that fact reveals nothing about the structure of the universe. They say that “The concepts of cause and event and all other event-structure concepts are not just reflections of a mind-independent reality. They are fundamentally human concepts. They arise from human biology. Their meanings have a rather impoverished literal aspect; instead, they are metaphorical in significant, ineliminable ways” (Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 171). I think they should drop the idea that we cannot get beyond the metaphorical into the real. Our metaphors should not be seen as impediments, blocking our view of reality.
us. To conceptualize such experience requires the magnificent tool of conceptual metaphor. But once we move to the domain of conceptual metaphor in theorizing about the micro and macro levels, any ordinary everyday literal notion of causation fails us.97

The assumption in favor of “middle-level physical experience” exposes a bias in Lakoff’s and Johnson’s central thesis that our broader metaphorical conceptualization of the world is an unavoidable extension of our embodied existence.98 The bias is that our understanding of all relations in nature is a reflection of our (“middle-level”) bodily relation to the world. The problem is that this puts all relations on a par.

A different reason, however, for why the “literal notion of causation” may seem to “fail us” at the macro and micro levels is because Lakoff and Johnson have blurred the concepts of causation and agency together.99 They say that “Since Causes are Forces, human agents exert force, and Natural Phenomena Are Human Agents, natural causes are conceptualized metaphorically as forces exerted by a human agent.”100 I doubt that Lakoff and Johnson are right that all of our concepts are embodied metaphors, but even if they are, there is no reason to think that the fact that we are “embodied” can tell either against or in favor of the idea that there is a unified phenomenon—or relation—of causation (that is distinct from agency). That is something in need of empirical support (or discovery); it is not merely a matter of how we conceptualize the world. And, in fact, I am not only claiming that there is a literal difference between the two kinds of relation, but also that we

97 Ibid., pp. 233-4.
98 The idea is of a piece with Sellars’s distinction between the scientific and the manifest image of man.
99 For example, they claim that “Reasons can be conceptualized as causes via a metaphorical blend, a natural composition of two metaphors: Reasons Are Forces and Causes Are Forces. “This,” they say, “explains why the question “Are reasons causes?” is a perennial philosophical question” (Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 216).
100 Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh, p. 212.
can see this difference: we can observe these two different relations operating in the
world.101 This sort of response to Lackoff and Johnson ought to be congenial to McDowell
because it pictures the world, reality, as “within reach”. As McDowell says, “there is no
gap [including no metaphorical gap] between thought, as such, and the world.”102 Yet, on
the other hand, McDowell also often frames his difference between natures as one between
two types of “intelligibility”.103 And, construing the difference between natures as just a
matter of explanation or intelligibility—between a “space” of reasons and a “realm” of
law—threatens to look like simply a difference in metaphor.104

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101 I think that seeing this difference is in fact what motivated the scientific revolution. This is basically in line with
what McDowell says, when he says that, “A proper appreciation of science makes it impossible to retain, except
perhaps in some symbolic guise, the common mediaeval conception of nature as filled with meaning, like a book
containing messages and lessons for us” (John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” MVR, p. 174). I, however,
think that we court problems when we make the contrast between natures be between meaningful human relations
and all other relations. That draws the distinction between natures too narrowly. Animals are bound to look like
mere machines or mechanisms on this picture. Instead I think that we need to broaden the contrast to make it
between the relations of living organisms and all other relations.

102 MW, p. 27. The point is one that McDowell also makes when he says that, “Although reality is independent of
our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. That things
are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that
very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world” (MW, p.
26). Similarly, he says, “The world is embraceable in thought” (MW, p. 33).

103 McDowell argues that “We need not equate the very idea of nature with the idea of instantiations of concepts that
belong in the logical space—admittedly separate, on this view, from the logical space of reasons—in which the
natural-scientific kind of intelligibility is brought to light…The logical space of reasons is the frame within which a
fundamentally different kind of intelligibility comes into view” (MW, pp. xix-xx). He speaks of an “image” that
“marks a contrast between two kinds of intelligibility: the kind that is sought by (as we call it) natural science, and
the kind we find in something when we place it in relation to other occupants of “the logical space of reasons” (MW,
p. 70).

104 McDowell says that “I suggest that we can approach the point in terms of a distinction between two ways of
finding things intelligible. Both involve placing things in a pattern. But in one case the pattern is constituted by the
regularities according to which phenomena of the relevant kind unfold; in the other it is the patter of a life led by an
agent who can shape her action and thought in the light of an ideal of rationality” (John McDowell, “Reply to
ago I voiced reservations about John McDowell’s embrace of a spatial metaphor.” He says, “There is a danger at
hand, metaphor can pave the way for inferences, inviting us to frame problems one way rather than another. A
metaphor can blind us to possibilities, including the possibilities that give us philosophical control of an area. For
that matter a metaphor can also make it easy to demonize those who do not see the subject in quite the same way”
(Simon Blackburn, “Julius Caesar and George Berkeley Play Leapfrog,” McDowell and his Critics, p. 203).
7. The second objection to my contrast between active relations and passive relations is that many times we want to say that agents—actors—are impelled by “forces” they are not responsible for, like genetics and environmental factors. This fact is undeniable, and it is no doubt a motivation for the idea that causation runs through agency. Thus, it looks like a mistake to make such a sharp contrast between agency and causation, as I do, because that makes it seems like agents cannot be, even in part, shaped by passive forces.

In response to this objection I admit that my way of framing the point, as a contrast between “active” relations and “passive” relations, looks like it excludes the potential for agents to be shaped and determined by factors outside of the agent’s control. But, this is not the case. The appearance of conflict is merely terminological and therefore superficial. It reflects a deficiency (in locution) implicit in my use of the contrasting terms “passive” and “active”, but it does not reflect a deficiency in my distinction between (the relations of) agency and causation. The terms “inanimate” and “animate” would perhaps provide a better contrast. For I hold that even though such things as genetics and the environment are forces that shape the careers of agents and are also (for that reason) out of agents’ control, they are not therefore revealed as mere causal forces or relations. Of course, it would be sheer lunacy to defend the idea that agency means complete control. In that sense my use of the term “active” in describing agential relations is somewhat loose, for it is not to be understood as excluding forces that can shape agents and their actions. But, by the same token, the idea that agent’s lives are shaped (by external forces) should not lead us to conclude (with equal lunacy) that they are entirely so shaped; but that is the implication, I aver, in the assumption that things like genetics and environmental factors are just a species of causal force. So my point comes to this: the coming to be of organisms—their physical and behavioral constitution—is a reflection of principles of
life processes, not principles of mere passive causality. It is not quite right to say that an agent is simply caused to be. But genetics and environmental factors (which certainly include social factors) are perfect examples of (non-causal) shaping principles in the world of the living. These shaping principles contrast directly with the principles of causal determination. Thus, my contrasting of agential or “active” relations with “passive” relations is unfortunate only insofar as it (misleadingly) implies that agents’ lives are not in some ways, at least, determined. So my point is not as radical as it may initially seem, for I merely want to draw a contrast between being alive and being inanimate. The latter—inanimate objects—can only be acted on, and it is in that sense they are to be understood as “passive”.

8. The third objection will be relevant throughout this chapter. It is an objection to my saddling McDowell with a view of humans as only able to engage in passive relations with the world. He explicitly denies that this is an implication of his view. For example he expands, in

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105 The best way that I can think to draw the contrast here is between the principles of nature uncovered by Darwin’s theory of evolution through reproduction and the principles of nature uncovered by Newton’s theory of universal gravitation and laws of motion.

106 Later I will employ a more technical vocabulary to get at this distinction. To foreshadow, I will contrast “entropic” relations with “disentropic” relations. The former are to be equated with what I here call “passive” relations, and the latter are to be equated with “active” relations. Entropic relations constitute my “first nature” whereas disentropic relations constitute my “second nature”. And the corresponding naturalisms are the “physical sciences” and the “life sciences”, respectively (see the previous note); or, as Dewey calls the latter, the “organic sciences”. Thus what contrasts with passive relations is not the idea of something that is always acting, but only the idea of something that is alive (and therefore—temporarily—resisting the forces of entropy). For now then, suffice it to say that even though we can make a distinction between acting and being acted on, an agent is never wholly passive. Whatever “happens” to an agent at once redounds to its conditions of acting and living. So being alive cannot be just a passive, causal happening. This is a point that Dewey repeatedly emphasizes. For example, he says that, “Wherever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover, is not wholly passive; is not a mere matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment” (John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 84). In this sense, living is being active, even when one is asleep. Falling asleep is part of being alive. Also, when an agent is acted upon by a force that is not completely disabling, the agent can respond.

107 There are actually two related objections here: one directed at my interpretation of McDowell and one directed at my account of the distinction between agency and passivity. The first objection is this: I have been claiming that if McDowell construes experience as a passive relation then he cannot accommodate agential relations into his picture, and he flatly denies that this is an implication of his view. The second objection is this: It looks as though my
a footnote in *Mind and World*, upon one of his many, repeated claims that “experience is passive,” by saying the following:

Of course this [claim that ‘experience is passive’] is not to deny that experiencing the world involves activity. Searching is an activity; so are observing, watching, and so forth. (This sort of thing is usefully stressed by people who think we should not conceive experience as passive reception at all, such as J. J. Gibson; see, for instance, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968).) But one’s control over what happens in experience has limits; one can decide where to place oneself, at what pitch to tune one’s attention, and so forth, but it is not up to one what, having done all that, one will experience. This minimal point is what I am insisting on.\textsuperscript{108}

Here, McDowell claims to be “insisting” on only the “minimal point” that there is an obvious sense in which, in experience, “things just happen.” And he tries to make his minimal point look sensible in comparison to those who (like J. J. Gibson) would have us believe that “we should not conceive experience as passive reception at all.” As McDowell puts it: “In experience one finds oneself saddled with content,” and, in experience one has no “choice in the matter.”\textsuperscript{109}

But, does McDowell mean to make *just* this “minimal point”, or does his view involve the much more substantial claim that *all* experience is a matter of passive receptions? I think that it involves the more substantial claim. Of course in the above block quote McDowell explicitly

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\textsuperscript{108} *MW*, p. 10, fn. 8. Note here the words that McDowell uses to denote “activity”: “searching,” “observing,” and “watching.” These are all “spectator” words. This point will be important to keep in mind for a later discussion of the “spectator theory of knowledge.”

\textsuperscript{109} *MW*, p. 10.
aims to clarify that the claim “experience is passive” is not intended “to deny that experiencing the world involves activity.” That is what he says, anyway.\footnote{Tim Thornton notices a conflict here as well; he says that “The claim that experience is conceptualized, and therefore belongs to the faculty of spontaneity, but at the same time the concepts are drawn into experience passively, without the conscious intent of the subject, may suggest a tension. How can the same items play both passive and active roles?” (Thornton, \textit{John McDowell}, pp. 213-14).}

But, we then need to ask: where does this \textit{activity} (in experience) come in in McDowell’s picture? McDowell is committed to the answer, it seems, that all activity comes from our (human) spontaneity to employ concepts.\footnote{He says: “The way I am exploiting the Kantian idea of spontaneity commits me to a demanding interpretation for words like “concept” and “conceptual”. It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials” (\textit{MW}, p. 47).} He cites Kant in identifying freedom with spontaneity. And, like Kant, he argues that the passive relations (i.e. impressions) that constitute experience are already concept-laden products of the co-operation of receptivity and spontaneity; and, that it is the involvement of spontaneity (with its link to “responsible freedom”) in the “co-operation” that allows the deliverance of receptivity to “belong to a network of capacities for \textit{active} thought.”\footnote{\textit{MW}, p. 12, emphasis added. I won’t deny that McDowell is entitled to claim that \textit{thought}, on his view, is “active”, but I will deny that he is entitled to say that that is what allows him to claim that \textit{experience} is active. He has a two-step view in which experiencing the world is something different from thinking about the world. It is the idea that thinking is not also a form of experiencing that I find difficult to comprehend. McDowell says that “any intelligible case of agency, legislative or any other, whether on the part of an individual or a group, must be responsive to reasons.” Also, he says that “Our freedom, which figures in the image as our legislative power, must include a moment of receptivity” (McDowell, \textit{RMW}, p. 276).} The idea is that while the passively received impressions of sense are “already conceptual” the “passive operation of conceptual capacities in sensibility is not intelligible independently of their \textit{active} exercise in judgement.”\footnote{\textit{MW}, p. 12, emphasis added. As McDowell puts it, “receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation” (\textit{MW}, p. 9).} For McDowell, although impressions are passively received—and therefore \textit{passive}, impressions are within the “active network” simply because they are \textit{linked to concepts}. So, the “activity” inherent in McDowell’s conception of passively received impressions derives entirely from their being conceptual, or rational.
McDowell’s point, then, is more than just a “minimal point”, at least insofar as it is committed to the questionable (Kantian) premise: that experience is indeed just passive, but, because of the involvement of concepts, these passive receptions are events that also get to count as “active” or “free”. And, since most people would not agree that *that* is what “freedom” or “activity” means for them, I suspect that he must be making a “substantial” claim.

Of course by calling it a “minimal point” McDowell might have meant only that passive experience is not all that there is to being human. His larger idea being that our faculties of thinking and judging are free (not passive) because they involve “our spontaneity in the exercise of our understanding.”\(^\text{114}\) This would leave room, in McDowell’s view, to say that “freedom” really resides in the capacity to make judgments on the basis of passively (i.e. un-freely) received experiences.\(^\text{115}\) As he says, “How one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it.”\(^\text{116}\) And, “Minimally,” McDowell says, “it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be.”\(^\text{117}\) But, if this ability to “decide” is *all* that is under our “control”, then the extent of our freedom or agency amounts merely to our ability to accept or reject the “appearances” that we are “saddled” with. Contrary, then, to McDowell’s stated claim that “experiencing the world involves activity,” the above remark seems to suggest that, although thinking may be free and active, experiencing is not. De Gaynesford describes McDowell’s view in this way:

\(^{114}\) *MW*, p. 8.
\(^{115}\) As de Gaynesford puts it, “Conceptual capacities are freely exercised in judgements and necessitated, or unfreely actualized, in experience. Given McDowell’s position on the exercise of control, it is possible to regard judgements as free because they necessarily involve the subject’s engagement of checking procedures for whose outcome he is responsible. In experience, on the other hand, the subject is not free but imposed upon; and since this deprives the subject of the opportunity to engage whatever checking procedures are at his disposal, the notions of control and its exercise have no application” (de Gaynesford, *John McDowell*, p. 115).
\(^{116}\) *MW*, p. 11.
\(^{117}\) *MW*, p. 11.
The subject ‘has’ experiences but ‘comes to’ judgement; experience is what happens to the subject, while judgement is what the subject makes of what happens. The subject is free to exercise control over his judgements in ways that are not open to him in experience.\(^{118}\)

For McDowell, “experience is what happens to the subject,” and “judgement is what the subject makes of what happens.”

I aver that this contradicts McDowell’s reassurance to us (made in his footnote about J. J. Gibson) that “experiencing the world involves activity.” For the only sense in which McDowell really allows experience to be “active” is in saying that it “involves concepts”. But the extreme narrowness of this conception of activity tends to be masked by the fact that McDowell’s argument often employs two different uses of the notion of “active”. In one sense, McDowell contrasts “active” with “passive”—in this way judging is “active” whereas experiencing is not. But, in another sense, McDowell contrasts “active” with “non-conceptual”—and in this way judging and experiencing are both “active”. For example, McDowell says that, “even though experience is passive, it draws into operation capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity.”\(^{119}\)

Here McDowell contrasts the involvement of concepts with “passivity”. But is the involvement

\(^{118}\) Maximilian de Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 111. This interpretation of the respective roles of thinking (as “active” and “free”) and experience (as “passive” and “un-free” or constrained) is well supported by Mind and World, where McDowell asserts the following: “I have been claiming that it is essential to conceptual capacities that they belong to spontaneity, that is, to a faculty that is exercised in actively self-critical control of what one thinks, in the light of the deliverances of experience” (MW, p. 49). Here, the notion of “deliverances” seems to exhaust the concept of experience for McDowell: as if “thinking” was not itself an “experience”; as if the realm of thought lies outside the realm of experience. And in fact, McDowell does seem to employ a Kantian faculty-ontology in which there is (at least a conceptual) separation between spontaneity and receptivity. On this “faculty-ontology” picture of the mind, the life of a human is a constantly occurring two-part process: first you’re acted on by the world (you “passively” receive a deliverance), then you assess (or think about, or “actively” judge) the situation and (perhaps) respond, or re-act. In addition, McDowell’s “Hegelian completion of Kant” involves saying that the first part is (always) already conceptual and thus that it need not be a mystery how the second part can relate to (or be about) the first part. (This picture of interaction as a two-part process, in my view, tends to reduce all interaction to a cause-effect or stimulus-response model.)

\(^{119}\) MW, p. 13.
of concepts really the same thing as “activity”? Well it seems that for McDowell “freedom” or “activity” simply consists in the capacity to judge incoming conceptual contents—e.g. to reject the appearance “that the cup is made of plastic” or to take it at “face value.” And “experience”, for McDowell, is just the passive reception of such appearances (conceptual contents).

9. In what follows I want to expose and critique McDowell’s narrow notions of “experience” and “activity”. At the same time, I hope that what I say will help to clarify my (last) response to the objection against my interpretation of what McDowell calls “active” relations. I will do this by contrasting the range of naturalistic options as McDowell sees them with the range of naturalistic options as I see them. This approach should also help to expose the differences between McDowell’s view of “active” relations and my own.

As I see it, McDowell is committed to the following four possible types of natural relations.

P-NR: Passive, non-rational relations (gravity, centripetal force, inertia, etc.).

P-R: Passive, rational relations (McDowell’s “conceptual impressions”).

A-NR: Active, non-rational relations (feelings of pain, reflexes, etc.).

A-R: Active, rational relations (thinking, planning, speaking, etc.).

120 Interestingly, McDowell sees himself as “putting a demanding interpretation” not on the term “activity,” but rather on the term “concept”. He says: “The way I am exploiting the Kantian idea of spontaneity commits me to a demanding interpretation for words like ‘concept’ and ‘conceptual’. It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials” (MW, p. 47).


122 My point here has been, basically, that McDowell uses Kant mainly to back up his equivocation on the use of the word “active”.
In this formulation “NR” stands for “non-rational” or “non-conceptual” (relations) and “R” stands for “rational” or “conceptual” (relations). Likewise, “P” represents passive (relations) and “A” represents active (relations).

The extent of McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature can be seen to consist in “making room” in nature for a special kind of *passive* relation, *P-R* relations (passive, rational relations). McDowell calls these passive relations “impressions”. But, in contrast to traditional empiricism, which (under the influence of the DVN) would have placed “impressions” in the category of *P-NR* relations, McDowell’s re-enchanted nature allows for a “non-traditional empiricism”, which can place impressions in his new category of *P-R* relations.\(^{123}\) This move allows McDowell to argue that, even though “impressions” are passively received, they can nonetheless *already* be endowed (or “enchanted”) with conceptual content. For McDowell, the only problem with the “disenchanted view of nature” is that it makes it seem that for passive experience (i.e. an “impression”) to count as “natural” it must also be a non-conceptual, or NR, relation.\(^{124}\) McDowell however says that passive impressions can also be seen as R relations once we remember our “second nature.”\(^{125}\)

For McDowell, it is precisely because passive impressions (i.e. *P-R* relations) are *R* relations that they can—even though *passively* received—*inherit* activity, so to speak, by being linked to a rational “network” in which active judging takes place. McDowell says that “The

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\(^{123}\) The DVN has no category for passive conceptual relations, and so traditional empiricists tried to make do without them. But, McDowell’s re-enchantment allows *him* to say that “Conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the *sui generis* logical space of reasons, can be operative not only in judgements—results of a subject’s actively making up her mind about something—but already in the transactions in nature that are constituted by the world’s impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable subject; that is, one who possesses the relevant concepts.”

\(^{124}\) McDowell says that “Apart from that naturalism [i.e. DVN], we would not have to conclude that since the operations of sensibility are, as such, natural goings-on, considered in themselves they can only be intuitions without concepts” (*MW*, p. 88).

\(^{125}\) So, McDowell says, “From the thesis that receiving an impression is a transaction in nature, there is now no good inference to the conclusion drawn by Sellars and Davidson, that the idea of receiving an impression must be foreign to the logical space in which concepts such as answerability function” (*MW*, p. xx).
conceptual capacities that are passively drawn into play in experience belong to a network of capacities for active thought.\textsuperscript{126} And, McDowell explains that:

\begin{quote}
It is essential to the picture I am recommending that experience has its content by virtue of the drawing into operation, in sensibility, of capacities that are genuinely elements in a faculty of spontaneity. The very same capacities must also be able to be exercised in judgements, and that requires them to be rationally linked into a whole system of concepts and conceptions within which their possessor engages in the continuing activity of adjusting her thinking to experience.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

I think that McDowell’s attempt to pass-off passive experiences as active (because conceptual) rests upon an equivocation on the use of the term “active”. The trick, I think, comes when McDowell brings in the Kantian idea that “activity” is synonymous with the “involvement of concepts”. For then, all of a sudden, the mere appearance of a concept on the scene turns what was otherwise just a mere passive happening in nature into something that it is not, viz. an active relation. But these passive relations—even if conceptual—seem to be precisely opposed to actions in the normal sense of “doing something”; they are cases, as McDowell says, in which the “subject is passive, acted on by independent reality.”\textsuperscript{128} My point is that the mere inclusion of concepts does not allow him to have it both ways: impressions can’t be both passive and active.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} MW, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{127} MW, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{128} MW, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{129} I am not suggesting that McDowell consciously equivocates on the word “active”. In fact, the confusion seems to infect his own thinking. For example, he often talks about human beings as seeming to have one foot in the realm of law (i.e. engaged in passive relations) and one foot in the space of reasons (i.e. engaged in active relations). He thus finds himself trying, at times, to defuse the worry that we may be “peculiarly bifurcated, with a foothold in the animal kingdom and a mysterious separate involvement in an extra-natural world of rational connections” (MW, p. 77). For example, he says: “Second nature could not float free of potentialities that belong to a normal human organism. This gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of law to satisfy any proper respect for
The fact that McDowell’s view is in agreement with traditional empiricism in holding that experiences (impressions) are passive (P) relations shows that his contrast between natures is a contrast between non-rational (NR) and rational (R) relations, not between passive (P) and active (A) relations. So for McDowell first nature consists of the NR relations (P-NR and A-NR), while second nature consists of the R relations (P-R and A-R). That is, first nature (or the “realm of law”) for McDowell consists of the physical laws of nature and the “immediate biological imperatives” of “mere animals”. This contrasts with what McDowell thinks of as second nature (or the “space of reasons”), which consists specifically of the human conceptual capacities of receiving impressions (P-R relations) and thinking about and judging impressions (A-R relations). In sum, according to McDowell’s more relaxed naturalism:

FIRST NATURE (realm of law) = P-NR relations & A-NR relations.
SECOND NATURE (space of reasons) = P-R relations & A-R relations.

What is sui generis and special about second nature, for McDowell, is that it is conceptual, that is, it involves rational (R) relations. Note that second nature for McDowell is not special because it involves active (A) relations. In fact he thinks that some active relations—namely the “biological imperatives” of non-conceptual creatures—fall into first nature (viz. A-NR relations). The point, simplified, is this: mere animals are “active”, but they are not “rational”, therefore they fall outside of second nature. And, because McDowell also equates non-conceptual NR relations with the merely “law-governed”, he places relations like animal reflexes and pains on a par with forces like inertia and gravity, i.e. in the “realm of law”. What is more,

modern natural science” (MW, p. 84). And, he says that, “It is part of what I want to insist on that we are animals too, not beings with a foothold outside of the animal kingdom” (MW, p. 183).

MW, p. 115. For McDowell, first nature is not special (or sui generis) because it involves only passive relations, for it also involves active relations, viz. “a merely animal mode of life”. Rather, what is distinctive about first nature, for McDowell, is its lack of concepts.

McDowell puts the point bluntly: “What we share with dumb animals is perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment. We can say there are two species of that, one permeated by spontaneity [P-R relations] and another independent of it [A-NR relations]” (MW, p. 69).
since the relations that non-concept-using animals engage in with the world are—pretty much by definition—“non-rational”, they are, for McDowell, therefore also non-free. For McDowell, it is the “extra-conceptual” nature of mere animals that precludes his naturalism from extending the term “agency” to them. Plus, we have already seen indications that McDowell’s view might lead to the conclusion that non-conceptual creatures may not even enjoy “experiences”. I will return to the topic of non-human animals in a later section. All that matters for now is just that it seems troubling to try to fit A-NR relations into first nature.

But there is a troubling implication in the other direction as well, one that concerns the placement of P-R relations in second nature. On McDowell’s story, we are supposed to conceive of P-R relations, i.e. impressions, as just like first nature relations—e.g. like the laws of gravity—in being passive. The only difference is that these relations are also conceptual; that is the quality that supposedly makes them moves in the space of reasons, i.e. relations in second nature. When McDowell talks about “re-enchanting” nature what he is basically doing is “enchanting” passive first nature relations with meaning or conceptual import. But, the sheer passivity of McDowell’s “new” second nature relations (i.e. P-R relations) makes them seem more like mere events—cogs in a determined chain of causal happenings—than aspects of our

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132 McDowell says that “The lack of freedom that is characteristic of merely animal life is not enslavement to the practical as opposed to the theoretical, but enslavement to immediate biological imperatives” (MW, p. 117).
133 McDowell says that “movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency” (MW, p. 89).
134 For example, McDowell admits that he is “committed to there being different stories to tell about perceptual goings-on in creatures with spontaneity and in creatures without it. In the one case we can apply the notion of experience, in a strict sense that connects it with conceptual capacities, and in the other case we cannot” (MW, p. 63).
135 For example, McDowell says that “Modern science understands its subject matter in a way that threatens, at least, to leave it disenchanted, as Weber put the point in an image that has become a commonplace. The image marks a contrast between two kinds of intelligibility: the kind that is sought by (as we call it) natural science, and the kind of intelligibility we find in something when we place it in relation to other occupants of the ‘logical space of reasons’, to repeat a suggestive phrase from Wilfrid Sellars. If we identify nature with what natural science aims to make comprehensible, we threaten, at least, to empty it of meaning” (MW, p. 70-1).
freedom and agency.\textsuperscript{136} And utilizing fancy hybrid notions like “agent causation” or “moves in the space of reasons” does nothing but paper-over the fact that these two relations (i.e., A and P relations) seem to clash.\textsuperscript{137}

10. I think that we should see the contrasting spaces of nature differently than McDowell does. Whereas he contrasts rational (R) relations and non-rational (NR) relations, I think the fundamental contrast to be drawn in nature is between active (A) relations and passive (P) relations. As I see it, the space of natural relations should look like this:

\begin{itemize}
  \item P-NR: Passive, non-rational relations (gravity, centripetal force, inertia, etc.).
  \item A-NR: Active, non-rational relations (feelings of pain, reflexes, growth, etc.).
  \item A-R: Active, rational relations (thinking, planning, speaking, etc.).
\end{itemize}

According to the inclusive naturalism I propose there is no special category of (hybrid) relation that is meant to tie P and A relations together, like I have suggested McDowell’s notion of P-R relations tries to do. \textit{First nature} in my view encompasses (or exhausts) all passive (P) relations, while \textit{second nature} encompasses (or exhausts) all active (A) relations. As I see it, P-NR relations are the proper target of a naturalism of first nature (e.g. physics), whereas both A-NR relations and A-R relations form the proper target of my envisaged naturalism of second nature (e.g. the life sciences). In fact, adding that passive (P) relations are non-rational (NR) is really

\textsuperscript{136} It would be tempting to quarrel with McDowell that, “such passive happenings—what he calls ‘impressions’—could be happening anywhere in nature, why think they must be localized in organisms, like you and me?” McDowell again uses the concept of second nature to tie impressions to linguistic practices: so being initiated into the space of reasons is exclusively a human thing, coming about through normal maturation and the development of young language learners.

\textsuperscript{137} Part of the reason that McDowell fails to see this is because he harbors “a causal picture of natural relations” (CPN) and so holds that all four relations must be just species of causal relations. That is, he is a monist about natural relations: they must all be causal. But, he is also pluralistic when it comes to the causal relation: for him, it comes in four forms, two of which belong in \textit{first nature} and two of which belong in \textit{second nature}. In fact his “inclusive naturalism” can be summarized simply by saying hat it adds a new sort of causal relation, viz. what I have labeled a P-R relation.
gratuitous; for on my account, unlike McDowell’s, there is only one sort of passive relation, and so there are no P-R relations to contrast with them. On my view the agential relations of all living organisms are to be contrasted with passive (P) forces like gravity. In sum, according to my inclusive naturalism:

FIRST NATURE (“realm of causal law”) = P relations.
SECOND NATURE = A-NR relations & A-R relations (“space of reasons”).

Since for me A-R relations (in the “space of reasons”) do not exhaust the relations of second nature, “the space of reasons” cannot be just another name for (i.e. cannot be synonymous with) “second nature”, as it is for McDowell. For me second nature includes more than just rational relations; it includes all of the active relations that living organisms can engage in. Hence, instead of equating second nature with the “space of reasons”, like McDowell does, my account needs a more inclusive term. I suggest the term “the world of the living”, since it seems to connote the right sort of contrast between the active relations of living organisms and the passive relations of inanimate first nature. Thus, for me, first nature is equivalent to “the realm of causal law”, and

SECOND NATURE = “The World of the Living.”

The way to distinguish between “the world of the living” and “the realm of causal law”, in my view, has to do with energy. Living organisms are disentropic entities; and in this way they are “active”. They temporarily resist the first natural forces of entropy by consuming and loved.

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138 Dewey also notices the need for new terminology. He says: “If we identify, as common speech does, the physical as such with the inanimate we need another word to denote the activity of organisms as such” (Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 254). Unfortunately Dewey settles on the term “psycho-physical”. I say that this is unfortunate because I believe that such a term can only reinforce a common misinterpretation of Dewey as a panpsychist. Rorty makes just such a charge in “Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin” (Rorty, *TP*, pp. 290-306). But really all Dewey means to do is to single out “the possession of certain qualities and efficacies not displayed by the inanimate” (Dewey, *EN*, p. 255).
utilizing sources of energy like food and sunlight. Meanwhile, everything else passively succumbs to the forces of first nature and increasing entropy.\textsuperscript{139} In a certain sense, life—the disentropic enterprise—is \textit{parasitic} on entropic nature. It is an “outgrowth”. And if its host dies (in this case a planet), it dies. The world of the living is in this way “precarious”.\textsuperscript{140} Certain conditions in first nature (e.g. planetary characteristics like temperature, radiation, atmosphere, etc.) have to be just right for the disentropic enterprise to get going.\textsuperscript{141} But, once it does get going, the emergence of active relations follows a unique, dynamic evolutionary development.\textsuperscript{142}

Respect for the distinctiveness of these second nature relations—that is, respect for the distinctiveness of the world of the living—could be called a “disentropic principle”.

This disentropic principle implies that the unity of nature is not to be found in a unity of relations. And once we realize that the quest for the unity of nature no longer requires us to be

\textsuperscript{139} I first heard of the notion of life as a “disentropic enterprise” from Donald Scherer, who proposed it as a definition of life in “A Disentropic Ethic” (\textit{The Monist}, (Oct., 1987), pp., 3-32). But perhaps the \textit{locus classicus} of the “disentropic view of life” comes from Erwin Schrödinger’s “What is Life”, 1944 (http://bill.srnr.arizona.edu/classes/182/Lecture\%202007-01/What\%20is\%20Life/What\%20is\%20Life.pdf). Prior to that, Dewey gives a similar account of life when he says that “the difference between the animate plant and the inanimate iron molecule is not that the former has something in addition to physico-chemical energy; it lies in the \textit{way} in which physico-chemical energies are interconnected and operate” (John Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, p. 252). He also says that, “Empirically speaking, the most obvious difference between living and non-living things is that the activities of the former are characterized by needs, by efforts which are active demands to satisfy needs, and by satisfactions.” Dewey describes this statement in detail. He says: “In making this statement, the terms need, effort and satisfaction are primarily employed in a biological sense. By need is meant a condition of tensional distribution of energies such that the body is in a condition of uneasy or unstable equilibrium. By demand or effort is meant the fact that this state is manifested in movements which modify environing bodies in ways which react upon the body, so that its characteristic pattern of active equilibrium is restored…” (\textit{Experience and Nature}, pp. 252-3).

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 40-77.

\textsuperscript{141} Understanding these “conditions” would be a matter for empirical science and so would fall outside of the scope of my topic, which is strictly philosophical.

\textsuperscript{142} Put differently, the point is that first nature does not “evolve” in the same way that second nature does. Thus, the term “evolution” should not, technically, be used to describe the progress of events in first nature. Or, the “evolution” of first nature (e.g. “the evolution of the solar system”) should be distinguished from the “evolution” of second nature (e.g. “the evolution of species”). Peirce’s concept of “tychism” is perhaps a better descriptor for evolutionary processes in first nature. Although the force of a blast like the \textit{Big Bang} can, in principle at least, be precisely measured, the trajectory and orientation of the spewing debris cannot. Some pieces may spin and spiral (into galaxies possibly) while others become “charged” or changed and explode again; but every piece—from the most miniscule components of atoms to the greatest expansive nebulae—will be “ringing” with the effects of that “explosion”. The resulting occurrences or happenings can be said to “evolve” or “unfold” only in the sense of succumbing to, rather than resisting, the increase of entropy.
causal monists about relations, the concept of a relation called “agent causation” or the idea of a P-R relation starts to look like a suspicious hybridization of two radically distinct kinds of relations. Instead of conflating agential relations and (non-agential) causal relations, our more inclusive naturalism ought to see them as distinctive sorts of relations; the mistake is to try to (conceptually) graft the one relation on to the other. McDowell makes this mistake when he conceives of “experience” as a passive relation to the world—a P-R relation—in which one is acted upon (e.g. presented with an impression). For some reason, McDowell and others think that describing “experience” with phrases like “being acted upon” and “the impact of external reality” (and other similar causal-sounding phrases) is supposed to make it look more like a “natural” relation.

11. One way to view my argument in this chapter is as an attempt to explain why we must reject McDowell’s notion of P-R relations. The reasons that I give for rejecting P-R relations fall into three broad categories. First, there are reasons having to do with naturalism. The idea that

143 Dewey says that there is a “tendency…to carry unification from an actual objective and experiemental enterprise, limited to particular situations where it is needed, into an unrestricted, wholesale movement which ends in an all-absorbing dream” (Experience and Nature, p. 68).

144 Of course there is nothing wrong, per se, with using the word “cause” in ordinary language to describe what agents do and undergo, but we should not let the way we talk distort our scientific understanding of nature. As pragmatic naturalists we should defend agential relations in ways that portray them as more than just cause-effect relations. In my view, this avoids what Dewey calls “the dogma of the superior reality of ‘causes’” (John Dewey, Experience and Nature, p. 252). But, S. Morris Eames interprets Dewey’s point differently. He says: “If the inquiry is part of physics, the causal law may be stated in mechanistic terms, for there are mechanisms in nature. If the inquiry is part of biology, causes may be stated in terms of organic development. If the inquiry is part of psychology, causes may be stated in terms of such conditions as motives and purposes” (S. Morris Eames, Pragmatic Naturalism: An Introduction, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 90). Eames’s suggestion here is that pragmatic naturalism should be inclusive or pluralistic about causal relations. But I think that we need to be pluralistic not just about causal relations, but about natural relations in general. And so we should wonder (as Eames does not): what is gained by (what is the utility of) our strict adherence to the causal relation? Eames and others seem to see this adherence to the causal relation as the only way to secure the continuity of nature. My point, however, is that this typical reliance upon the causal relation (as a unifier) actually endangers, rather than preserves, the idea of a unity in nature. The causal relation seems to “alienate” the agential relation. This problem is well put by Jennifer Hornsby, who says: “When the relations between agents and the events that are their actions is understood, it will not seem possible to locate actions among a causal flux in which agents might play no role” (Agency and Alienation, in Naturalism in Question, ed. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 176).
there needs to be a (hybrid P-R) kind of relation that mediates between the passive structure of
the first natural world and the “active” things that concept-using humans do stems (largely) from
a restrictive naturalism that only counts passive relations as truly “natural”. And in spite of what
he says, McDowell is motivated by just such a restrictive, monistic naturalism. But, when the
disentropic principle is respected we can see (and so allow) that there are two distinct sorts of
relations going on in nature: inanimate relations passively succumb to increasing entropy, while
the (dis-entropic) agential relations of living organisms resist (temporarily) the path of increasing
entropy. Thus agential relations need not be naturalized by reducing them to—or integrating
them with—some (more fundamental) type of relation that is non-agential, non-organic, and non-
active.

Second, there are epistemological reasons for rejecting P-R relations that involve the use
of a particular conception of “experience”. This topic will be discussed in the next section. The
idea is that McDowell’s conception of experience as a P-R relation reflects a failure to see
experience as an active relation. He conceives of “experience” as merely a passive
“undergoing”. This places the activity of knowing (i.e. the normative game of giving and asking
for reasons) on the opposite side of an active-passive dualism. As a result the activity of
knowing retreats into the “spectating” mind. A proper respect for the disentropic principle,
however, provides a conception of experience as an active relation of doing and undergoing.
The activity of knowledge, on this view, is just a small part of the broader experiential activities
of coping and interacting with the environment.

The third sort of reason is basically metaphysical; it has to do with experiential freedom
and agency. Not only does the passive conception of experience make the activity of knowing
retreat into the mind, it makes freedom itself seem to retreat into the mind and away from
experience. In other words, McDowell’s conception of experience as a P-R relation does not allow for a realistic conception of free-agency. But, pluralism with regard to natural relations can allow us to conceive of active, disentropic relations as being distinguishable by the very fact that they are not passively determined in the way that first nature relations are. I focus on this topic in section four.

The concluding section of this chapter focuses on some of the more specific consequences that surround McDowell’s failure to respect the disentropic principle. For one thing, that failure results in a picture in which non-human animals lack agency and even experience. But, my point is that there is a continuity among active relations (which we share with all living things) that stems from the fact that they are disentropic relations. Thus animal relations are much more like human relations than they are like the mechanistic, determined relations of first nature. I also take up the topic of learning, and I suggest that McDowell’s picture of experience as a passive relation makes learning impossible.

I want to conclude this section by reiterating the fact that McDowell’s narrow conception of “activity” and “experience” is largely motivated by the same thing that makes notions like “agent causation” look appealing: viz. the view that we must fit agency into the monistic, passive structure of causal relations. My different separation of natures—i.e. my pluralism of natural relations—is, in the main, a denial that there is any need to try to unify nature in this way. And so my complaint against McDowell’s naturalism is that re-enchanting nature with concepts (such that experiences count as already conceptual) does no good if experiences are still just passive relations; for then they cannot be properly thought of as aspects of our agency. Rather, experiences (i.e. impressions) turn out to be external impingements upon an agency (a freedom)—consisting of a faculty of spontaneity—that is isolated from action. And so, if we
cannot reconstruct agency out of passive relations, then there can be no proper conception of “agent causation” either, for that concept requires fitting active relations onto the passive structure of causation—much like trying to fit square pegs into round holes. Since cause-effect relations are passive relations, and passive relations are opposed to active relations, causal relations and agential relations cannot be coherently combined. And, if rational relations are active, then the notion of a passive rational (P-R) relation is an oxymoron; and so too is the notion of “agent causation”. The assumption that there is a relation of agent causation (or space-of-reasons causation) that can be used to naturalize experience and intentionality is yet another philosophical dogma.

**Passivity, Presentationalism, and Knowledge**

1. In the last section I called into question the idea that agency, or active relations, can be combined with passive relations to form one (P-R) relation (e.g. “agent causation” or “space-of-reasons causation”). In this section I am going to call into question the idea that knowledge can be compatible with the passivity of experience (i.e., with P-R relations).

   McDowell, as we have repeatedly seen, emphasizes the passivity of the experiential relation. Why does he do this? I think that his reasons for doing so are twofold. The first

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145 I do, however, concede that the word “cause” can be used to explain both what happens in first nature and what happens in second nature, i.e. the doings and undergoing of living organisms. But, that is not to concede that there is one unitary relation that underlies each deployment of the explanatory phrase “A caused B”. I admit that the idea of one thing (A) coming before another thing (B) and producing it (i.e. the sequential order) is not something that we can just eliminate from language, and I am not suggesting that we should. Rather, my point is that it has been extremely difficult for anyone to see that there is a multiplicity of natural relations because the word “cause” has the role it does: viz. as the central term in our linguistic mode of the explanation of all events. This fact is also, I aver, what has been responsible for the seeming unassailability of a certain monistic conception of naturalism. (See note 56 above.)

146 Getting rid of agent causation is part and parcel of getting rid of the notion of passive rational relations. The notion of agent causation involves an attempt to squeeze active relations into passive relations.

147 Again, for example, he says that “The view I am recommending is that even though experience is passive, it draws into operation capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity” (MW, p. 13). For him experiences are
reason has to do with naturalism. He continues to think that in order to understand experience naturalistically—that is, in order to fit it into the causal picture of nature—we must understand experience as a passive relation or occurrence.\textsuperscript{148} The previous sections were aimed at undermining this passive conception of nature. The second reason, however, involves an epistemological point.\textsuperscript{149} McDowell thinks that experience must be viewed as a passive relation in order to ensure that it can be a proper constraint (or “friction”) on what we think about the world.\textsuperscript{150} And, according to McDowell, in order for it to be a proper rational constraint experience must not only be passive, it must also be conceptual (i.e., a P-R relation). In this section I am going to argue that McDowell’s notion of the experiential relation, conceived as the “impressions” and are “passive occurrences” (\textit{MW}, p. 22). And, he urges that, “in order to escape the oscillation, we need a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive.” The only qualification is that these “passive occurrences” “reflect conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity” (\textit{MW}, p. 23).

\textsuperscript{148} Although McDowell admits that “experience is passive”, he would probably want to reject my description of his view as a “passive view of nature”; but I am suggesting that he is nonetheless committed to such a view. What is more, I am suggesting that it is a remnant of the very “disenchanted view of nature” [DVN] that he claims to have overcome. In the last two sections I tried to show how he still remains tied to such a DVN. I did so, in part, by connecting the character of causal relations (which McDowell admits exhaust the sphere of natural relations) with passive relations and by connecting his claim that “the idea of receiving an impression is the idea of a transaction in nature” with the claim that impressions are “impingements by the world” and are “passive” (\textit{MW}, p. xv). Indeed, I would say that McDowell is committed to what David Macarthur calls “a causal account of the mind”, in which “the mind is thought of as nothing but a realm of efficient causal states, events, and processes” (David Macarthur, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” in \textit{Naturalism in Question}, p. 110). Furthermore, even if McDowell were to object that he conceives only of first nature relations as passive, his claim is still that second nature relations (at least impressions) have to “fit” in (somehow) with the admittedly passive structure of the first nature relations. (For McDowell “fit” would imply “synthesis” rather than (bald-naturalistic) “reduction”). And I am objecting even to the more minimal idea of “fit”. In fact the point of my quibbles about where to draw the line between the two naturalisms is to stress that active second nature relations precisely cannot “fit” with first nature relations, because the latter are passive relations. That line is drawn for us by nature; and so it must be discovered; it cannot be constructed. I will defend these claims at greater length in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{149} McDowell specifically distinguishes between a (transcendental) worry about intentionality and a worry about knowledge. He describes the former worry as involving the (“how possible?”) question: “how can exercises of spontaneity bear on a reality outside the sphere of thinking at all?” He says that the latter, “specifically epistemological form” of the question is: “how can exercises of spontaneity amount to knowledge?” (\textit{MW}, p. 15)

\textsuperscript{150} In fact, McDowell describes “the Given” as “a response to a way of thinking that underlies the familiar philosophical anxiety about empirical knowledge.” Roughly, Givenness is “the idea that truth and knowledge depend on rational relations to something outside the conceptual realm” (\textit{MW}, p. 15-16). We have seen that McDowell’s preferred givenness—small “g”—meets this “rational constraint” without the need to conceive of relations that extend “outside the conceptual realm.”
passive reception of conceptual impressions, actually makes the knowledge relation impossible.\(^{151}\)

Our empirical thinking, according to McDowell, must be answerable to the world for its truth or falsity. And, although thinking, for McDowell, is essentially active (a freedom of spontaneity), it cannot be completely unlimited or unconstrained. The world must provide an external constraint (or friction) on our empirical thinking. McDowell locates this constraint in the passivity of experience. For McDowell it is the passivity of experience that puts it in a position to provide (or serve as) evidence for empirical beliefs: experience can then function as a tribunal. But experience cannot “return evidence” in this way if, because it is a natural, passive relation to the world, it is thought to take place without (the use of) concepts. For McDowell, if experience is just a realm of law event, then it cannot provide the type of content (viz. conceptual content) that can enter into relations in the space of reasons (i.e. normative, grounding relations).

The stipulation that only conceptually structured entities can enter into relations in the space of reasons (and thus into knowledge relations) flows from the principle of psychological nominalism: the notion that “all awareness is a linguistic affair.” This same principle lies behind Davidson’s slogan that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” as well as McDowell’s modified version of that slogan: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts.”\(^{152}\) Recall also, from the last chapter, that Davidson, Rorty, and McDowell all agree on this one principle. But what does this principle mean for epistemology when it is held in conjunction with the view that all natural relations are passive? This section will attempt to provide an answer to that question.

\(^{151}\) We can put the naturalistic and the epistemological points together by saying that, for McDowell, in order to have empirical knowledge nature must impose a limit on our freedom of thought.

\(^{152}\) MW, p. 143, emphasis added. Rorty puts the point similarly: “The crucial premise of this [Sellars’s] argument is that there is no such thing as a justified belief which is nonpropositional, and no such thing as a justification which is not a relation between propositions” (Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 183).
2. Evidence of the effects of this combination of psychological nominalism with the passive view of natural relations can be found in Rorty’s and Davidson’s conclusion that “there is nothing distinctive left to call empiricism.” Rorty finds that adherence to psychological nominalism means that (passive) sensory experience can no longer have any sort of epistemological relevance.\(^{153}\) In fact Rorty goes as far as to suggests that talk of “experience” should be banished from the philosophical lexicon altogether.\(^{154}\) McDowell however re-enchants nature just enough to allow it to contain passive, rational relations (i.e. P-R relations).\(^{155}\) This move sets up passive sensory experiences (he thinks) with the capability of returning (conceptual) “verdicts”, and so it breathes new life into empiricism.\(^{156}\) Nonetheless, both accounts seem to be responding to a clash between the principle of psychological nominalism and a passive conception of the experiential relation. Rorty just gives up that conception of “experience”, while McDowell redefines it (as a P-R relation) to better cohere with the principle of psychological nominalism.

\(^{153}\) And, Marc Joseph describes Davidson’s view like this: “Certainly, our sensations are causal intermediaries between the world and our beliefs and utterances, but the point is that our sensations play no epistemic role, in particular, they do not play the epistemic role that empiricism assigns to them, as the ultimate foundation for our beliefs about the world” (Marc Joseph, *Donald Davidson*, p. 182).

\(^{154}\) Of course this move makes it difficult, as McDowell has repeatedly complained, to make sense of what our empirical beliefs are about; empirical thought as he says would lack “friction”. To put the same objection in a Wittgensteinian way: whatever seems right would be right (Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 258). Rorty would probably not deny this as a characterization of his view, except that he would add that by “right” he means not “correspondence to reality” but only “subject to the conventions of communicative solidarity”. He says that “things in the world do not make sentences (nor, a fortiori, beliefs) true” (Rorty, *ORT*, p. 116). This is why some label him a “linguistic idealist”.

\(^{155}\) In terms of McDowell’s spatial metaphor the point is that, although experience is external to the faculty of active thinking it is not external to the space of concepts. For McDowell, once the experiential relation is seen as rational, then experience can exhibit intentionality; and with that, it can supply the type of content (to the active faculty of judging) that can support claims of knowledge. To do this McDowell extends spontaneity out to our involuntarily-triggered faculty of receptivity.

\(^{156}\) Rorty agrees. He says: “McDowell is just the philosopher you want if you fear losing your grip on the notion of ‘perceptual experience’…” He has rehabilitated empiricism” (Rorty, “The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” *TP*, p. 150). “Of course,” Rorty adds, “I do not want such a…rehabilitation…I see nothing worth saving in empiricism.”
For McDowell experience (receptivity) is passive, whereas thinking (spontaneity) is active. The thing that makes thinking “active”, according to McDowell, is the involvement of concepts. (This point combines psychological nominalism with a Kantian view of active relations.) This sounds like a very narrow definition of “active”, but McDowell tries to reassure us by saying that these (active) concepts can also be passively employed: experience itself can be a matter of receiving conceptual sensory impressions, “impacts of the world on our senses” that, “impose rational demands on our empirical thinking.”

This is where McDowell’s Kantian conception of the co-operation of receptivity and spontaneity comes in. It is by dint of the fact that concepts are products of spontaneity, that their employment in experience, though passive, can link experience to an “active” faculty of understanding. This position allows McDowell to go on to claim that such conceptual content can be both passively received in experience and (then also) actively employed in thinking and judging. In this regard, it seems that McDowell understands experiential content as capable of playing a dual role: first, it can be (passively) received by the senses, and second, it can be (actively) employed in thought. McDowell’s primary concern in *Mind and World* is to secure just such a notion of empirical content. He argues that the content passively received in experience—although not yet knowledge—is in a form that is amenable to knowledge, which is to say that it is already conceptual.

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157 *MW*, p. 139.
158 For example, McDowell states that “The conceptual capacities that are passively drawn into play in experience belong to a network of capacities for active thought, a network that rationally governs comprehension-seeking responses to the impacts of the world on sensibility” (*MW*, p. 12).
159 His claim is that “spontaneity extends all the way out to the content of experience” (*MW*, p. 13). The point of doing this is that it allows him to say that “That things are thus and so” can be both “the content of” an experience and that “it can also be the content of a judgement” (*MW*, p. 26).
160 The point, in McDowell’s own words, is that “a subject is passively saddled with conceptual contents” (*MW*, p. 31). This view allows McDowell to hold that “The constraint [on one’s faculty of spontaneity] comes from outside thinking, but not from outside what is thinkable.” That is, although being “passively saddled with conceptual content” is not itself an “act of thinking,” it nonetheless provides one access to “thinkable contents” (*MW*, p. 28). This aspect of McDowell’s view was taken up in greater detail in the last chapter.
whether or not we agree to conceive of that “content” as “conceptual”. The question is this: why
is the knowledge relation seen as a separate and distinct relation from the experiential relation? \[161\]

I think the main reason that McDowell’s account separates knowledge from experience is
to allow the knowledge relation to be a matter of “viewing” and endorsing an experiential
content. In that way, empirical knowledge can be *epistemically* constrained by an experience;
we can be “answerable” to the world. Accordingly, the knowledge relation is understood by
McDowell to involve an “active” faculty (of spontaneity) whereas the experiential relation is said
to involve a “passive” faculty (of receptivity). In this respect, one might even be inclined to
think that McDowell’s account harbors an “active-passive dualism” (which he “bridges” with
concepts). On the one hand, for McDowell, there are passive rational (P-R) relations—viz. the
reception of conceptual impressions, and, on the other hand there are fully rational (A-R)
relations—relations that we are *actively* in control of, e.g. thinking and judging. McDowell
clearly places knowing on the “active” side of the dualism. But experience is said to be passive
and involuntary. We are in control of the one but not the other; thought can be entered into
voluntarily but experience cannot. (For McDowell, when one opens one’s eyes, one is “saddled”
with content.)

So, on McDowell’s picture active knowledge relations occur in a different way, or at a
separate level, from the experiential relation—which is passive. And the one (passive
experience) is to be conceived as “the tribunal” for the other (active knowing), just as in the
picture given by foundationalist empiricism. Thus on McDowell’s view coming to know
something looks like it must involve a two-part process: first, there is the *passive* reception of a
conceptual content (an experience), and then there is an *active* judgment, or endorsement, of that

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\[161\] Briefly, McDowell answers in the affirmative in order to allow himself to talk of experience as a tribunal.
content (a case of knowledge). Our freedom of action (i.e., our freedom from constraint or determination) lies entirely in the second part of this process: in the thinking part. In the next chapter I am going to question whether—if the extent of our freedom lies only in our freedom of thought—this deserves to be called “freedom” or “agency” at all. But for now I want to put off that issue and focus on the idea of a two-part knowledge process. I want to argue that it is a mistake to conceive of a “faculty” of knowing as something separate from a “faculty” of experiencing (i.e. receptivity). Following Dewey, I am going to complain that such a view amounts to a “spectator theory of knowledge.”

3. Dewey criticizes traditional empiricism for assuming that “the “knower” is in the position of a spectator, who makes judgments or discovers facts about the world without otherwise acting on it.” This view models “the process of “knowing” on the model of vision.” As Dewey puts

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162 McDowell says that “Minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be. How one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it” (MW, p. 11).
163 In fact, it may be helpful to think of the second (active) part of this process as encompassing what McDowell thinks of as “second nature” and the first (passive) part as being grounded in “first nature”. Accordingly, when it comes to the empirical world, the “freedom” of the “active” thinking part is severely restricted. In fact, by default, it is determined by worldly facts: experience just is a direct openness to facts that passively impress themselves on one; it is “object-dependent”.
164 McDowell repeatedly uses this “faculty” terminology. Here, as he admits, he follows Kant, saying that “the understanding is a faculty of spontaneity” (MW, p. 12). He says also that “conceptual capacities belong to a faculty of spontaneity” (MW, p. 15). And, he says that “The idea of a faculty of spontaneity is the idea of something that empowers us to take charge of our lives” (MW, p. 43). And, he explains that, “Making judgement fundamental to our conception of concepts brings out at least part of the point of saying, with Kant, that conceptual capacities belong to a faculty of spontaneity” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” Reason and Nature, p. 11). “Spontaneity,” he says, is the “faculty that is exercised in actively self-critical control of what one thinks, in light of the deliverances of experience” (MW, p. 49, emphasis added throughout). The idea is that spontaneity is an active faculty—a faculty of freedom, whereas “experience”, which gets equated with a faculty of receptivity, is a passive faculty—a faculty of constraint by the world. On this point, my complaint against McDowell has been that it is of no help to turn to the Kantian notion of experience as a co-operation of spontaneity and receptivity. The addition of spontaneity to receptivity doesn’t make “experience” “active”; it just makes it conceptual and passive. Thus McDowell equivocates between the special Kantian meaning of “active” as involving concepts and the normal meaning of “active” as physically or mentally doing something.
165 Dewey uses this title to lampoon a broad range of traditional epistemological theories. Here I am restricting it to any epistemological theory which maintains a separation between the experiential relation and judgment, i.e. the knowledge relation.
166 Steven Toulmin, “Introduction” to The Quest for Certainty, Vol. 4 of Dewey’s Later Works, p. x.
it, “all [spectator theories of knowledge] flow from the separation (set up in the interest of the quest for absolute certainty) between theory and practice, knowledge and action.” I will argue that this separation manifests itself in McDowell’s conception of the distinction between passive experience and active judging or knowing. I will also suggest that a similar commitment to an active-passive dualism is what forces Rorty and Davidson to renounce the concept of an “experiential relation” and to replace it with an idea of knowledge as exhausted by linguistic and inferential relations (i.e., word-word relations as opposed to word-world relations).

Rorty interprets Dewey’s critique of the spectator view of knowledge very narrowly: i.e. as directed specifically against representationalist theories of knowledge, where what is “viewed” or “seen” is not the world itself but rather an intermediary or representation of it. Rorty, for instance, picks on Locke’s empiricism as an example of such a representationalist manifestation of the spectator theory of knowledge. Rorty explains that, for Locke, the mind is conceived as something like a wax tablet, or *tabula rasa*, upon which the world impresses itself. These impressed “representations”, passively embedded on the tablet, are in turn “perpetually under the gaze of the unblinking Eye of the Mind.” This so-called “Eye” is a parody of Locke’s conception of the “mind” as a “faculty which was aware of the representations, a faculty which judged the representations rather than merely had them.” The “Eye” in this case is the “spectator”. On this (traditional empiricist) account, what we (i.e. our minds) are aware of—what is in *view*—is not the world itself; rather, from the Eye’s perspective, the tablet actually gets in the way of our ability to “know”—i.e. *view*—the world. So the trouble is that the

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167 Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, pp. 19-20. Here Dewey does not mean by “action” what McDowell means, i.e. the connection of activity with concept use. Although Dewey’s use certainly would include the use of concepts, it is much broader than that: it would include non-cognitive, non-conceptual activity as well. Thus “activity” does not represent a class that would exclude all non-conceptual (or non-cognitive) events.

spectating “Eye” is “veiled” from reality (i.e., the “external world”) by representational intermediaries.

This version of the spectator theory naturally leads to skepticism regarding our knowledge of the external world.\(^{169}\) Rorty traces this empiricist manifestation of skepticism to a Cartesian epistemology based on the indubitability of internal “privileged representations”\(^{170}\). On Rorty’s view, the problem with this Cartesian way of thinking about the mind, is that it “directs us to look for picturing (correspondence) relations between fundamentally different realms, e.g., mental and physical.”\(^{171}\)

McDowell, however, shows us that there are other “picturing” relations besides “correspondence”. He, for example, offers an “openness view” in which there is not a correspondence (between a representation and the world) but rather an *identity* between the way the world is and the way it is presented in experience. The world contains a fact, e.g., that there is a plastic cup on the table, and the mind is open to that fact—the layout of reality itself can be what is presented to the mind’s “Eye”. According to McDowell’s (non-traditional) version of empiricism the “Eye” is not directed inward, but outward. On McDowell’s view there are no intermediaries in Rorty’s sense of “privileged representations”; the “Eye” is *open* to the world (not confined to an inner theater). So, when McDowell says—in the very first sentence of *Mind

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\(^{169}\) Rorty says that the “image of the Eye of the Mind...has often been accused of leading to the ‘veil of ideas’ and to solipsism” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 94).

\(^{170}\) Rorty says that “In Descartes’s conception—the one which became the basis for ‘modern’ epistemology—it is representations that are in the ‘mind’. The Inner Eye surveys these representations hoping to find some mark which will testify to their fidelity....Skepticism in the manner of Descartes’s *First Meditations* was a perfectly definite, precise, ’professional’ question: How do we know that anything which is mental represents anything which is not mental? How do we know whether the Eye of the Mind sees is a mirror...or a veil?” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 45-6)

\(^{171}\) David Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism*, p. 108. Rorty says that “Davidson’s point is that one can epistemologize meaning by tying it to the given [this is what McDowell does], or one can epistemologize truth by tying it to justification, but *either* tie-up will lead either to skepticism or to extravagantly complicated, ultimately unsuccessful attempts to evade skepticism. Either will lead us back into the maze of blind alleys which is the representationalist tradition. So the thing to do is to marry truth and meaning to nothing and nobody but each other” (Rorty, *ORT*, p. 154).
and World—that “concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world,” he does not mean (by “mediate”) that concepts stand in the way of that relation (as the tablet did in Locke’s view) but rather that concepts facilitate the knowledge relation by holding the (active) freedom of spontaneity and the passive faculty of receptivity together. For McDowell, the conceptual aspect is the synthesizing “glue” in the knowledge relation, so to speak, because it is the constant factor uniting passive experiences with the activities of spontaneity. On McDowell’s version of empiricism then, the spectator—the “Eye”—does not need to perform any special operation or interpretation on what is seen. This leads McDowell to conclude that his notion of experiential passivity is innocent (of the Myth of the Given), since it is not seen as involving either intermediaries or un-conceptualized presentations of the world. The interpretive step is replaced in McDowell’s view by a synthesizing step, in which—as if by second nature—the activity of concepts is already integrated into the passive reception of impressions.

But (as the word “already” indicates) this synthesis is not a conscious step at all. Indeed, it is meant to obviate the need for a third step in which one must make an inference about what the world is like based on an appearance or representation of it—a step in which one must interpret what is presented. Empirical knowledge, on McDowell’s direct presentationalist account, requires only two steps: a passive experience and an active endorsement of its

172 I think that it is appropriate to label McDowell’s openness view “presentationalism”: his view is a “presentational realism” that combines direct realism with conceptualism. He says that “we have no need to represent the relevant bit of the world to ourselves, as if in order to have something by which to guide what we do; we can guide what we do by the relevant bit of the world itself, directly presented as it is to our view” (McDowell, MKR, p. 273). And, evidence of his commitment to the spectator view comes out when he says that, “My suggestion is…that ‘this visual experience’ can signal a way in which a visual experience can be presented in a thought, made possible by the fact that the experience itself is presented to the mind by virtue of being enjoyed.” (McDowell, MKR, p. 266)

173 That is, we are not aware of it, though it is responsible for awareness itself. As Dewey explains, “In the Kantian scheme, the two [‘perception’ and ‘conception’] originally exist in independence of each other, and their connection is established by operations that are covert and are performed in the hidden recesses of mind, once for all.” Dewey contrasts this view with his conception of “experimental knowing”. He says, “The fundamental difference lies in the fact that…[for experimental knowing]…the distinction of sense and thought occurs within the process of reflective inquiry, and the two are connected together by means of operations outwardly performed” (Dewey, The Quest for Certainty, p. 137, see also pp. 18-19). This point is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s claim that “nothing is hidden”.
“content”. But, even with only two steps there is still a “spectator” in McDowell’s picture: it is just that the spectator now has the world itself in view rather than a mere representation or inner image of it. So the question is: how is McDowell’s presentationalism supposed to neutralize what is problematic about the spectator view of knowledge? As I will argue here (and in the next section), McDowell’s view has been specifically designed to neutralize and eliminate only one particular threat to the spectator view of knowledge: that is, that it leads to external world skepticism.

McDowell as we know is a quietist. And I think that he sees his presentationalism in this light: viz., as an attempt to quiet those critics of empiricism who, like Rorty, assume that a spectator-like view of knowledge must inevitably lead to external world skepticism of the “veil of ideas” sort. But in fact, like Rorty, McDowell too wants to do away with the notion of “inner representations”. Unlike Rorty, however, he does not want to give up the epistemological relevance of “experience”. To walk this fine line McDowell offers his “non-traditional empiricism”, which replaces “impressions” as representations of the world with “impressions” as direct presentations of it. McDowell is well aware of Davidson’s warning, which he quotes, that “if we picture experiences as emissaries, putatively informing us about the world, we have the problem that they ‘may be lying…we can’t swear intermediaries to truthfulness’.” But McDowell responds to this worry by suggesting that “the real trouble with conceiving experiences as intermediaries is that we cannot make sense of experiences, so conceived, as purporting to tell us anything, whether truthfully or not.” And if that is the worry (viz. that passive experience shields us off from the “external world”) then it can be corrected—or

174 He does not want to give up the idea (crucial for “objectivity”), for example, that the fact that “the cup is made of plastic” can be presented to one in experience; and, that that fact (the relevant “bit of the world”) can be what determines the truth or falsity of one’s belief that “the cup is made of plastic.” McDowell thinks that Rorty is wrong to give up experience and objectivity as a way of avoiding the problem of our knowledge of the external world. 175 MW, p. 143.
quieted—by simply re-conceiving experience as a direct “openness to the world” (rather than as an intermediary), so that “receptivity itself [can] impinge rationally on belief.” Thus McDowell thinks that his re-enchantment of nature in turn allows for a re-conception of experience as “passive openness”, i.e. as a P-R relation, a conception which he thinks can resuscitate the heart of empiricism in the face of Rorty’s and Davidson’s attack. He says that Rorty’s view makes it look compulsory not to think of knowledge as a natural phenomenon. But this merely reflects the fact that he does not consider a liberal naturalism. Liberal naturalism is immune to Rorty’s attack on the confusions of traditional epistemology.\footnote{McDowell, “Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind,” \textit{Naturalism in Question}, p. 97.} 

So, McDowell thinks that his new conception of the experiential relation as “passive openness” can fix (or quiet) the problems of “traditional epistemology” that Rorty attacks, specifically, skepticism with regard to our knowledge of the external world.

4. But, is external world skepticism the real problem with traditional epistemology’s spectator view, or is it just the tip of the iceberg? I will argue that it is just the tip of the iceberg and that the deeper problems lie with the conception of experience as passive (not with its being conceived as “non-conceptual”). So we can admit that McDowell’s response would quite the problems of the spectator view \textit{if} those problems were just the ones that Rorty identifies, viz. those associated with the notion of “inner representations”.\footnote{Rorty, e.g., identifies the problematic view as the idea “of a single inner space in which bodily and perceptual sensations…, mathematical truths, moral rules, the idea of God, moods of depression, and all the rest of what we now call ‘mental’ were objects of quasi-observation. Such an inner arena with its inner observer had been suggested at various points in ancient and medieval thought but it had never been taken seriously long enough to form the basis for a problematic. But the seventeenth century took it seriously long enough to permit it to pose the problem of the veil of ideas, the problem which made epistemology central to philosophy” (Rorty, \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature}, p. 50-1).} But, Rorty’s focus on
Rorty quotes C. I. Lewis who, in *Mind and the World Order*, claims that “one of the oldest and most universal philosophical insights” is the idea that

There are, in our cognitive experience, two elements; the immediate data, such as those of sense, which are presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction, or interpretation, which represents the activity of thought.\(^{179}\)

As Rorty sees it, this concept of “cognitive experience” is what props up the problematic epistemological enterprise of Modern philosophy to begin with. But it also sounds a lot like the view that McDowell himself proposes in *Mind and World*, except that McDowell would object to Lewis’s implication of a non-conceptual “Given” (big “G”) element in experience. Instead, McDowell would add that the conceptual “activity of thought” has already been passively employed in what’s “presented or given to the mind” in experience, so there is no need for a (third) step that involves an “interpretation” or “construction” of the deliverances of experience.\(^{180}\) Unlike Lewis’s conception of “cognitive experience”, McDowell’s does not involve “two elements”. Rather, it involves one element—a “conceptual content”—that can play two distinct roles: it can be passively received in experience and actively employed in thought. I think that McDowell specifically tailors this different conception of the content of “cognitive

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\(^{178}\) Fellow neopragmatist Hilary Putnam backs Rorty here when he says that “I believe that it is only by giving up this picture of perception as mediated by a set of “representations” in an inner theater that we will ever be able to escape from the endless recycling of positions that do not work in the philosophy of mind (not to mention a traditional epistemology and traditional metaphysics)” (Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, p. 102).


\(^{180}\) McDowell’s view ought to be seen as an advance over Lewis’s insofar as he rejects the idea that our (cognitive) “activity” is confined to interpretation. He argues that there is no need for such an interpretive step, our conceptual scheming “activity” reaches right out into the world thanks to the effects of second nature on our faculty of receptivity.
experience” to avoid Rorty’s criticism that the problem with an epistemology spelled out in terms of (passive) impressions is that it falls into the Myth of the Given. McDowell says that

The position I am urging appeals to receptivity to ensure friction, like the Myth of the Given, but it is unlike the Myth of the Given in that it takes capacities of spontaneity to be in play all the way out to the ultimate grounds of empirical judgements.  

Here McDowell admits that his re-interpretation of “experience” is just like the Myth of the Given, in that it conceives experience as a matter of passive receptivity. So McDowell’s re-interpretation of “experience” avoids the Myth of the Given only by adding (to that account) that the “content” delivered by the passive receptions of experience is also “conceptual content”.

But, even if we grant that McDowell’s view (as I have described it) can make a clean escape from a Myth that leads to external world skepticism, we still have reason to be suspicious of his re-interpretation of “experience”. Rorty makes a good point when, in response to Lewis’s “insight”, he complains that

The term experience has come to be the epistemologists’ name for their subject matter, a name for the ensemble of Cartesian cogitations, Lockean ideas. In this sense, ‘experience’ is a term of philosophical art (quite distinct from the everyday use).

I think that Rorty is right to be suspicious of the narrow and technical use that the term “experience” has had in traditional philosophy—a suspicion that would also apply to McDowell’s concept no less than to Lewis’s. But Rorty’s complaint about the term “experience”

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181 MW, p. 67.
182 Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 150.
is not that it is passive. Quite the contrary, Rorty’s complaint is that “experience” can’t be said to comport with “representations” of a conceptual nature at all (i.e. it can’t be epistemologically relevant), because our relation to the world is exhausted by passive, causal relations.183

5. Unlike McDowell, Rorty sees no utility (only futility) in the attempt to combine the passive conception of “experience” with Sellars’s “‘psychological nominalism’—the doctrine ‘that all awareness is a linguistic affair’. ”184 This doctrine stipulates that knowing is a normative activity involving only relations between beliefs.185 But that’s not the kind of relation that we have with the world in “experience”—at least not if it is conceived as a passive, causal relation. Thus Rorty thinks that McDowell’s attempted revival of “experience” flies in the face of the principle of psychological nominalism; and he mocks McDowell’s view as an attempt to make the “nonhuman world a conversational partner” in the game of giving and asking for reasons.186

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183 In fact, because Rorty views human experiential relations with the world as solely involving causal relations he thinks that following Sellars’s psychological nominalism requires us to reject the reason-giving potential of experience. And that is why he (mis)interprets himself as a “bald naturalist” in McDowell’s sense. He says, “I was led to a baldly naturalistic view by Sellars’ attack on the Myth of the Given and Davidson’s on the dualism of scheme and content. I was perplexed, therefore, to find that McDowell heartily endorses the former. I had thought that once one follows Sellars in distinguishing between the causal antecedents of a belief and its place in the logical space of reasons, McDowell’s questions about the relation between Reason and Nature no longer need asking. I was equally perplexed by the fact that McDowell combined an indebtedness to Davidson with a willingness to take Kant’s distinction between receptivity and spontaneity—that paradigmatic scheme-content distinction—with entire seriousness” (Rorty, “McDowell, Davidson, and Spontaneity,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research (June 1998), p. 389). McDowell responds by saying: “That is not what ‘bald naturalism’ means in my book. The position Rorty espouses under the title of bald naturalism is a refusal to choose from among candidates for ways of describing reality, a refusal to select one candidate as filling the bill on the ground that it captures reality’s intrinsic character. Rorty’s position rejects the very idea that reality has an intrinsic character. Bald naturalists in my sense, in contrast, hold that reality does have an intrinsic character, which is captured by one of the candidate vocabularies for describing reality, namely the language of the natural sciences” (McDowell, “Reply to Rorty,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research (June 1998), p. 419-20).


185 Rorty says that “We psychological nominalists are the people whom [Michael] Ayers describes as linguistic idealists. We try to take the sting out of the latter epithet by saying, with Davidson, that it is ‘futile to reject or accept the slogan that the real and the true are “independent of our beliefs”’” (Rorty, “The Contingency of Philosophical Problems: Michael Ayers on Locke,” TP, p. 282, he quotes Davidson, “The Structure and Content of Truth,” Journal of Philosophy 87 (June 1990), p. 305).

186 Richard Rorty, “John McDowell’s Version of Empiricism,” TP, p. 148. Rorty, with Sellars, thinks that we can only engage in that normative activity with others who have also been initiated into the space of reasons. Rorty says that “Sellars’s psychological nominalism…is a remark about the difference between facts and rules, a remark to the
McDowell would no doubt object that Rorty mischaracterizes his view, and that, in fact, his point is precisely to show how the principle of psychological nominalism can indeed be made *compatible* with the passivity of experience (i.e., if we can understand experiential passivity as involving a second nature that has *already* conceptually synthesized what’s received as experiential content). But Rorty’s interpretation of psychological nominalism is simply different: he takes it to imply that the activity of knowing is *incompatible* with the (causal) passivity of experience; and that is why he boldly advocates dropping the philosophical enterprise of epistemology altogether.

This “oscillation” between Rorty and McDowell could not occur unless both philosophers were in agreement that “experience” is passive (based on a “causal view of nature”) and that “knowing” is active (based on a “linguistic-practice” or “theoretical” view of knowledge, i.e. psychological nominalism). Hence, this oscillation seems to turn on the active-passive dualism between the (linguistic) activity of knowing and the passivity of experiencing.

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Effect that we can only come under epistemic rules when we have entered the community where the game governed by these rules is played” (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 187). But, Richard Gaskin takes the idea of the “world as a conversational partner” very seriously (i.e. literally) in his text *Experience and the World’s Own Language: A Critique of John McDowell’s Empiricism*. He says that, “McDowell’s appeal to the image of the non-human world as a sort of conversational partner fits with his persistent tendency to personalize the relationship which we have in experience with the world, as when he talks about the world’s ‘doing you favors, showing you a kindness, vouchsafing facts’.” But Gaskin thinks that McDowell should have *embraced*, rather than distanced himself from, the view of the world as a sort of “conversational partner”. In fact, Gaskin’s complaint is only with McDowell’s claim that objects speak to us “only because we have learned a human language” (McDowell, “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality,” p. 470). Instead, Gaskin says that “the position I am recommending is in a sense, no less that McDowell’s, idealistic: but it is a form not of Hegelian absolute idealism, nor of Kantian transcendental idealism, but of a relatively unpretentious *linguistic idealism*. The world is construed as propositionally structured, and worldly propositions themselves have, as Rorty puts it (meaning to cast aspersion on the position), a ‘sentence-like appearance’: hence my characterization of the structure of the world is ‘quasi-linguistic’” (Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 227). Gaskin’s position differs from McDowell’s only in that, as Gaskin puts it, “the world’s ‘testimony’ is delivered not in an empirical language, as testimony strictly so called is, but in its own language, which, as I have emphasized, is not one empirical language among others, but the transcendental basis of all empirical languages.” By “empirical language” Gaskin just means a human language, like English or Spanish. But in spite of his distinction between “languages”, Gaskin’s view, like McDowell’s, fails because it also takes the experiential relation to be passive. Making the experiential relation linguistic does not help if the relation is still *passive*.

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Rorty says that “McDowell wishes to revive the notion of sentience, even though he accepts psychological nominalism” (Rorty, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations,” in *TP*, p. 126).
McDowell tries to bridge this gap, between active (linguistic) relations on the one hand and passive (experiential) relations on the other, by saying that “concepts mediate” our direct “openness” (relation) to the world. But Rorty stands firm and rejects any sort of “mediation” or “gap-bridging”; he maintains instead that knowledge relations can only occur on the “active” (linguistic) side of the gap.\(^\text{188}\) He thus completely discounts the epistemological role of (passive) experiential relations.

Because of his strong interpretation of the principle of psychological nominalism, Rorty urges us to abandon the term “experience” altogether. But in doing so, Rorty blatantly ignores a different solution offered by one of his proclaimed heroes, John Dewey. Dewey definitely rejects the passive conception of experience, but in its place he proposes a radical re-defining of “experience” as involving the active relations of doing and undergoing.\(^\text{189}\) Rorty, however, thinks that Dewey’s attempt to re-define “experience” (like McDowell’s) is one of the places where Dewey went wrong. He says: “Dewey should have dropped the term ‘experience,’ not redefined it.”\(^\text{190}\) But I think that Rorty underestimates the power that re-conceiving experience in terms of active—rather than passive—relations can have, especially as a way of overcoming what is truly problematic about the spectator view of knowledge. But Rorty, like McDowell, can

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\(^\text{188}\) For example, Rorty says “I read Sellars and Brandom as pragmatists, because I treat psychological nominalism as a version of the pragmatist doctrine that truth is a matter of the utility of a belief rather than of a relation between pieces of the world and pieces of language” (Rorty, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representation,” \textit{TP}, p. 127). Rorty also admits that “We psychological nominalists are the people whom Ayers describes as linguistic idealists” (Rorty, “The Contingency of Philosophical Problems: Michael Ayers on Locke,” \textit{TP}, p. 282). In fact, McDowell, like Ayers, criticizes Rorty’s interpretation of psychological nominalism \textit{because} it leads him to “linguistic idealism”; the only difference is that McDowell refers to this view as a “frictionless spinning in the void”. Gaskin however thinks that “linguistic idealism” can be made “unpretentious” if it can be grounded in the idea that “The world is construed as propositionally structured, and worldly propositions themselves have, as Rorty puts it (meaning to cast aspersion on the position), a ‘sentence-like appearance’” (Gaskin, \textit{Experience and the World’s Own Language}, p. 227). Gaskin thus proposes an even more radical form of psychological nominalism than either Rorty or McDowell.

\(^\text{189}\) “Undergoing” too is “active” (despite the connotation) not because it can involve concepts but because it is inextricably linked to doing: experience is the \textit{continuity} of doing and undergoing, not one side of a separation between the two. Here “knowing” takes its place as just one more active relation of experience.

only see “experience” as a passive relation in which one is causally acted-upon by the world. This, however, is precisely what sets up the dualism between the activity of knowing about the world and the passivity of experiencing it.

In contrast to Rorty, therefore, I suggest that we follow Dewey’s lead and retain a concept of “experience”. We just have to avoid one particular conception of “experience”: one which, like McDowell’s and Rorty’s conception, construes experience as a passive relation. That is the idea of experience that will lead us to the spectator view of knowledge; for that is what leads us to see the relation between knowledge and experience on the model of vision or perception. It is only when “experience” is equated with passive perceptions (e.g. “impressions”) that the notion of “experience” takes on its special significance as “a term of philosophical art.” That is why, according to Dewey, “generations of thinkers” have held “as an unquestioned axiom the idea that knowledge is intrinsically a mere beholding or viewing of reality—the spectator conception of knowledge.” So, although Rorty was right to link the traditional concept of “experience” to the spectator conception of knowledge, he failed to see that what really motivates this conception—and with it the problems of traditional epistemology—is not just the thought that experience must be a “representational” relation, but, more broadly, the thought that experience must be a passive (non-agential) relation. That is why Rorty never takes Dewey’s re-definition of experience seriously. He thinks that the only way to re-define experience would be—as McDowell does—to pack some other (bogus) form of representational or informational content carrying capacity on top of the conception of experiences as passive.

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192 This is basically Rorty’s complaint against Kant’s move: describing passive experience as brought about via a “synthesis”. He says that, were it not for the “intuition-concept distinction”, “we would not know what counted as ‘experience’…For, once again, the notion of a ‘theory of knowledge’ will not makes sense unless we have confused
6. Dewey’s diagnosis of the problem at the heart of the spectator view involves contrasting two “starting points” from which the epistemological enterprise might begin. First, there is a “theoretical starting point” (TSP), which views the activity of knowing as a separate activity, distinct from experience, involving a special kind of mental or linguistic relation. Dewey sees this starting point as responsible for leading epistemology down the (garden) path to the spectator conception of knowledge. Dewey contrasts this with a second starting point (which he recommends), the “practical starting point” (PSP), which views the activity of knowing as continuous with the broader activities of experience and interaction.\footnote{Hildebrand constructs a diagram to depict Dewey’s view, and he describes it like this: “Knowledge (‘objects known’) lies inside ‘experience’ in the diagram because knowing [for Dewey] is one among many varieties of experience” (David Hildebrand, Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism, pp. 62-3).} This starting point requires a conception of experience as involving an active, rather than a passive, relation to the world.

The problem with traditional epistemology’s starting point, i.e. the TSP, according to Dewey, is that it makes “a definite separation between the world in which man thinks and knows and the world in which he lives and acts.”\footnote{John Dewey, The Quest for Certainty, p. 233.} This “definite separation” carries with it an active-passive dualism: the active control of thinking and knowing about the world contrasts with the passive occurrence of experiencing it. Plato’s theory of the “forms” is an early example of this sort of separation. Descartes’s starting point also, infamously, involves making such a “definite separation”, one that for him marks an ontological difference between substances, mental and causation and justification in the manner of Locke, and even then it will seem fuzzy until we have isolated some entities in inner space whose causal relations seem puzzling. ‘Concepts’ and ‘intuitions’ are exactly the entities required. If Kant had gone straightforward from the insight that ‘the singular proposition’ is not to be identified with the ‘singularity of a presentation to sense’...to a view of knowledge as a relation between persons and propositions, he would not have needed the notion of ‘synthesis’ (Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 152). I think that Rorty’s dismissal of McDowell’s re-conception of experience rests on similar grounds: viz. that McDowell’s notion of space-of-reasons causation (just like Kant’s synthesis) can offer no escape from the confusion of causation and justification.
The TSP however can take on a more subtle and modern guise when it is combined with the “linguistic turn” (in analytic philosophy).

Psychological nominalism—the view that “all awareness is linguistic awareness”—I aver, is a particular manifestation of the TSP. For the psychological nominalist the activity of knowing about the world is taken to be an entirely conceptual or linguistic matter. The problem is that this starting point immediately alienates ordinary agential experience from the activities of knowing. This aspect of the TSP is the common factor in both McDowell’s and Rorty’s views, and it leads them to worry about a distance between the “content” of a passive “experience” and the (linguistic) “activity” of knowing. McDowell tries to reconcile (or bridge) this dualism by making passive “experience” (already) linguistic or conceptual (i.e., a P-R relation), while Rorty simply refuses to acknowledge that knowing about the world can involve anything other than linguistic activity (for him knowledge involves a word-word relation not a word-world one). Thus the TSP makes empirical knowledge seem as if it must either be grounded on something passive (e.g., traditional, foundationalist empiricism and McDowell’s re-enchanted “impressions”) or else be holistically actuated by the activity of a language-using mind and so independent of experiential passivity (e.g., rationalist coherentism). The former concern drives McDowell to invent “conceptualized impressions”, while the latter concern drives Rorty to “linguistic idealism.”

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195 Rorty’s argument, for example, can be seen as sliding from the idea that our conceptual activities aren’t going to (be found to) comport with the causal passivity of experience to the conclusion that “experience” is epistemologically irrelevant and should be done away with in favor of “language use” or “belief”. But expelling the term “experience” does no good; for, when the notion of passivity gets packed into the very idea of a natural relation, it becomes impossible to reconcile “nature” with the activity of knowledge.

196 Linguistic idealism is, in this sense, similar to Cartesian rationalism. The similarity, I suggest, is grounded upon Davidson’s suggestion—which Rorty heartily endorses—that one’s beliefs are (mostly) intrinsically true. Rorty says that, “I can happily agree with Ayers…that we linguistic idealists coalesce real distinctions with distinctions of reason…For if we linguistic idealists could once get people to give up the question common to Aristotle and
The principle of psychological nominalism confines the activity of knowing, not to an immaterial mind, but rather to linguistic relations: to relations between “persons and propositions.”\textsuperscript{197} Ironically, psychological nominalism is often interpreted by its adherents as an attempt to avoid the theoretical starting point (at least in its Cartesian—“privileged access”—form), by dint of the fact that the public and shared nature of \textit{language} is supposed to give us enough of a foothold in practical activity to avoid the picture of the mind as removed (or “veiled”) from reality.\textsuperscript{198} But here our “practical activity” is taken to be confined to, and exhausted by, linguistic activity. In this way, “practical activity” is distanced from lived experience. The “space of reasons”—the sphere in which the activity of knowing takes place—thus becomes simply a “game of giving and asking for reasons.”\textsuperscript{199} The “practical” turn inspired by Wittgenstein and the pragmatists gets misunderstood to include only linguistic relations; and so Rorty, McDowell, and others take the “linguistic turn”.\textsuperscript{200} As a consequence the normative activity of knowing and thinking about the world shrinks to include only linguistic relations. As David Hildebrand puts it,
The advocate of the TSP holds this basic view: since all characterizations of what we do or think must be expressed through language, what can be said to be present to us is linguistic or conceptual in nature.\textsuperscript{201} This attenuated view of “what we do”—i.e. the activity of knowing about the world—contrasts sharply with “experience”, especially when it is narrowly conceived (as Rorty and McDowell conceive it) as what we merely undergo. For, unless this passive “undergoing” relation is also taken to be linguistic in nature (as McDowell’s invention of the P-R relation takes it to be\textsuperscript{202}), then it cannot even play a role in the knowledge relation.\textsuperscript{203} And, even if passive experiential undergoing is taken to be linguistic in nature, as on McDowell’s view, it still contrasts with the activity of the knowledge relation. The TSP places the space of reasons (and thus all knowledge relations) on one side of an active-passive dualism. Doing is separated from undergoing.

But this TSP can be replaced by Dewey’s preferred PSP, which overcoming the active-passive dualism of traditional epistemology by seeing knowledge not as separated (in kind of “activity”) from experience but as just one more aspect of (a thoroughly active) experience. Knowing, in this case, is indeed a form of doing. But the possibility of conceiving of knowledge as active—in the sense of being part of our agential relation to the world—is blocked when “experience” is understood in terms of passive “undergoings”; for then the activity of knowing

\textsuperscript{201} David Hildebrand, \textit{Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism}, p. 186.
\textsuperscript{202} Here it can be seen that McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature involves “making room” for a notion of passive “experience” as a purely linguistic undergoing.
\textsuperscript{203} Although Rorty and Davidson rightly see that knowing cannot be a matter of viewing impressions (of any sort), what they don’t do is replace the notion of experience (which at least seemed to connect us to the world). They leave it for dead, along with empiricism. They say that linguistic activity gives us all we need for knowledge without appeal to experience, after all, knowledge is a space of reasons phenomenon. Rorty says that “All talk about doing things to objects must, in a pragmatic account of inquiry “into” objects, be paraphrasable as talk about reweaving beliefs” (“Inquiry as Recontextualization,” \textit{ORT}, p. 98). Actually, in direct contrast to Dewey’s, and pragmatism’s, PSP, Rorty’s statement here could be taken as a slogan for the TSP. Rorty provides a view that entrenches the knowledge relation as an activity that is independent of living in and acting on the world.
looks like a foreign kind of relation (in nature) and so retreats into language or the mind. This “retreat” from experience is what makes the knowledge relation look like it must consist in a spectator’s “view” from afar. If experience no longer means doing but only undergoing (sensations or impressions or beliefs or whatever), then experience is immediately distanced from (the activity of) knowing. So the problem with the TSP is this: *if experience isn’t a doing (i.e. an active relation) then neither is knowledge.*

7. Dewey’s PSP calls for a conception of experience as an active relation of doing and undergoing. This point calls for a word of caution: we can no longer think of the latter term (“undergoing”) as synonymous with a passive relation. We fail to get the very point of Dewey’s PSP when we try to model “doing and undergoing” on the relation of cause and effect. (That is to picture experience as a passive relation of merely undergoing.) But it is only an adherence to the active-passive dualism of natural relations that forces us to view the relation between knowledge and experience on the model of a relation like cause and effect (e.g. “agent-causation” or “P-R relations” or, alternately, “space-of-reasons causation”). Experience then must get placed on one side of the dualism, and given philosophy’s particular naturalistic proclivities, it typically gets construed as merely a passive undergoing. Of course McDowell

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204 This problematic “retreat” will be the central focus of the first section of the next chapter. For now, it can be said that the problem with “experience” conceived as a relation merely of “undergoing”, or as Dewey puts it, “the favoring of cognitive objects and their characteristics,” is that it “results by a necessary logic in setting up a hard and fast wall between the experiencing subject and that nature which is experienced. The self becomes not merely a pilgrim but an unnaturalized and unnaturalizable alien in the world” (*Experience and Nature*, p. 24). In short, “When intellectual experience and its materials are taken to be primary [i.e., when the TSP is adopted], the cord that binds experience and nature is cut” (Ibid., p. 23).

205 It is worth emphasizing that the subtitle of Dewey’s main epistemological work, *The Quest for Certainty*, is “*A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*.”

206 S. Morris Eames says that “The implications of the pragmatic naturalists’ view of the fullness of experience have never been fully realized….For instance, when pragmatic naturalists are analyzing an aspect of experience [like “undergoing”] which they think important in an overall view, but an aspect which has connotations of the inherited biased accounts [active-passive dualisms], it is easy to misread what they are saying” (Eames, *Pragmatic Naturalism: an Introduction*, p. 29). The mistake, generally, is to commit what Dewey calls the “philosophical Fallacy”.
tries to overcome this sort of dualism by saying that concepts can mediate the active-passive split. But for Dewey, doing and undergoing do not need to be (re)united (or mediated) by concepts; for they simply are not separable aspects of experience. Rather, doing and undergoing are connected by the very (“precarious”) predicament of life itself—i.e. by organismic interaction. This agential continuity between doing and undergoing gets lost by construing experience as part of an active-passive dualism involving some sort of causal relation. Hence, “experience” is better understood on the model of actions and consequences (as the very integration of “doing” and “undergoing”) rather than causes and effects. Thus “experience” is to be understood as “doing and undergoing”. That is, Dewey’s sort of “naturalism” involves grounding the conception of “experience” not merely in practical terms (which could be construed as pertaining merely to linguistic activity) but also in terms of the very foundations of our organic life. Dewey says that

Wherever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover, is not wholly passive; is not a mere matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment. Even a clam acts upon the environment and modifies it to some extent.

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207 I have charged that this move depends upon an illicit equivocation on the word “activity”, which is taken now as genuine activity (doing something), now as the mere involvement of concepts.

208 Dewey says: “If we start from primary experience, occurring as it does chiefly in modes of action and undergoing, it is easy to see what knowledge contributes—namely, the possibility of intelligent administration of the elements of doing and suffering” (Dewey, Experience and Nature, p. 22). Dewey contrasts “primary experience” with “reflective experience.”

209 John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 84. Yes, “experience” on this view must have some sort of continuity with the doings and undergoings of mere clams. Rorty uses this implication against Dewey and charges him with panpsychism (Richard Rorty, “Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin,” TP, pp.). I will argue later that that charge does not hold water. In fact one of the arguments that Dewey employs is that “unless there is breach of historic and natural continuity, cognitive experience must originate within that of a non-cognitive sort” (Experience and Nature, p. 23). I will call this Dewey’s “argument from continuity.” This argument is grounded upon an assumption of the truth of Darwin’s picture of nature and the origins of life.
The call, then, is to re-define “experience” as a distinctive kind of active relation, not just a different form of passive, cause-effect relation. We must see experience as a practical, coping relation, not a passive, “spectatorial” one. Dewey says that experience is an affair primarily of doing. The organism does not stand about, Micawber-like, waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself upon it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience. Disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them experiences.210

In this passage Dewey gives us his definition of “experience”: the “close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience.” And, the last line of the passage exposes the fault of the TSP: the attempt to “disconnect” (or separate out) a “doing” element in experience from an “undergoing” element. McDowell himself is guilty of making just such a separation when he talks about knowledge and experience in terms of an active faculty and a passive faculty. But, because McDowell is also guided by a monistic view of natural relations (as are most philosophers) he thinks that in order to “naturalize” experience it must be seen as grounded on the passive structure inherent in first nature relations. And so, since McDowell also acknowledges that knowledge relations involve a normative activity, he says that such activity must therefore be sui generis in comparison to first nature (“realm of law”) relations. That is why McDowell needs to invent a special kind of causal relation, P-R relations,

210 John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 86.
which are supposed to make it so that our active (sui generis “space of reasons”) relations don’t “float free” of the natural world.\textsuperscript{211}

But all of these problems can be avoided by adopting an inclusive naturalism that respects the disentropic principle. Respect for the disentropic principle obviates the need to invent a special kind of causal relation. Instead, inclusive naturalism affirms that all agential relations, including all experiential relations, are whole-heartedly active relations.\textsuperscript{212} They are doings, and for that reason are distinct from passive, causal relations. This is the point of view from which Dewey’s PSP begins. As Dewey puts it, the only “assumption” that this view of experience makes “is that something is done, done in the ordinary external sense of that word, and that this doing has consequences.” And, he goes on to say that “We define mind and its organs in terms of this doing and its results.”\textsuperscript{213} The point of describing experience as “doing and undergoing” is to see it as something practical, not something that just happens, passively as it were. Philosophy no longer needs to try to make the experiential relation conform to the passivity of first nature relations. And, if experience is in fact an active relation, then we no longer need to see the “activity” of knowledge as something that (dualistically) contrasts with natural relations; a fortiori, we no longer need to see knowledge as, at best, dependent upon a merely passive view of experience or the world. Rather, from the perspective of the PSP, knowing’s involvement in experience is itself a part of our active coping as organisms; it is therefore primarily a doing, not a passive contemplating or viewing.\textsuperscript{214} And so, Dewey’s PSP

\textsuperscript{211} McDowell’s argument, simplified, is that, because P-R relations are rational (conceptual) they can provide “friction”. So when McDowell says that “concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world” he means that concepts mediate between the activity of knowing and the passivity of experiencing. But, the defect of restrictive naturalism (the DVN), from my perspective, is not that it disallows concepts but that it disallows active relations; so including a conceptual aspect to passive relations is not the right way to overcome the DVN.

\textsuperscript{212} It is not that experiential relations have one foot in an active realm and another foot in a passive realm.

\textsuperscript{213} John Dewey, \textit{The Quest for Certainty}, p. 183.

\textsuperscript{214} Dewey’s PSP suggests that, “unless we start from knowing as a factor in action and undergoing we are inevitably committed to the intrusion of an extra-natural, if not supernatural, agency or principle” (John Dewey, \textit{Experience...
aims to avoid the mistake of trying to separate out a doing element in experience from an undergoing element. For Dewey the relation of doing and undergoing is through-and-through an active relation: “undergoing” is not a separate, passive element in that relation. Hence, Dewey says that “Knowledge is not something separate and self-sufficing [from our experience of the world], but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved.”

8. McDowell, as we saw in the last chapter, wants to cash out epistemological relevance in terms of the notion of “answerability” to the world. The problem with McDowell’s view lies not with the idea of answerability itself (as Rorty argues), but rather just with the conception of answerability in terms of passive presentations in experience. This passive manifestation of answerability can only be gauged in terms of correspondence or identity; but both (identity and correspondence) theories of truth involve forms of answerability that are committed to the spectator conception of knowing. Knowledge therefore cannot be conceived as an affair dealing with passive presentations.

So contrary to McDowell, who thinks that empirical thought can only be made answerable to (i.e. be epistemically grounded upon) passively received impressions, according to Dewey’s PSP we can still be said to be “answerable to the world”, though through the consequences of our actions. Thus the PSP implies a different sort of epistemological

and Nature, p. 23. McDowell’s invention of a P-R relation is, in my view, a vain attempt to give this “extra-natural agency” a semblance of legitimacy by attaching it to a causal, passive relation.

John Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 87.

So in contrast to Rorty’s claim that “we can have aboutness without answerability,” the PSP gives us the resources to say just the opposite: that we can have “answerability without aboutness”. The “aboutness” (of intentionality) only comes into play as an aspect of the spectator view: from that perspective the question “what do you know?” looks analogous to (and of the same form as) “what are you watching on TV?”, or simply, “what’s on?” Rorty’s saying, that “you can have aboutness without answerability”, could pretty much be the slogan for Linguistic Idealism: nothing is “on” that does not involve linguistic relations. Perhaps if experience could only afford a passive form of answerability, then Rorty would be right that we should turn to linguistic idealism; for McDowell’s view of answerability (and aboutness) is indeed committed to the spectator view of knowledge.

An “identity theory of truth” is what you get with a direct realism, a presentationalism; whereas a “correspondence theory of truth” is what you get with an indirect realism, a re-presentationalism.
“answerability”, one that directly involves our ongoing activities of predicting, directing, and coping with a generally adverse environment. The fundamental epistemological project, in other words, is not just to obtain an accurate “view” of “the world”. Knowing the world is not a spectator sport, it takes the application of one’s own agency (and energy) upon the world. This sort of “answerability” cannot be dependent upon passive undergoings. As Steven Toulmin says, from the point of view of Dewey’s practical starting point, “the authority of the intellect would rest less on a capacity for passive observation than on the employment of active method.”

Dewey diagnoses the problems that lies behind the spectator conception of knowledge when he says that “they spring from the doctrine that knowledge is a grasp or beholding of reality without anything being done to modify its antecedent state—the doctrine which is the source of the separation of knowledge from practical activity.” But, he says that we can avoid these problems “if we see that knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participant inside the natural and social scene, then the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action.” It is “the consequences of directed action” that I am saying can provide for a different conception of “answerability”, one that has nothing to do with the “matching-up” of passive presentations. From the point of view of Dewey’s PSP, answerability comes to this: “If we start from primary experience, occurring as it does chiefly in modes of action and undergoing, it is easy to see what knowledge contributes—namely, the possibility of intelligent administration of the elements of doing and suffering.”

218 Organisms that merely spectate die quickly. One certainly cannot reproduce by spectating.
219 Steven Toulmin, “Introduction” to The Quest for Certainty, p. xviii.
221 The “criterion” of knowledge for Dewey is thus not correspondence, nor coherence, nor identity; rather, as he says, “the criterion of knowledge lies in the method used to secure consequences and not in metaphysical conceptions of the nature of the real” (Dewey, The Quest for Certainty, p. 176).
222 Dewey, Experience and Nature, p. 22.
Thus the practical starting point (PSP) opens up the activity of the space of reasons to experiential (and experimental) inquiry: real action, rather than just viewing impressions or trafficking in beliefs or propositions. In this case, the idea of giving and asking for reasons must incorporate the world, not because the world is conceptual, but because we are alive in it and so must survive in it. Knowledge requires not vision but empirical proof, action not words.\textsuperscript{223} So, contrary to the principle of psychological nominalism, knowing cannot be just a relation between beliefs or conceptual items, it requires real action. Accordingly, the PSP instructs us to look for answerability in practical terms rather than theoretical terms—in terms of doing and undergoing (activities and their consequences), rather than in terms of propositions being “made true” or “right” by being related to other propositions or to bits of the world. This view of answerability is rooted in something deeper than language and epistemology. Answerability first gets cashed out in terms of life and death, only later—through the invention and employment of symbols—does it make sense to apply the terms “truth” and “falsity” to this facet of life.\textsuperscript{224} Knowledge therefore, is a uniquely human way of being answerable to the world—of directing our activities. This latter form of answerability is the basic subject of Dewey’s epistemology, which is why he referred to it not as a “theory of knowledge”, but rather as a “theory of inquiry”: the intelligent application of methods to control what is done and undergone.

\textsuperscript{223} Questions from the scientific point of view are like this: What did you do? What was your method? How can I reproduce your experiment, so that I can (possibly) disprove or falsify your result—your conclusion? The point of the PSP is to suggest that the epistemological point of view must be in some sense analogous to this experimental point of view. Dewey explains that “The adoption of empirical method thus procures for philosophic reflection something of that cooperative tendency toward consensus which marks inquiry in the natural sciences. The scientific investigator convinces others not by the plausibility of his definitions and the cogency of his dialectic, but by placing before them the specified course of searchings, doings and arrivals, in consequence of which certain things have been found. His appeal is for others to traverse a similar course, so as to see how what they find corresponds with his report” (Dewey,\textit{ Experience and Nature}, p. 30).

\textsuperscript{224} This point is also reinforced by the “argument from the continuity of nature”. Dewey summarizes the argument like this: “unless there is a breach of historic and natural continuity, cognitive experience must originate within that of a non-cognitive sort” (Dewey,\textit{ Experience and Nature}, p. 23).
Dewey thinks that the PSP is implicit in the methods of scientific inquiry, investigation, and experimentation. He says that

*The* method of physical inquiry is to introduce some change in order to see what other change ensues; the correlation between these changes, when measured by a series of operations, constitutes the definite and desired object of knowledge.²²⁵

This point, in itself, exposes the poverty of traditional empiricism: knowing cannot be a process that depends upon organizing an incoming myriad of passively received “experiences”. Nor can knowledge be just a matter of relations between beliefs or other linguistically structured propositions. Knowledge requires doing something to the world, observing what reactions follow, and modifying and repeating that same process accordingly. There is a definite survival value to this enterprise: we change the world in order to know about it and so to better *deal* with it. Traditional epistemology (the TSP), by contrast, only allows knowledge to play the role of an observer; and so it models knowledge as, at best, the viewing of a passive fact—a snapshot of external reality, so to speak. But how can we (i.e. our minds) *do* anything with “snapshots” of the world that have been (passively) taken for us? (I will address this question in the next section.)

Dewey suggests that philosophy has been slow to adopt the PSP, lagging behind under the weight of a view of knowledge as a separate sort of activity, distinct from the events of ordinary bodily experience.²²⁶ That is why Dewey told us to see “inquiry” on the model of the experimental scientific methodology of testing and examining—doing things to see what results come back, not waiting for experience to “return a verdict”. This requires the knowledge relation to be *part* of the experiencing relation, not a “view” of that relation. Science, from the

²²⁶ He traces this to Plato’s “Forms”, Descartes’ “clear and distinct ideas”, Locke’s “ideas”…etc.
point of view of the PSP, is a vital human resource, a “technology” for coping with the world.\textsuperscript{227} Science is not a special method of getting at an “objective” reality or “truth”.\textsuperscript{228} Hence, Dewey often referred to his epistemological view as “instrumentalism”. As Hildebrand says, for Dewey, “The aim of science and philosophy is not to discover the ultimate blueprint of reality—or the past as it was in itself—but rather to secure both long- and short-term goods in future experience.”\textsuperscript{229}

Dewey summarizes his epistemological view thusly:

While the traits of experimental inquiry are familiar, so little has been made of them in formulating a theory of knowledge and of mind in relation to nature that a somewhat explicit statement of well known facts is excusable. They exhibit three outstanding characteristics. The first is the obvious one that all experimentation involves \emph{overt} doing, the making of definite changes in the environment or in our relation to it. The second is that experiment is not a random activity but is directed by ideas which have to meet the conditions set by the need of the problem inducing the active inquiry. The third and concluding feature, in which the other two receive their full measure of meaning, is that the outcome of directed activity is the construction of a new empirical situation in which objects are differently related to one another, and such that the \emph{consequences} of directed operations form the objects that have the property of being \emph{known}.\textsuperscript{230}

\textsuperscript{227} Dewey describes the practical status or province of knowledge like this: “Owing to the presence of uncertain and precarious factors in [nature]..., attainment of ends, of goods, is unstable and evanescent. The only way to render them more secure is by ability to control the changes that intervene between the beginning and the end of a process. These intervening terms when brought under control are \emph{means} in the literal and in the practical sense of the word. When mastered in actual experience they constitute tools, techniques, mechanisms, etc.” (Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, p. xii).

\textsuperscript{228} Dewey says that “physical science makes claim to disclose not the inner nature of things but only those connections of things with one another that determine outcomes and hence can be used as means” (\textit{ibid.})

\textsuperscript{229} Hildebrand, \textit{Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism}, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{230} Dewey, \textit{The Quest for Certainty}, pp. 69-70.
CHAPTER IV

A CRITIQUE OF MCDOWELL’S RE-ENCHANTMENT OF NATURE, PART II: FREEDOM AND INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION

Two Sorts of Skepticism: Threats to the External World and Threats to Freedom

1. In the last chapter I critiqued some of the epistemological implications of McDowell’s conception of experience as passive. In passing, I mentioned that I doubted whether his conception of “activity” could even be construed as a form of freedom at all. I want to take up that complaint in this section.

In this section I am going to discuss two sorts of skepticism. The first sort of skepticism is one in which our contact with the external world retreats into the mind. This sort of skepticism is typically referred to as “external world skepticism.” In the first half of this section I will discuss two versions of external world skepticism: “veil of ideas” skepticism and brain-in-a-vat skepticism. Both of these skepticisms are of an epistemological variety.

But there is another sort of skepticism. This second sort of skepticism is metaphysical rather than merely epistemological. It involves the disappearance of “freedom” or (at least) its

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1 Of course I don’t mean to suggest that there are only two sorts of skepticism. There are many varieties that I will not be dealing with here. For instance, McDowell also deals with skepticism about other minds, but that will not be a topic of concern for me.
retreat into the “mind”. This sort of skepticism is not as widely discussed—at least not as a variety of “skepticism”; it involves a conception in which “freedom,” as opposed to “the world,” gets confined to the “mind.”

I know of no pre-existing term by which to refer to this sort of skepticism, but, I suppose it is sometimes dealt with in connection with discussions of “free will”, specifically, the dilemma of determinism: the compatibilism/incompatibilism debate.

If being an “agent” really just amounts to being like a spectator, then McDowell’s direct realism allows that spectator to spectate (i.e., “observe”) the real external world itself—not a mere intermediary or mere representation of the world. In this way, McDowell’s direct realist alternative does seem to neutralize the worrisome problem of external world skepticism, at least as it is traditionally framed—viz., as a loss of (referential or epistemic) contact between the mind (i.e., “thought”) and the world. But, at the same time, if the agent is just (confined to) a spectating mind, then (whatever sort of contact “it” has with “the world”) the agent cannot have real freedom, only an internal sort of freedom—a freedom of thought. And, if this “freedom” of thought is (spectatorially) disconnected from bodily experience, then it is no freedom at all.

That, at any rate, will be the gist of my argument. So, although I’ll admit that McDowell does an admirable job of trying to eliminate the first sort of skepticism, I will argue that the deeper source of skepticism is of the second, metaphysical sort. This means that there is another kind of skeptical “retreat” that McDowell’s moves do not forestall, and that is the retreat of freedom into the recesses of the mind.

In what follows I will critique McDowell’s view as still committed to this more fundamental sort of skepticism. This commitment, I will argue, comes from McDowell’s view

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2 I think that Michael William describes this sort of skepticism when he talks about “a threat built into the relation between ‘mind’ and ‘world’” (Michael Williams, “Epistemology and the Mirror of Nature,” in Rorty and His Critics, p. 205). Rorty deals with this threat by making “mind” non-relational—i.e. merely a matter of the interaction of beliefs. McDowell, by contrast, deals with the threat by re-conceiving the relation between “mind” and “world” as a relation of passive, conceptual openness.
of experience as merely a passive undergoing. I will suggest that if the notion of “experience” is in any way divorced from the ordinary notion of doing—i.e. physically acting on the world—then the second sort of skepticism is inevitable. So, avoiding traditional external world skepticism (as I admit McDowell does) is not that liberating—i.e., not unless it is connected with an avoidance of the more pernicious and invasive form of skepticism: *viz.*, the sort of skepticism that questions our very ability to act on the world and do things in experience.

2. I will begin with McDowell’s treatment of the first sort of skepticism. McDowell specifically tailors his conception of experience to counter (or “quiet”) the (less pernicious) problem of external world skepticism. McDowell defines the threat of external world skepticism like this: “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?”

McDowell traces this threat to an indirect realist theory of perceptual experience. And McDowell combats it with his direct realist view of experience, the view that I have been calling his “presentationalism”. McDowell’s presentationalist response to external world skepticism involves two main ideas: passive experiential openness and a disjunctive conception of experience.

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3 *MW*, p. 112. McDowell’s way of framing the skeptical issue differs slightly from the conventional way, which specifically frames it as a concern about our *knowledge* of the external world. David Macarthur puts it like this: “The problem of the external world can be understood, broadly, as the problem of how we can know, or justifiably believe, that there is an external world on the basis of sense experience” (David Macarthur, “Naturalism and skepticism,” *NIQ*, pp. 107-8). More picturesquely, Rorty describes external world skepticism as “the problem of getting from inner space to outer space” (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 139). McDowell claims that there is an even deeper worry at the root of this specifically epistemological problem, and that is the (transcendental) problem of how there can be intentionally directed states at all—not to mention those favorably classed as states of “knowing”. McDowell’s resolution to this underlying problem involves his Kantian conceptualist move, which makes “the basis of sense experience” already conceptual.

4 One reason I use this term is to call attention to McDowell’s reliance upon a similar account presented by Searle, in *Intentionality*: see, e.g. Searle, *Intentionality*, pp. 45-6.
The disjunctive conception of experience is a response to what McDowell calls the “highest common factor” (HCF) conception of experience.\(^5\) McDowell objects to the implication (of the HCF view) that a “genuine glimpse of the world” must be understood as phenomenally indistinguishable from what merely “seems to be that”. That is, he objects to the idea that an appearance or “glimpse of the world” must involve a factor (or form of “content”) common to both veridical and non-veridical experiences. McDowell says that this faulty conception of experience (as involving a relation to a highest common factor) has been propped up in epistemology by the argument from illusion.\(^6\) The conclusion of the argument from illusion is that our “starting-point in the space of reasons must be something common to both the favorable [i.e. veridical] and the potentially misleading cases.”\(^7\) As we will see, McDowell’s disjunctive conception of experience rejects this “starting-point” in epistemology.

The upshot of the HCF view is a form of skepticism akin to classical “veil of ideas” skepticism, in which one can never be sure (i.e. have absolute certainty) that what one is having at any given time is a veridical experience—an awareness of a fact. The problem is that the HCF view leaves us in a position in which we have to start from a conception of experience as something less than a genuine encounter with the external world, i.e., as merely a relation to an intermediary—a highest common factor—not a relation to the world itself.\(^8\) McDowell argues that from this starting point knowledge cannot be seen as objective, because “we have to

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\(^7\) “Knowledge and the Internal,” \textit{MKR}, p. 397. Roughly, the argument from illusion goes like this: 1. In cases of illusion what we directly perceive is a mere appearance (something less that the state of affairs itself). 2. In non-illusory cases what we directly perceive is the same as what we directly perceive in illusory cases—a mere appearance. 3. Therefore, in all cases what we directly perceive is a mere appearance (something less than the fact itself).

\(^8\) McDowell says that “the argument [from illusion implies] that since there can be deceptive cases experientially indistinguishable from non-deceptive cases, one’s experiential intake—what one embraces within the scope of one’s consciousness—must be the same in both kinds of case” (“Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” \textit{MKR}, pp. 386).
conceive the basis [of knowledge] as a highest common factor of what is available to experience in the deceptive and the non-deceptive cases alike, and hence as something that is at best a defeasible ground for knowledge.9 McDowell’s objection is that this view leaves the knower in a position “in which, for all one knows, things may be otherwise.”10 According to McDowell, conceiving of experience as merely a defeasible ground for “knowledge” is what leads epistemology down its skeptical blind alleys.

3. Instead of starting from a highest common factor conception of experience, McDowell proposes that we start (the epistemological project) from a different conception of “experience”, viz. “experience” conceived as a direct openness to the world. So, in a quietist spirit, McDowell says that

the way to respond to skepticism about, for instance, perceptual knowledge…is not to answer the sceptic’s challenges, but to diagnose their seeming urgency as deriving from a misguided interiorization of reason.11

McDowell traces this “interiorization” to a Cartesian conception of mental content as a self-standing inner realm (or “theater”). In the Cartesian case one is presented with what seems to be a “world”, but that mental “content” is merely an inner world (of appearances) and so may not match up with anything “outside” the mind at all; experiential content on this view only affords one access to a “self-standing” inner realm of impressions or appearances—intermediaries, not the world itself.12 But McDowell’s conception of experiential content, by contrast, involves an

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12 The problem with this “interiorization”, as McDowell sees it, lies in thinking of the objects of empirical knowledge (in true—i.e. veridical—cases of knowing) as on a par with the objects of mere appearings, like hallucinations or illusions. David Macarthur explains that, “the mind and its states are self-standing with regard to the existence of the external world, meaning that such states could, in principle, be just the same whether or not the
openness to the world; this allows him to say that in experience one is directly presented with the world itself, so that moves in the space of reasons can involve (or start from) the world itself, not merely a “highest common factor” between the world and a mere appearance of the world. In this way McDowell claims to quiet the “sceptic’s challenges”: that is, by displacing the HCF view with an alternative conception of experience (as openness). According to this alternative view of experience, there is no HCF—no “veil of ideas”—standing between the objects (or “contents”) of empirical knowledge and the external world itself. According to McDowell’s view, “Cognitive space incorporates the relevant portions of the ‘external’ world.”

McDowell describes this alternative to the HCF view as involving a “disjunctive conception of experience”. McDowell says that “If we adopt the disjunctive conception of appearances, we have to take seriously the idea of an unmediated openness of the experiencing subject to ‘external’ reality, whereas the ‘highest common factor’ conception allows us to picture an interface between them.” That is, the disjunctive conception of experience depends upon a picture of “experience” in which a “fact itself is directly presented to view, so that…the object of experience does not fall short of the fact.” With this conception of “experience” in place McDowell argues that

We [can] say—not at all unnaturally—that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be either a mere appearance or the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone.

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Objectivity, according to this disjunctive account, need not be cashed out in terms of a correspondence between a mere appearance or representation (a “highest common factor”) and the real thing—i.e. the world as it really is in-itself. (That would involve a “sideways-on” view.\textsuperscript{16}) Instead, according to McDowell’s presentational realism, which I have suggested implies an “identity theory” of truth—as opposed to a correspondence theory, there can be a “match in content”: the content of a veridical experience can be the layout of reality itself.\textsuperscript{17}

That is, instead of conceiving of knowledge as involving an inner representation of an outer fact, on McDowell’s view experience can give us “a direct hold on the facts.”\textsuperscript{18} So, at least in cases of veridical experience—i.e. in cases of true empirical knowledge—the “appearance that is presented to one…is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer.” In contrast to the HCF view then, on McDowell’s view, “appearances [impressions] are no longer conceived as in general intervening between the experiencing subject and the world.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Rorty frames his attack on traditional epistemology as an attack on the view that “To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind” (Rorty, \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature}, p. 3). McDowell agrees with Rorty that this “traditional” epistemological project must be given up, but McDowell does not agree that epistemology itself—or the quest for objectivity—needs to be given up. Instead, McDowell thinks that epistemology can be refashioned in non-correspondence, non-sideways-on directions. McDowell thinks that Rorty gives up too much, specifically objectivity in the form of rational answerability to the world. And McDowell is not alone in this criticism of Rorty. Defenders of pragmatism, like John Ryder, often bristle at Rorty’s implication that a tenet of pragmatism involves “a rejection of the…philosophical enterprise of making sense of nature and knowledge.” Ryder says that “Rorty does not seem to notice, or else he simply ignores, the possibility that the broadly pragmatist rejection of “correspondence” conceptions of knowledge does not compel one to abandon attempts to understand the world” (Ryder, “Reconciling Pragmatism and Naturalism,” \textit{Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism}, p. 58). But pragmatists tend to offer a different way around the correspondence view than McDowell, who proffers his presentational identity thesis. Pragmatism’s different way involves something roughly akin to the “different sort of answerability to the world” that I briefly highlighted at the end of the last section.

\textsuperscript{17} Jennifer Hornsby explains that “The identity theory is encapsulated in the simple statement that true thinkables are the same as facts.” Thinkables are the contents of thoughts. McDowell says: “On perfectly natural ways of using talk of what one says or thinks and of what is the case, such a remark – which gives expression to the core of the so called identity theory – is beyond the bounds of possible dispute. It is, as I said in \textit{Mind and World} (1994), a truism” (McDowell, “The True Modesty of an Identity Conception of Truth: A Note in Response to Pascal Engel (2001),” International Journal of Philosophical Studies, Vol. 13(1), p. 83).

\textsuperscript{18} MW, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{19} McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” \textit{MKR}, p. 387. McDowell explains that it is still possible for one to err as to which disjunct obtains. As McDowell says, “infallible knowledge of how things seem falls short of infallible knowledge as to which disjunct is in question. One is as fallible about that as one is about the associated question how things are in the external world.” But, McDowell says, “What figures in the innocent position I have just outlined as the difference between the two disjuncts cannot be a difference between two ways things might be in
4. In sum, according to McDowell, the problem with the HCF conception is that it involves a Cartesian sort of “inner retreat”, which pictures intentional mental states as intermediaries in a self-contained realm.\(^{20}\) This “Cartesian picture,” McDowell says, involves “the idea of the inner realm as self-standing, with everything within it arranged as it is independently of external circumstances.”\(^{21}\) In contrast to this inner retreat, McDowell argues that intentional mental states are open to the external world and so are object-dependent. Hence, McDowell calls his view “object-directed” or “object-dependent” intentionality.\(^{22}\) The opposing view—the idea of a self-standing space of reasons—could in turn be called “object-independent” intentionality.\(^{23}\) McDowell’s point is that experiential states or “impressions” (i.e. intentional contents) depend for their very existence on the actual presence of the objects and things they are about. “The idea,” as McDowell puts it, “is that the outer injects content into the inner; the world affords us appearances, and we thereby have dealings with content.”\(^{24}\) The virtue of this way of thinking,
according to McDowell, is that it “exploits the perceptible presence of the object itself.”

Thus McDowell feels entitled to say that what is experienced, at least by default, is a fact made manifest. And, as far as illusions go, McDowell allows that an experience may be just a case of a mere appearance; but that does not mean that experiential content is always an intermediary, something common to both veridical and non-veridical “experiences” alike, something that always “falls short of the fact itself.” It is only when the external world, in its entirety, retreats inward that it is necessary to picture experience as involving an intermediary (or HCF) that “falls short of the facts.”

So McDowell blames the threat of “veil of ideas” skepticism on the inner retreat of experiential content. If answerability to the world is just answerability to a representational intermediary, then external world skepticism is indeed inevitable. But, McDowell argues, this skepticism can be avoided by understanding answerability in terms of an openness to the world itself. He summarizes his view in the following way:

What gives the seeming problems of mainstream modern epistemology their seeming urgency is not the sheer idea that inquiry is answerable to the world. The culprit, rather, is a frame of mind in which the world to which we want to conceive our thinking as answerable threatens to withdraw out of reach of anything we can think

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25 MW, p. 105.

26 David Macarthur explains that, “Non-deceptive experience plays, as McDowell puts it, a ‘primary role’ in the availability of empirically contentful thought quite generally, that is, in cases of both non-deceptive and deceptive experience” (David Macarthur, “McDowell, Scepticism, and the ‘Veil of Perception’,” Australasian Journal of Philosophy (June 2003), p. 179. Here Macarthur refers to McDowell’s “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space”). McDowell also clarifies: “Of course we are fallible in experience, and when experience misleads us there is a sense in which it intervenes between us and the world; but it is a crucial mistake to let that seem to deprive us of the very idea of openness—fallible openness—to the world….When we are not misled by experience, we are directly confronted by a worldly state of affairs itself, not waited on by an intermediary that happens to tell the truth” (MW, p. 143).

27 Rorty says this explicitly: “Any theory which views knowledge as accuracy of representation, and which holds that certainty can only be rationally had about representations, will make skepticism inevitable” (Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 113).
of as our means of access to it. A gap threatens to open between us and what we should like to conceive ourselves as knowing about, and it then seems to be a task for philosophy to show us ways to bridge the gulf. It is the threat of inaccessibility on the part of the world that we need to dislodge, in order to unmask as illusory the seeming compulsoriness of mainstream epistemology. And the threat of inaccessibility is not part of the very idea of the world as something other than ourselves to which our investigative activities are answerable.²⁸

This passage comes from an article in which McDowell critiques Rorty’s response to external world skepticism. Rorty correctly (in McDowell’s view) gives up the idea of inner representational intermediaries. But McDowell complains that Rorty’s subsequent attempt to “quiet” the problems of “mainstream epistemology” involves an attack on “the vocabulary of objectivity as such…rather than the conception of the world as withdrawn.” McDowell however says that we must quiet the threat of external world skepticism without giving up objectivity, cashed out in terms of answerability to the world.²⁹ Thus McDowell’s avoidance of the threat of an internal retreat involves re-conceiving the experiential relation as a direct, passive “openness to the world” (i.e. as a P-R relation), so that the world (of awareness) cannot “withdraw” inwards. McDowell says that “my talk of openness is a rejection of the traditional predicament, not an attempt to respond to it.” So, in that face of Rorty’s dismal (and dismissive) view of “impressions”, McDowell thinks that the notion “impressions” can be revived, so long as they

²⁹ McDowell says that “Rorty brings out very clearly how discouraging the prospects are [for the Cartesian assumption that epistemology can be spelled out in terms of a self-standing inner realm]. But with the assumption in place, however well we appreciate the hopelessness of our predicament once we allow ourselves to feel the Cartesian fear, that does not seem enough to confer intellectual respectability on suppressing it. We have to be shown how to make ourselves immune to the fear of losing the world: but with the assumption about intentionality [as non-relational and self-standing] maintained, the best we [quietists] can do seems to be to avert our gaze…” (McDowell, “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,” MKR, p. 259). McDowell’s point is that we must undermine the very picture of the mental as a self-standing realm, not first allow it and then try to deal with it.
are not conceived in terms of inner events at all; that is, “impressions” need not be conceived as “opaque”—as a “veil”. Rather, according to McDowell, “impressions are, so to speak, transparent,” they bring the world itself directly into “view”, so that the “content” of a veridical experience (an “impression”) just is the layout of reality. In short, by making experiential relations (i.e. P-R relations) world-involving, McDowell claims he can quiet external world skepticism before it can even get started.\footnote{Since Rorty does not replace the mistaken notion of “impressions” but simply eliminates the notion altogether, McDowell sees his form of “quietism” as unsatisfactory. Rorty simply refuses to admit that a different picture can put in place of the faulty epistemological “starting point”. But, as Thornton says, “if scepticism presupposes a picture of experience or reason that can never reach out to the world, then McDowell’s account provides a response before the scepticism can be motivated” (Tim Thornton, \textit{John McDowell}, p. 205).}

5. Of course, as I indicated at the outset of this section, the “veil of ideas” is not the only form that external world skepticism can take. And McDowell also deals with a different manifestation of external world skepticism, one implied by the brain-in-a-vat scenario. And, as with “veil of ideas” skepticism, McDowell traces brain-in-a-vat (BIV) skepticism to the inner retreat of experiential content—that is, to the idea that we are aware of something less than the world itself, something self-standing or self-contained—a “highest common factor”. So, the (philosophical) worry that one might be just a brain-in-a-vat goes to show that it is not just Cartesian immaterialism, but also a more (respectable) modern materialism, that can induce external world skepticism.\footnote{Gregory McCulloch says that McDowell’s “main target [in \textit{Mind and World}] is not Descartes’s immaterialism: it is the losing of the world, which can be a feature of materialisms too” (Gregory McCulloch, “Phenomenological Externalism,” \textit{RMW}, p. 123). Leslie Stevenson relates the point (about materialisms) to the brain-in-a-vat scenario: “If the brain is the real ‘seat’ of all conscious experience, it seems logically possible that the brain could be taken out of its body and kept alive in a vat of nutrients (conceivably it might even be grown in the vat), while having its nerves electronically stimulated to induce a whole series of illusory experiences as of an external world” (Leslie F. Stevenson, “Experiences in the Cave, the Closet and the Vat—and in Bed,” \textit{Philosophy} (April, 1995), p. 178).} For example, McDowell criticizes the following view put forward by Searle in \textit{Intentionality}:
Each of our beliefs must be possible for a being who is a brain in a vat because each of us is precisely a brain in a vat; the vat is the skull and the ‘messages’ coming in are coming in by way of impacts on the nervous system.  

McDowell responds like this:

Surely no sane naturalism can possibly compel us to accept the idea that being in the world, for us, is being inside our own heads. The idea has a comical ring; and the indirectness it imposes on how we have to picture our dealings with the world (the talk of ‘messages’ coming in) sits ill with Searle’s earlier commendable rejection of intermediaries.

McDowell’s complaint here is focused on Searle’s conception of the “indirectness” of our “dealings with the world”. His point is that the possibility that we might be brains-in-a-vat can only seem gripping if one is at the same time under the impression that we are not directly aware of (or presented with) the world itself in experience. For only then can it make sense to think of the truth (value) of one’s beliefs about the world as varying independently of the way the world in fact is. This (frictionless) free-play or “independence” of experiential content is what McDowell means to criticize as the “self-standing” or “self-contained” interiorized picture of the space of reasons: the idea that the extent of our “cognitive reach” does not incorporate the world itself. The world, as he says, becomes “withdrawn”. On McDowell’s analysis, both “veil of

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34 Putnam concurs with McDowell’s interpretation when he says that the “difficulty in seeing how our minds can be in genuine contact with the ‘external’ world is, in large part, the product of a disastrous idea that has haunted Western philosophy since the seventeenth century, the idea that perception involves an interface between the mind and the ‘external’ objects we perceive. In dualistic versions of early modern metaphysics and epistemology, that interface was supposed to consist of ‘impressions’ (or ‘sensations’ or ‘experiences’ or ‘sense data’ or ‘qualia’), and these were conceived of as immaterial. In materialist versions the interface has long been conceived of as consisting of brain processes. The position I described as ‘Cartesianism cum materialism’ simply combines the two versions: the interface consists of ‘impressions’ or ‘qualia’ and these are ‘identical’ with processes in the brain” (Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, p. 43). Putnam’s use of “identity” here refers to materialism’s idea that mental states are identical to brain processes. This is not the same thing as an earlier referred-to “identity theory”, which was a theory of truth that said that truth is to be conceived in terms of a “match in content”.

ideas” skepticism and brain-in-a-vat skepticism call into question our possession of genuine knowledge of the external world because they both share this assumption, derived from the argument from illusion: that our “cognitive reach” extends only to a (self-standing) highest common factor. But McDowell argues that without that assumption in place the brain-in-a-vat scenario (just like “veil of ideas” skepticism) does not have its characteristic skeptical bite; in fact McDowell argues that it does not even make sense.35

So McDowell’s criticism of Searle’s “talk of ‘messages’ coming in” (in the quote above) is that those “messages” are conceived as self-standing “intermediaries,” not direct presentations of the world itself.36 McDowell refers to this as Searle’s “brain in a vat requirement,” according to which “Intentional content must be thinkable by a brain in a vat.”37 Here McDowell’s criticism of Searle’s “brain in a vat requirement” parallels his critique of the Cartesian view of “inner space”. But in this case McDowell’s attack is directed on a naturalistic and materialistic worldview that “construes mental states as literally inner neurological states”. Nonetheless, from McDowell’s point of view, there is a parallel between the dualist’s (or immaterialist’s) and the materialist’s view of mental states, one that lies in the shared “assumption that mental states are entities that can exist independently of the outer world.”38 Accordingly, McDowell’s response to

35 It cannot make sense because a BIV would not have dealings with “content”, let alone deceptive “content”. Tim Thornton says that “McDowell’s fundamental objection to this broadly Cartesian account is thus not that it cannot explain how knowledge is justified in the face of the skeptical possibilities raised by the evil genie or by more recent worries that we might be brains in a vat. The deeper problem is rather that intentionality does not seem to be possible at all” (Tim Thornton, John McDowell, p. 6).
36 That is, his complaint is not directed against “messages” talk altogether—that is, talk of “experience” as involving the passive reception of information or data or messages, rather it is directed at the indirectness of the supposed “message”. My complaint will be directed against such “messages” talk; that is, against the conception of “experience” in terms of passive receptions, bits of information or “atoms” of data.
37 John McDowell, “Intentionality De Re,” MKR, p. 274. That is, “Searle’s ‘brain in a vat’ requirement dictates that one’s visual experience when one sees, say, a station wagon is something that could have been exactly what it is even if there had not been a station wagon in one’s vicinity; this very experience might have been a hallucination.” McDowell goes on to say that “it is hard to see how this is consistent with his admirable ‘direct realism’” (Ibid. p. 272, fn. 21).
38 Tim Thornton, John McDowell, p. 6. Of course according to monistic materialism the “inner world” is not some non-physical or immaterial thing while the “outer world” is a physical thing, rather both the “inner” and the “outer”
brain-in-a-vat skepticism parallels his response to the more traditional “veil of ideas” form of external world skepticism. His point is that BIV skepticism can be quieted—just like the more familiar “veil of ideas” skepticism—only if one adopts a direct realist “presentationalism”, with its accompanying disjunctive account of experience. McDowell thinks that without the assumption about mental states being self-standing intermediaries the brain-in-a-vat scenario does not make sense and so it cannot motivate skepticism.39

In sum, as McDowell understands it, the crucial skepticism inducing thrust of the BIV scenario lies in the idea (or implication) that a mad scientist could make it so that none of the BIV’s experiences are veridical experiences; and so a BIV would be susceptible to being deceived about what the external world is really like. But McDowell rejects the very possibility of the BIV scenario because a BIV, so conceived, cannot really be said to have experiential content at all (i.e. not even deceptive content) since such “content”—given the facts of the BIV case—could only be something self-standing, not “object-dependent”.40 So contrary to Searle’s view, for McDowell, a brain-in-a-vat cannot even have intentional states, states that purport to be world-directed or world-involving at all. Maximilian de Gaynesford describes McDowell’s view like this:

39 He says: “the inward retreat of the mind undermines the idea of a direct openness to the world, and thereby poses the traditional problems of knowledge about ‘external’ reality in general. Without the ‘highest common factor’ conception of experience, we can leave the interface out of the picture, and the traditional problems lapse” (John McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge,” MKR, p. 393-4).

40 The idea is that the contents of an “internal” world cannot be construed as existing in splendid isolation from an “external” world; indeed, the internal must be (fallibly) open to the external. So for McDowell, whatever is happening to the BIV, it would not be something that even counts as a seeming awareness of the world, i.e. as “experience”. As McDowell puts it, “if we refuse to make sense of the idea of direct openness to the manifest world, we undermine the idea of being in the space of reasons at all, and hence the idea of being in a position to have things appear to one a certain way” (McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” MKR, p. 411). McDowell continues: “There is no making sense of perceptual appearances—the testimony of one’s senses—without making sense of the possibility that the objective world can be immediately present to the senses.” McDowell describes this idea as an extension of the Sellarsian idea “that reality is prior, in the order of understanding, to appearance.”

realms are physical or material. But there are still two realms; now they are merely separated by skin (or sensory surfaces), not by a difference in substance.
Zonk, who lives in a grassless world, can no more think about grass than he can graze on it. The same applies to envatted brains that have never roamed free of their vats and to immaterial minds in a world empty but for an omnipotent deceiver. None of these unfortunates has the appropriate sort of intercourse with grass to be able to think about it.  

Without a suitable “sort of intercourse” to provide a source of object-dependence or world-dependence there would be no “content” supplied to the envatted brain.

6. So the question naturally arises: just what is “the appropriate sort of intercourse”, according to McDowell? Well, McDowell complains that the problem with the envatted brain is that its (presumed) contentful states would have to be self-standing, not object-dependent. So, for McDowell, “the appropriate sort of intercourse” must involve some sort of object-dependent content. But this “object-dependence” cannot be cashed out merely in terms of a “causal-dependence” on external objects. In fact McDowell criticizes Donald Davidson for claiming that a causal intercourse, or a causal relation to the world, is all that is needed to get empirical content into the picture. McDowell’s complaint is that if causal intercourse is all that we can avail ourselves of, then the very idea of contentful states (Davidson’s “beliefs”) goes missing. McDowell himself proposes a causal account of experience, but, importantly, his account utilizes an augmented version of the causal relation, viz. a P-R relation. So, for McDowell, causal-dependence does not necessarily equal object-dependence; there must also be a rational

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41 De Gaynesford, John McDowell, p. 137.
42 McDowell says: “I think that we should be suspicious of his [Davidson’s] bland confidence that empirical content can be intelligible in our picture even though we carefully stipulate that the world’s impacts on our senses have nothing to do with justification [i.e. since they are merely causal]” (MW, p. 15).
dependence—a rational relation—running through experience as well. In this way, content cannot float free (epistemically speaking) of its cause; the content (not just the cause) of such an experience is the world itself.

Notwithstanding, to Davidson, the BIV scenario seems to make sense. (He supposes that a mad scientist could electronically produce—i.e. *cause*—experiential “content” in the BIV.) And so he at first admits the skeptical possibility that, for all we know, we might be brains-in-a-vat.

McDowell’s complaint is that Davidson’s “quietism”—if it can be called that—only comes after the crucial (skepticism inducing) fact is admitted, and so it comes “too late”: i.e. merely as an attempt to reassure one that, even if one was a brain-in-a-vat, the (global) skeptical conclusion would not follow, because most of one’s beliefs must be true. The supposed consolation here is that, even if I am a brain-in-a-vat I am nonetheless “mostly right about my [artificial]

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43 As Putnam explains, “McDowell argues…that experiences do not merely *cause* us to have beliefs; they *justify* some (we hope a lot) of our beliefs. They bear rational relations to our beliefs, including verifying and making probable. But they could not do this if they lacked content” (Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, p. 155).

44 As David Macarthur puts it, “It is part of our understanding of efficient causation [which is all that Davidson avails himself of] that the very same effect can have indefinitely many causes. In accordance with the causal model of experience, we can think of our subjective experiences from the first-person perspective as a temporally extended stream of inner effects. If one asks, ‘What is the cause of these experiential effects?’ from this internal perspective, then the mere existence of a causal relation to some cause or other provides no clue.” And then, linking this concept of causation with the foundation of naturalism, Macarthur goes on to suggest that “On the naturalist’s own reckoning, skeptical possibilities are alternative causal hypotheses capable, in principle, of accounting for the entire history of one’s inner experiences. Illusions, dreams, and hallucinations can serve to help illustrate this point but they are inessential. All that we require is a scenario in which we are caused to have the very same subjective experience by some peculiar power of our own minds or by some ‘world’ quite unlike the world we believe in: for example, the brain-in-a-vat scenario” (Macarthur, “Naturalism and Skepticism,” *N&Q*, pp. 112-13). My alternative naturalism avoids altogether the “link” that Macarthur draws, between causation and naturalism. McDowell’s alternative naturalism, in contrast to mine, simply admits a second sort of causal relation, viz. P-R relations.

45 Davidson would probably have to admit that skepticism may still seem plausible on a case by case basis, but the thesis that most of one’s beliefs must be true avoids global (Cartesian) skepticism. Rorty explains that “Davidson's point is that retail skepticism makes sense, but wholesale skepticism does not. We have to know a great deal about what is real before we can call something an illusion, just as we have to have a great many true beliefs before we can have any false ones” (Richard Rorty, “Out of the Matrix,” *Boston Globe*, 10-5-2003). For an account of the difference between “global” and “local” skepticism see, e.g., Michael Bradie, “Quinean Dreams or, Prospects for a Scientific Epistemology,” in D. Jacquette (ed.), *Philosophy, Psychology, and Psychologism*, pp. 188-9. McDowell would probably contend, in the face of this distinction, that local skepticism is skepticism enough. That is, if admitting local skepticism is used as a strategy to minimize the consequences of starting from a HCF view, then this admission (as candid as it is) comes “too late”.

46 McDowell says that, “whatever credence we give to Davidson’s argument that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, the argument starts *too late* to certify Davidson’s position as a genuine escape from the oscillation” (*MW*, p. 17, emphasis added).
environment.” The attribution of this view to Davidson is supported by Davidson himself, for example, when he says the following:

What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.

But, what is supposed to cause one’s “beliefs” or experiences about the (artificial) “environment” in the BIV scenario is nothing other than the electrical stimulations of a mad scientist (or computer, etc.). And, McDowell’s point is that assuming that such stimulations could account for the presence of genuine contentful states is akin to assuming the “self-standing starting point.” So again, McDowell sees the “self-standing starting point” as at the center of the BIV scenario’s skeptical implications. Thus he complains that,

The Davidsonian response seems to be that if one were a brain in a vat, it would be correct to interpret one’s beliefs as being largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment.

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48 Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, p. 151. This quotation is also offered by Rorty as support for this interpretation of Davidson’s view in Rorty’s “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth,” ORT, pp. 133-4. In addition, in a footnote, McDowell explains that we know that this is Davidson’s view based “on the testimony of Richard Rorty” (MW, p. 17, fn. 13). The “testimony” that McDowell refers to in the quote above is given, also in a footnote, by Rorty: “As far as I know, Davidson has not used this example in print. I am drawing upon unpublished remarks at a colloquium with Quine and Putnam, Heidelberg, 1981” (Rorty, ORT, pp. 133, fn. 15).
49 MW, p. 31. Hence, McDowell sees the BIV scenario as a case in point that, “If we begin with a free-standing notion of an experiential route through objective reality, a temporally extended point of view that might be bodiless so far as the connection between subjectivity and objectivity goes, there seems to be no prospect of building up from there to the notion of a substantial presence in the world” (MW, p. 102).
50 MW, pp. 16-17. McDowell here cites Rorty, who says that, “Davidson’s claim [is] that the best way to translate the discourse of a brain which has always lived in a vat will be as referring to the vat-cum-computer environment the brain is actually in. This will be the analogue of construing most native remarks as about, e.g., rocks and diseases rather than about trolls and demons” (Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth,” ORT, p. 133). This general sort of response has been at the forefront of most claims to “naturalize” our experiences and beliefs: viz. that we can accurately portray the knowledge relation from a third-person point of view. This point of view is supposed to jibe well with a scientific perspective, in which one merely observes (objectively) causal processes going on—and this is similar to the tendency to make out the “soft”, or social, sciences to be as “hard” as the physical sciences.
McDowell rejects the idea that the causal relation by itself can be appealed to to secure conceptual content. His point is that a merely causal relation is not enough to ensure that one’s beliefs are appropriately—i.e. rationally—constrained by what they are about, viz. by the (real, external) world itself.\(^{51}\)

So Davidson’s view first grants the possibility that a mad scientist could indeed pass-off a false reality on a BIV; but, he then adds that the BIV’s beliefs would nonetheless be (mostly) true of that false reality or “environment”. Davidson plainly states this: “clearly,” he says, “a person’s sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different. (Remember the brain in the vat.)”\(^{52}\) Davidson’s statement here shows that he is indeed committed to the very same view that McDowell ridicules as Searle’s “brain in a vat requirement”; and it likewise reveals that Davidson too falls prey to the assumption of a self-standing epistemological starting-point.\(^{53}\) Accordingly, McDowell’s complaint is that Davidson’s “response to the brain-in-a-vat worry…does not calm the fear that our picture leaves our thinking possibly out of touch with the world outside us.”\(^{54}\)

McDowell’s own response, by contrast, is to suggest that the BIV scenario cannot even make sense unless one is committed to a notion of self-standing mental content. Without that

\(^{51}\) The only real difference between the causal account that Davidson presents and the causal account that McDowell presents is that for McDowell some causes can also be conceptual or concept-laden, those are his P-R relations. There is no however no difference between them in claiming that the experiential relation is a form of causal relation. For Davidson experiential relations can merely be passive, not also conceptual; while for McDowell, experiential relations can be both passive and conceptual. The problem is that in both cases the experiential relation is seen as passive. McDowell says that, “I follow Davidson in thinking…reasons both efficiently cause actions and beliefs and justify them. The reason why experience as Davidson conceives it cannot justify belief is not that its relation to belief is causal, but simply that it is extra-conceptual” (McDowell, \textit{RMW}, p. 293).


\(^{53}\) Davidson says: “Of course we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware” (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” \textit{Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective}, p. 144, quoted at \textit{MW}, p. 16). McDowell responds by calling this “a very unsatisfactory remark.” And he asks, incredulously: “Why should we suppose that to find out about external objects we would have to get outside our skins? (Of course we cannot do that.)”

\(^{54}\) \textit{MW}, p. 17.
assumption, McDowell argues, the BIV’s “beliefs” cannot even be seen as (contentful or meaningful) beliefs at all, let alone “largely true beliefs about the brain’s electronic environment.” So as far as McDowell is concerned, the idea that a BIV could even have beliefs about anything at all depends upon a misguided conception of what experiential content is—a picture in which the world “withdraws” into the mind. McDowell states that experiential content simply cannot be conceived as a self-standing realm, “with everything within it arranged as it is independently of external circumstances.” Simply put, McDowell’s point is that, if we admit content to be self-standing, then we forthwith admit the skeptical possibility that our contentful states may be out of touch with the external world. Moreover, according to McDowell, BIV skepticism cannot be avoided in Davidson’s way, i.e., by positing merely a causal connection between (supposed) intentional states and what those states purport to be about; the connection must also be rational or conceptual (and that is precisely why McDowell invents the P-R relation). So McDowell’s contention is that the contents of a BIV’s supposed “mental states” would be prevented from being in any way “world-dependent”, and, as a consequence, those states would simply not be “contentful” states at all—they would be “empty”. Therefore, if this is the position a BIV is in, then, contrary to Searle’s “requirement”, “If we were brains inside our own skulls we would have no inkling of the outside world, in a particularly strong sense: there would be no content available to us.”

7. At this point one might be inclined to question McDowell’s rather narrow understanding of the BIV scenario: why assume, as McDowell does, that a BIV cannot have a direct perception of its environment, a direct hold on the facts? That is, why assume that the BIV scenario is

applicable only to the self-standing or indirect realist account? Davidson’s coherentist view seems, at least tacitly, to make that assumption (i.e. in the form of the self-standing starting point). But the thrust of McDowell’s criticism is simply that Davidson does not even contemplate this direct realist alternative. As such, McDowell criticizes Davidson’s response for the sense of disconnectedness or “frictionlessness” that follows from his “unconstrained coherence.” So, like “veil of ideas” skepticism—which directly targets representational (or “indirect”) realism, the BIV scenario, according to McDowell, can be traced to a remnant of the self-standing conception of the space of reasons as well; this means that Davidson too is implicated in the resulting external world skepticism. And again, McDowell offers his direct realist account as the cure for this form of external world skepticism. But, couldn’t we tweak the BIV scenario, and extend it, so that it applies to a direct realist conception of experience too? I think that we can: in fact we can re-envision the scenario so that the envatted brain’s “environment” is not made out to be a self-standing, self-contained realm—involving access only to a HCF, but rather as involving the external world itself. (After all, this is just a thought-experiment.)

57 I want it to be clear that I am not here claiming that Davidson’s coherentism should be understood as a form of “indirect realism”. To the contrary, I am only claiming that McDowell critiques Davidson for his continued adherence to a self-standing (“interiorized”) view of the space of reasons; and McDowell thinks that it is the self-standing aspect of both indirect realism and unconstrained coherence that leads them to external world skepticism: the former into “veil of ideas” skepticism and the latter into “brain in a vat” skepticism. Of course the self-standingness of Davidson’s view, like Rorty’s, is largely hidden by the fact that when they talk about the mind, or mental activity, they try to appeal only to linguistic relations. (And, linguistic relations have a definite social or public character, which seems to protect their view from being charged with a commitment to a self-standing conception.) But, McDowell would argue that they have contrived to make mental relations look respectable at the cost of interiorizing linguistic relations. (Roughly this is the view that I earlier labeled “linguistic idealism”: Commenting on Putnam, McDowell says that “the ‘isolationist’ conception of language that Putnam objects to is all of a piece with a similarly ‘isolationist’ conception of the mind—at least of the mind as it is in itself” (McDowell, “Putnam on Mind and Meaning,” MKR, p. 291).

58 The reason that Davidson does not even consider direct realism is because Davidson, like Rorty, interprets the principle of psychological nominalism as disallowing it, and as allowing only rational relations between beliefs. And so, as McDowell says, “they [Davidson and Evans] do not so much as consider the possibility that conceptual capacities might be already operative in actualizations of sensibility. It is not that they argue that there is no such possibility; it simply does not figure in their thinking….So long as a passive operation of conceptual capacities is not in view as an option, one cannot even try to cast experience as a rational constraint on empirical thinking without falling into the Myth of the Given” (MW, p. 67).
Thus it seems that McDowell’s own conception of the BIV thought-experiment is artificially tailored to parallel “veil of ideas” skepticism, which is to say that in both cases external world skepticism is seen as resulting from a conception of mental content as something self-standing; for that is the position shared by both the indirect realist and the coherentist. Given that set-up, McDowell’s direct realism is bound to seem appealing in contrast. But why say that a disembodied brain (kept alive in a nutrient-rich vat) must have access only to a highest common factor? Can we not also (imaginatively) put the BIV in McDowell’s disjunctive position, in which a veridical experience can be a case of a fact made manifest? All we have to do is tell some convoluted, sci-fi story about how the envatted brain is hooked up to some sort of sensory receptors, and say that those receptors act as “conduits”, in the sense of affording the BIV an “openness to the world” or an “openness to the layout of [the] reality” surrounding the BIV (or wherever the “sensory receptors” are set up).59 Then, we can conceive of the BIV as capable of receiving direct presentations from the external world—as opposed to mere electrical brain stimulations. The causal source of these “stimulations” or “sensations” or “experiences”, let us say, is not electrical impulses by a mad scientist, rather it is the world itself.60 If we can picture this case, then the BIV scenario should no longer house a bias in favor McDowell’s direct realist alternative to the self-standing view of subjectivity. I now want to apply this modified version of the BIV scenario—making it out in terms of a direct presentationalist account of perceptual experience—to test McDowell’s own thinking.

59 That is, since the BIV is disembodied, the “sensory receptors” could be hooked up to the BIV in any number of ways; they could be spread out over the galaxy for example. Or we can imagine them to be set up just like a normal human body if we want to. The additional element of “sensory receptors” should pose no problem to my critique so long as we can stipulate that the BIV has a story to tell about how it is causally “hooked up to the world”; and we can allow for that in our thought experiment if we think we need to.

60 Or, we could say that the BIV is presented with a facsimile of the world. The point is just to allow the BIV to have an “environment” of some sort, something external to the BIV that can account for states that have “content”. This just means that the controlling scientist is less “mad”; he lets us see an environment. Also, when I say “causal source” I do not mean to imply that the relation is only causal. Rather, the case is supposed to apply to McDowell’s account, in which the experiential relation is also rational or conceptual, i.e., a P-R relation.
The “modified version” of the BIV scenario that I have in mind has parallels to the sort of scenario envisaged in Plato’s allegory of the cave. Envatted brains are akin to the prisoners chained down. The brain (BIV), like the prisoner, cannot move. Its sphere of “experience” is confined to what is presented to it. The point here is to conjure a scenario that would avoid McDowell’s particular criticism that a BIV would necessarily lack “world-dependent” content. Simply put, this cave-like scenario is meant to properly envisage a case in which the BIV has direct access to the external world.

Unlike McDowell’s characterization of the BIV scenario then, there is now no intermediary or HCF in the picture standing in between the BIV and the external world. In this case what is “presented” to the BIV, like what is presented to Plato’s prisoners, is not something “inner”. In fact, in this case we don’t even need to assume that what is presented to McDowell’s BIV is merely a “shadow” of an object; we can say that it is the object itself. Of course such a disembodied brain can be mistaken—just like an embodied brain can be, but when it is not it grasps, or “embraces”, the world itself in thought. This is just to say, again, that we can imagine the BIV to be placed in the disjunctive scenario that McDowell utilizes to quiet external world skepticism. To accommodate McDowell’s openness view, we simply need to take away the “self-standing” (private inner theater) aspect of the BIV scenario. The brain (the experiencing subject), we can say, is now directly presented with states of affairs—i.e. the external world itself.

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61 I mean no more than that it “parallels” Plato’s story. Plato was not using the cave scenario as a thought experiment concerning skeptical possibilities about our knowledge of the external world or our ability to act on it, rather Plato was developing a metaphor—an allegory—as a way of illuminating his account of the development of the soul or intellect. The only “parallel” that I am keying on is described by Leslie Stevenson as follows: “In this image, passivity of perception is crudely enforced by physical fetters.” (173) Stevenson is specifically referring to Plato’s cave here, but I am suggesting that this image of “passivity” can be applied to McDowell’s conception of experience. The image of the BIV is intended to isolate that factor.

62 Plato’s story specifically stipulates that the prisoners cannot move their heads. He says that the prisoners are “prevented by the chains from turning round their heads.”
The point, then, is this: there are at least two different ways to envisage the BIV scenario. One way, which has a right to be called the “traditional” interpretation, is accepted by McDowell and Davidson.63 (This interpretation might also be called the “Matrix” interpretation.) According to this interpretation the world of awareness of a BIV could only be an “inner” world. The BIV’s thoughts are conceived as *seemingly* about the world, that is, they would (supposedly) *seem* to have content, but in fact there is no contact with the “external” world, causal or otherwise (i.e. unless you consider—as Davidson seems to—the causal connections between the scientist’s probe and the envatted brain). Of course, unlike Davidson, who apparently thinks this interpretation of the BIV scenario is at least plausible, McDowell rejects it as incoherent; and he does so for the same reasons that he rejects the self-standing, interiorized conception of the space of reasons.

But, I have elaborated a second, “non-traditional” way to conceive of the brain-in-a-vat scenario, a way that cannot be seen as “incoherent” for the reasons that McDowell adduces against the traditional interpretation. We might call this the “direct realist” conception of the BIV scenario. This second, “direct realist” conception of the BIV scenario shows that McDowell’s alternative is not much better at alleviating the real source of skepticism than Davidson’s route. The question is: why?

8. McDowell’s contention was that the BIV scenario would not even be thinkable on his presentationalist account.64 But, I think that the modified (“direct realist”) BIV scenario as we

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63 McDowell of course rejects this scenario as incoherent. But, like Davidson, what he does not do is conceive the BIV scenario differently: so his point touches *only* on the traditional BIV scenario.
64 That seems to be the point of his *quietist* aims with regard to BIV skepticism. Gregory McCulloch concurs with this reading when he says that, “McDowell clearly means to deny for his own part that vat-brains have beliefs about their electronic environments, or indeed anything” (McCulloch, “Phenomenological Externalism,” *RMW*, p. 130). Here McCulloch cites McDowell’s “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space.” Michael Huemer explains that “One might try arguing that the brain-in-a-vat scenario, as usually described, is impossible, in the sense that the
have just imagined it is no less plausible than the scenario in which the BIV could only have indirect access to external events. So it is at least thinkable. But then in what sense can it be said that McDowell’s account can defeat or “quiet” external world skepticism? Well, as I said before, McDowell’s attack draws on a similarity between the “veil of ideas” or “Cartesian evil demon” scenario and the brain-in-a-vat scenario (traditionally conceived). The thing that induces skepticism in both cases is the idea or implication that a false reality could be passed off on one’s subjectivity. Because in both cases what is regarded as our “world of awareness”—i.e. experiential content—retreats into the (self-standing) mind or brain, the world becomes “withdrawn”, and so it becomes impossible for the states of the mind or brain to be (intentionally) directed at the external world (as it is in itself).

McDowell’s presentationalism is designed specifically to overcome this particular “skepticism inducing” aspect of the scenario. But, I have shown that we can remove this particular “skepticism inducing” aspect without thereby making the BIV scenario unthinkable, or even less plausible. If we move to a “direct realist” conception of the BIV scenario, then the best that McDowell can say is that, if one was a brain-in-a-vat, then one would not, ipso facto, be shielded off from the world—one’s thoughts and experiences could be “about” the external world. But, what McDowell does not do—although he says (or implies) he does—is demonstrate the implausibility of the brain-in-a-vat scenario itself. He only shows it to be implausible when it is interpreted in the traditional way, as implied by the self-standing starting

65 This is the feature of the traditional interpretation of the BIV scenario that makes it analogous to the sort of situation presented in the movie The Matrix.
point. So that particular route to external world skepticism is indeed cut off by McDowell. But the BIV scenario is not thereby ruled out. Instead, the situation we are left with is this: if one is a direct realist BIV, then even though one’s thoughts could indeed be about the world itself (i.e., not a world “withdrawn”), that “world” would only be the world as it is passively presented (or received) in experience. Now, perhaps one could say in this case that one “knows” that one is a BIV, but the problem is that that sort of “knowledge”—if we can even call it that—would be completely ineffectual. It would simply amount to direct, rather than indirect, spectatorial knowledge. But if that is the extent of the power of “knowledge” then it cannot help us escape from our passive (experiential) prisons. Knowledge, as construed by McDowell, can be said to involve a direct view of “the external world”, but it would not be directly tied to “practical” affairs; the activity of knowing, according to McDowell, only involves the endorsement or refusal to endorse passively received presentations of the world. McDowell’s epistemological gain, therefore, simply amounts to an improvement in the (notably problematic) spectator conception of knowledge. As McDowellian BIV’s we might indeed be able to see our situation as BIV’s (i.e., the “facts”), but we could not do anything about it.

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66 This proviso is meant to highlight the (epistemological) difference between the traditional or indirect realist interpretation of the BIV scenario and the direct realist version, which would be amenable to McDowell’s view. On the traditional view the idea is supposed to be that it would simply be impossible to detect whether one was in fact a brain-in-a-vat or not: one’s experience, in that case, is not something world-involving. But the story would be different in a direct realist version of the BIV case. Supposedly the BIV’s thoughts and experiences are world-involving. And so, given the right set-up of world-involving-ness (in the scenario), it is conceivable that a BIV could detect that it was a BIV. That is, if one was a BIV one could potentially find out this fact about the world.

67 And, in the last section I supplied reasons for rejecting this conception of knowledge. In its place I offered Dewey’s conception of knowledge in terms of actively doing something to the world and assessing the consequences. If this is indeed what knowledge is, then McDowell’s conception would not count.

68 Recall, from the last chapter, that I briefly focused on a particular clarification offered by McDowell in a footnote. In footnote 8 of chapter one in *Mind and World* McDowell adds, after claiming that “experience is passive,” the following comment: “Of course this is not to deny that experiencing the world involves activity. Searching is an activity; so are observing, watching, and so forth.” Notice the “activity” verbs that McDowell employs here: “searching,” “observing,” and “watching”. They are all spectatorial activities! All of these “activities” can be done from behind the bars of a passive prison.

69 That is to say, we could not act on the facts. Of course, one might try to object here and say that “action” is something separate and distinct from “experience”. That is, one might think that “acting” is one thing, and “experiencing”, something different. But to think that, in my view, is disastrous: it amounts to a full embrace of
So even if we grant that McDowell’s direct presentationalism solves the problem of the BIV being “knowledgeably” out of touch with the external world (the “facts”), there still seems to be something very troubling about the scenario we are left with.70 What we really want is what McDowell attempted to offer but failed, and that is a reason to think that the BIV scenario makes absolutely no sense at all. McDowell gives us a reason to reject the “traditional” interpretation of the BIV scenario, and he in turn “quiets” the associated threat of external world skepticism by introducing his direct realist account. But then the BIV scenario just pops up again in a different form: viz. in the form of a direct realist version. McDowell fails to even consider this interpretation of the BIV scenario.

To get to the point then, what remains troubling about the BIV scenario, even on the direct realist version, involves a second sort of skepticism, not external world skepticism. I think that the modified (direct realist) version of the BIV scenario shows us that the real—i.e. the skepticism inducing—problem with the BIV scenario is more than just that the BIV is screened-off or “veiled” from the world by an intermediary or a HCF. The real problem is that the BIV cannot do anything: it’s inside a vat. All it can “do” is (passively) receive—i.e. undergo—sensations or “experiences”. Here “experience” is equated with mere “undergoing”; I want to cast doubt on the idea that this conception of “experience” could ever allow for “doing” or “acting” at all. And if there cannot be doing or acting in the picture, then there cannot be what is problematic about the active-passive dualism. And how can it make sense to say that an action is not an “experience”? The only way that that can make any sense is if one believes (i.e. assumes) that experience is passive, that is, that “experience” is just receptivity, just “undergoing”. And, that view (or assumption) is the one toward which I am directing my attack. It forces us to regard what it means to “act” as something—an event—that takes place “outside” of experience or apart from experience, in the mind or in the head or in the space of reasons or in the sphere of linguistic relations or between belief, etc..

70 Not to mention we are forced to conceive of “knowledge” as a spectatorial relation. McDowell’s philosophical goal can thus be put in unfriendly terms: he wants to make the spectatorial conception of knowing compatible with a certain “naturalistic” conception of experience as passive.
knowing either, since knowing is a form of doing.\textsuperscript{71} So, this second sort of skepticism runs
deeper than the epistemological variety, and in fact it motivates its spectatorial form.\textsuperscript{72} This sort
of skepticism is tied to the passive conception of natural relations. And that sort of naturalistic
conception is what provokes a picture of “experience” as merely a passive undergoing. Of
course, the reason that this sort of skepticism is not usually identified as a “skeptical” problem is
because most philosophers tend not to be concerned by it, or even to notice it. This is because, in
my view, most philosophers subscribe, at least tacitly, to the passive conception of nature.

McDowell is obviously \textit{not} concerned by this second sort of skepticism: he continually reiterates
the idea that “experience is passive” and that “in experience one finds oneself saddled with
content.”\textsuperscript{73} In contrast, I want to argue that experience, so conceived (i.e., understood as being
passively saddled with content), rules out practical dealings with the world; it rules out agency;
and so it rules out knowledge. Doing—i.e. agential dealings with the world—cannot even enter
the picture if experience is conceived as a passive relation. And McDowell’s additional claim,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{71} Again, this is a Deweyan conception of knowledge, and I agree with it. In fact I think that this idea—that
“knowing is a form of doing”—ought to be implicit in the conception of the space of reasons as a “game of giving
and asking for reasons.” It is, in part, the ability to engage in this sort of activity that constitutes one as a “knower”.
Of course the activity of knowing also involves the practical and directed inquiry and manipulation of the world: it
involves \textit{doing} things (physically) to the world, not just conversing about it. So the phrase “the game of giving and
asking for reasons” need not necessarily imply linguistic idealism. As Dewey says: “When interaction has for its
consequence the settling of future conditions under which a life-process goes on, it is an ‘act’. … “If it be admitted
that knowing is something which occurs within nature, then it follows as a truism that knowing is an existential
overt act. Only if the one who engages in knowing be outside nature and behold it from some external locus can it
be denied that knowing is an act which modifies what previously existed, and that its worth consists in the
consequences of the modification. The spectator theory of knowing may, humanly speaking, have been inevitable
when thought was viewed as an exercise of a [faculty of] ‘reason’ independent of the body, which by means of
purely logical operations attained truth” (Dewey, \textit{The Quest for Certainty}, p. 195).
\textsuperscript{72} In other words, the underlying assumption—i.e. the offending premise—that gives rise to both sorts of skepticism
involves the conception of experience as a passive occurrence, i.e. as a “happening” that just happens to make a
mark on one’s subjectivity. The problem with this conception of experience is not only that we may be misled about
what we see—that is the traditional epistemological problem, but, what’s worse, we may be misled into thinking that
we are \textit{doing something} when we are in fact doing \textit{nothing}, nothing, that is, but passively receiving “impressions” or
“presentations”.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{MW}, p. 10.
\end{footnotesize}
that experience is not just a passive, but also a direct, rational relation (i.e. a P-R relation), does nothing to address this second sort of skepticism.\footnote{In fact, McDowell’s view attempts to 	extit{enshrine} the second sort of skepticism. He wants to insulate the passive conception of experience from attacks that suggest that the passivity of experience rules out its also being rational. So when McDowell begins \textit{Mind and World} by saying that “concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world,” he means that concepts mediate between the “active” relations of knowing and the “passive” relations of experiencing. This role for concepts is meant to preserve the thought that experience, because it is a \textit{natural} occurrence, is passive.}

So what remains troubling after McDowell “quiets” external world skepticism is a second sort of skepticism, skepticism about our freedom of action—about our genuine \textit{interaction} with the world. McDowell’s conception of “experience” allows the following skeptical possibility to remain live: although I \textit{think} that I can freely act on the world—i.e., do something, like read these words—this may be just an illusion. If I am a BIV, then (in experience) I am not doing anything at all, I am simply being passively presented with “glimpses” or aspects of the world (i.e. facts, events, states of affair, etc.). But—and this is the key point—this is just how McDowell conceives of the \textit{normal} (non-BIV) case of experience as well! “Experience”, for him, consists of being passively presented with content by the world. This seems to be McDowell’s own version of the “brain in a vat requirement”. And the problem with it is this: even if I am not a BIV, I still cannot genuinely \textit{do} anything.

The sort of skepticism that remains in the direct realist rendering of the BIV scenario, then, resides in the possibility of making one think that one is “active” when in fact one is merely passive (a BIV). Once we recognize that a BIV (or a prisoner in Plato’s cave) cannot \textit{do} anything—all it can “do” is \textit{have} (i.e. be passively presented with) “experiences”—the real question becomes: how can a BIV, which is doing \textit{nothing}, be made to \textit{think} that it is doing something? That is the question; for if that trick cannot be pulled off then the BIV scenario is not possible, and it may in fact be incoherent.
The only thing that makes the BIV scenario seem coherent—that is, what makes the “trick” work—is a specific conception of “experience”. It is only when an “experience” is equated with a mere “passive undergoing” or a “having of a presentation” or a “being saddled with content” that the BIV scenario seems compelling—i.e. skepticism inducing. And this is exactly the way that McDowell conceives of experience.

So if we are looking for a reason to reject the BIV scenario outright and show it to be totally confused and absurd, the reason is this: the notion of experience as passive leads to a second sort of skepticism. That view of experience is what keeps alive the (skeptical) possibility that one could have a “reality” (in which one thinks one is doing and undergoing things) passed-off on one. It is the idea that undergoing can be disconnected from doing, and that mere undergoing in isolation is what constitutes “experience”.

With this concept of experience in place, a BIV could be said to have “experience” yet it wouldn’t be able to detect that it was not actually acting on the world—doing things. But, once we reject the conception of “experience” as passive, as Dewey does, we can eliminate the plausibility of the brain-in-a-vat scenario altogether, and with it, both sorts of skepticism. As Dewey sees it, “the problem of the possibility of knowledge is but an aspect of the question of the relation of knowing to acting, of theory to practice.” If “experience” is an active relation—a matter of doing and undergoing rather than just undergoing (presentations, beliefs, etc.), then the BIV scenario makes no sense at all. It would simply be impossible for a BIV to think that it is acting when it is in fact just passive in experience, just undergoing or receiving presentations from the world. Accordingly, the way to avoid the second sort of skepticism is to view experiential relations as genuinely

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75 This would not be a “false reality” about what one sees, but rather a false reality about what one does. It is not a problem about us being spectators, but rather a problem about us being participants (in experience).
76 The same problematic arises when one equates “experience” and “consciousness”.
active, agential relations; that is, to re-conceive “experience” as Dewey does: as a term for the doings and undergoings of living organisms.

9. Here then are the two sorts of skepticism that I set out to highlight in this section: The first sort, (i), has to do with a spectatorial relation. The skeptical implication here is that one can be perceiving or “seeing” something (i.e. having states with “content”) that may not actually be there—or, things may not be as they appear to be. The second sort of skepticism, (ii), has to do with our practical, experiential relation to the world, i.e. our ability to be actors. The skeptical implication here is that it’s possible think one is doing something, i.e. acting, when one is really just passively being acted upon by the world. Most of the philosophical effort through the ages has been directed at overcoming the first sort of skepticism. But, my point is that such attacks on (i) cannot be successful without a concomitant attack on (ii). But (ii) is sustained by a naturalistic monism that presumes that every relation in nature—including human and animal “activity”—ought to be seen in terms of cause-effect relations; and, in the context of this causal structure, relations must ultimately be passive (a case of one thing being (causally) acted upon by another). The passive conception of nature is thus the source of the second sort of skepticism because it provokes a passive conception of experience.

Instead of being literally tied down in a cave, the passive conception of experience makes it look like we are prisoners in our own minds or brains—even if it can be said that we directly “see” the real, external world. So although the traditional epistemological problem of the external world may be “quieted”, we are still imprisoned. Just because the mind’s “eye” is open to the world does not mean that we can act on the world: that is the point of the modified BIV
scenario. If experience is a passive relation, the best the mind’s activity can accomplish is a relation to passively received input. So, the only place for freedom and agency to go, when one adopts the passive conception of experience, is to retreat or “withdraw” into the mind—where it looks like it must take the form of an independent “will”.

I have admitted that McDowell (correctly) characterizes the first sort of skepticism as involving an inner retreat of the external world. But he fails to notice a second sort of retreat, and so he fails to notice the second sort of skepticism. Dewey describes this sort of failure when he says,

Inner reveries and enjoyments constitute freedom to the natural man. Everywhere else is constraint, whether it be of study, of science, family life, industry, or government. The road to freedom by escape into the inner life is no modern discovery; it was taken by savages, by the oppressed, by children, long before it was formulated in philosophical romanticism.

Here Dewey is talking about a common sort of misconception of “freedom” whereby it can only be had by virtue of thinking: it is a purely psychological freedom. This conception of freedom is the last resort for the passive naturalist, who must argue in the following sort of way: “well,” the argument might run, “even if passive mechanistic determinism is the rule of nature, we human beings are nonetheless capable of freedom because we are thinking beings.” This sort of defense depends upon the assumption that thinking (or the will) is the origin of freedom. But,

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78 In fact, McDowell actually employs the “eye” metaphor in Mind and World. In the “Afterword,” on page 172, McDowell says, commenting on a remembered shade of color, that “One way of capturing this is to say that one sees the shade in one’s mind’s eye” (MW, p. 172).


80 This idea seems to stand at the center of compatibilist defenses of freedom. It involves the idea that the right sort of causal mechanisms or relations—viz. those that run (causally) through our thinking or deliberating or willing processes—can constitute “free” actions. But this idea should really just be seen as a reinterpretation of “freedom” along passive, as opposed to active or agential, lines—and so as merely semantically different from determinate causation.
when activity shrinks into to the sphere of mental operations it shrinks away from the sphere of practical activity. McDowell courts this precise sort of retreat when he splits up the faculty of spontaneity and the faculty of receptivity. “Experience” for him then falls on the passive, “receptivity” side. But, as Dewey succinctly put the point, “Disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them experiences.”

The thesis of this section is this: The BIV scenario presupposes a conception of experience as a passive relation to the world. Without that presupposition the BIV scenario does not have any plausibility. Dewey’s point, that “disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them experiences,” is a vivid way of emphasizing that experience cannot be something that is merely imposed upon one by the world (it cannot merely be “undergoing”); rather experience must involve an active relation to the world, a relation of doing and undergoing.

10. I mentioned that the “withdrawal” or “retreat” of activity into the mind makes it seem like we need the idea of a “will” to understand our ability to direct our bodies to action. McDowell is not at all oblivious to the problematic nature of this picture, and he definitely wants to avoid it. The only question is whether his account can successfully avoid it. I don’t think that it can.

McDowell says that the

Withdrawal of agency from nature, at any rate from the ordinary nature in which the movements of our bodies occur, strains our hold on the idea that the natural powers

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82 The will is like the “seat” of agency. It is often allied with agent causationism and a compatibilist account in which a free action is one that arises in the right sort of way—viz. by being caused by the will. (Of course what caused the will to cause the action is still a question that begs to be answered.)
that are actualized in the movements of our bodies are powers that belong to us as agents. Our powers as agents withdraw inwards, and our bodies with the powers whose seat they are—which seem to be different powers, since their actualizations are not doings of ours but at best effects of such doings—take on the aspect of alien objects. It comes to seem that what we do, even in those of our actions that we think of as bodily, is at best to direct our wills, as it were from a distance, at changes of state in those alien objects. And this is surely not a satisfactory picture of our active relation to our bodies.  

Here McDowell correctly (in my view) identifies the problem: the withdrawal or retreat of agency. And, up until the last sentence it seems like I should be considering McDowell my ally rather than my enemy. But, that last sentence exposes the problem in his view. McDowell clearly indicates that what he thinks we need is “a satisfactory picture of our active relation to our bodies.” Why does he think that we need to find a “relation to our bodies”? The answer is that he sees the mind as an active faculty and he sees experience as a passive faculty. He does not view experience as an active relation of doing and undergoing.

So, although McDowell cannot overcome the second sort of skepticism, he seems, at least, to see what the problem is. Just as I have been doing throughout this section, McDowell draws a parallel between the retreat of “empirical content” and the retreat of “agency”. But McDowell misdiagnoses the reason for the twin retreats. McDowell blames both retreats on the “exclusion of spontaneity from sentient nature”, i.e., the exclusion of concepts from nature. He says:

83 MW, p. 91.
84 McDowell’s aim is to accurately describe “the ultimate contact between our mental life and the world” (MW, p. 8, fn. 7).
Just as the exclusion of spontaneity from sentient nature obliterates anything we can recognize as empirical content, so here the withdrawal of spontaneity from active nature eliminates any authentic understanding of bodily agency.\(^{85}\)

But my point is that it is not the “exclusion of spontaneity” from nature that “eliminates…bodily agency”. Rather, it is the picture of experience as a passive relation that eliminates agency from nature. And so McDowell’s conception of a faculty of spontaneity as something separate from a faculty of receptivity actually produces the need to find a “relation to our bodies.” The location of agency for McDowell must then be found in the faculty of spontaneity. That is, it must be found in the “active” faculty, because that is the faculty that employs concepts. So agency, for McDowell, is not something that describes a whole organism’s interaction or relation with the environment, rather it involves a particular faculty. And that faculty must then somehow be connected to the passivity of experience. That is why McDowell thinks that the absence of \textit{concepts} in nature eliminates the presence of active relations in nature. He ties activity to the use of concepts. But my point is that the real problem is not the exclusion of concepts from nature but rather the exclusion of activity—genuine experiential activity—from nature.

McDowell parallels the Kantian slogan like this: “intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency.”\(^{86}\) Now, the first half of this slogan seems okay. It simply admits the ordinary phenomenon in which one intends to do something but fails to carry it out (like: I meant to take out the trash, but I forgot). It is the second part of McDowell’s slogan that seems problematic: “movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings.” “Mere happenings”? Does that mean that they are (“happenings”) on a par with the happenings at the center of the sun or the

\(^{85}\)\textit{MW}, p. 91.
\(^{86}\)\textit{MW}, p. 89.
orbit of electrons around a nucleus? This view completely discounts the differences between living things (what I call second nature) and inanimate objects (what I call first nature). Instead, McDowell’s attempted reconciliation of agency with nature involves

the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, with its rationality part of its animal, and so natural, being, not a mysterious foothold in another realm. The way to do that is to realize that our nature is largely second nature.87

Here McDowell’s “second nature” simply amounts to the involvement of concepts, and so he hypostatizes the “rational” part (of human beings) as a “faculty of spontaneity”. But, I have been arguing that it is a mistake to think of the faculty of rationality—the “mind”—as something that resides in a special part of us, or as an aspect that is added to our animality. It is better to think of the “mind” as a useful term for describing what we (humans) do. Dewey puts this point well when he says:

Mind is primarily a verb. It denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves. Unfortunately, an influential manner of thinking has changed modes of action into an underlying substance [or faculty] that performs the activities in question. It has treated mind as an independent entity which attends, purposes, cares, notices, and remembers. This change of ways of responding to the environment into an entity from which actions proceed is unfortunate, because it removes mind from necessary connection with the objects and events, past, present and future, of the environment with which responsive activities are inherently connected.88

87 MW, p. 89.
88 Dewey, Art as Experience, p. 264.
The fact that McDowell thinks of the mind as an “independent entity”, i.e. as a faculty of spontaneity, is demonstrated by his thinking that we need to find a “relation to our bodies.”

So the reason that McDowell thinks we need to find a “relation to our bodies” is because he views the activity of thought, the “rational” part (or faculty) of our animality, as something sui generis, in the sense that it is what gives birth to genuine activity. The use of concepts is, for McDowell, what turns an otherwise mere “happening” into an “action”. My point, following Dewey, is that we don’t need to think of something (like the use of concepts) as having to turn ordinary natural events (which would otherwise be mere passive “happenings”) into “actions” (where something is done). Rather, the more inclusive naturalism that I am proposing already admits actions into the natural world: it does so when it acknowledges the presence of the world of the living, the world of disentropic events where living things utilize energy and engage in life-sustaining activity. We therefore do not need to try to reconcile (mental) activity and nature. The whole world of the living, of which we are a part, is the world of active nature, of active, natural relations. We, and our conceptual abilities, are part of that active nature; we human beings do not create it (by way of concept use).

11. At the core of the spectator view lays the mistaken conception of “experience” as a passive undergoing or reception. This conception of “experience” is in turn propped up by a particular sort of restrictive naturalism, one that views all natural relations as passive, causal relations. If experience is not conceived as an active relation, i.e., as doing and undergoing, then the activity of knowing about the world will be, at least, windowed-off from the external world, insofar as that world is passively presented to us. That “window” indicates an active-passive dualism, and it can only be shattered by a proper respect for the disentropic principle, the
principle that allows for a pluralism of natural relations; specifically, the granting of full and independent “natural status” to living, agential relations. These relations cannot be equated with the structure of determined, cause-effect relations, and they cannot be confined inside the mind either; active relations are not mere happenings, nor are they dislocated internal events—they involve the active resistance and persistence of sustaining one’s own life. Energy in second nature is not passively transferred (as it is in first nature); it is actively acquired and used. This use or utilization of energy stands at the heart of our thinking of life—i.e. being alive—as being a relation in which an organism, such as you or me, is “free”. Of course we are not totally “free”, since, being living organisms, we are chained to specific activities like pursuing food, water, and other life-sustaining necessities (on pain of death). And, there are involuntary life-sustaining actions (like breathing, blinking, etc.) that contrast with voluntary actions (like moving here or there and eating certain things, etc.). But in either case, the sort of utilization of energy that living organisms engage in requires acting on the environment in some form or other, and that action is the “heart” of agential freedom—the heart of the world of the living. Of course even amoebae are alive, and so, on my account, I must admit that they—and any other simple organisms—do do something, i.e. act. But it is also clear that the more an organism can

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89 In plants—which are also part of the world of the living—movement, I assume, is involuntary (like animal respiration), being dictated by a source and direction of light. Of course, this “movement” could also just be an aspect of growth, and so be a distinct sort of process from motility.

90 This point is in keeping with a Deweyan conception of the continuity of living forms. As S. Morris Eames explains, “Dewey shows that logical processes grow out of, but are not reducible to, the preconditions of organic responses of the organism. The organism responds; its responses are a kind of crude classification of its life. The amoeba, for instance, pushes out into its immediate environment or conditions of its life. If this simple organism finds parts of its environment unfriendly, then it recoils and rejects those parts; if it finds other parts of its environment friendly, then it selects those parts. On this very simple level of life, there is emerging in the responses of the organism a kind of logic; that is, the processes of selections are affirmations and the processes of rejections are negations. Thus, organisms make discriminatory responses, and, in a crude way, they are classifying and defining. These crude beginnings are not on the level of a more complex and highly developed logic, a logic that emerges from a biological foreshadowing into the development of abstract symbols and their implications” (Eames, “Experience and Philosophical Method in John Dewey,” in Experience and Value, p. 26).
do, the “freer” it is. And on this scale humans stand way at the top. So in that sense we need not feel threatened by extending second nature’s active relations to all living organisms—active relations, like passive ones, can come in all shapes and sizes.

Accordingly, McDowell’s account leaves out a huge chunk of what it means to be an experiencer; and this, in effect, sucks the agency right out of the experience. In McDowell’s picture of experience one is passive, and for that reason one is still in a theater. It is not the private Cartesian “inner” theater in which the images or representations that pass before the subject (the mind) may or may not match up with what’s “out there”, i.e. the external world. Instead, on McDowell’s account, the mind is an open inner theater. Yet McDowell’s picture still involves a passive subject who, though he can be certain that he is not out of touch with the objects that he perceives (i.e. with what’s “out there”), nonetheless feels disconnected from them in that his freedom—his agency—consists only in being able to endorse or refuse to endorse the impressions he is passively presented with. The crux of agency for McDowell resides merely in deciding whether or not to take these passively presented appearances at “face value”.

“Experience” and Education

In the previous section I called into question whether McDowell’s conception of experience as passive receptivity (i.e. a P-R relation) was compatible with genuine agential freedom. There I

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91 I will expand upon this point in section three. For now, I will defer to Dewey, who says that “In the interests of the maintenance of life there is transformation of some elements in the surrounding medium. The higher the form of life, the more important is the active reconstruction of the medium” (Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 85).

92 This point will be clarified and elaborated in section three.
argued that the best that his account can allow for is an “inner” freedom of thought or judgment, not a freedom of activity.\(^93\) As de Gaynesford puts it, for McDowell,

Conceptual capacities are freely exercised in judgements and necessitated, or unfreely actualized, in experience. Given McDowell’s position on the exercise of control, it is possible to regard judgements as free because they necessarily involve the subject’s engagement of checking procedures for whose outcome he is responsible. In experience, on the other hand, the subject is not free but imposed upon; and since this deprives the subject of the opportunity to engage whatever checking procedures are at his disposal, the notions of control and its exercise have no application.\(^94\)

In this section I am going to call into question the idea that McDowell’s conception of “experience”, in which one is “unfree” and “imposed upon”, can be compatible with the capacity for human beings to \textit{learn}. Before coming to that, however, I first want to draw some conclusions about the sort of control over our lives that McDowell’s conception of “experience” allows.

1. Experience for McDowell is passive, whereas thinking and judging are active. Accordingly, what we have “control” over, on McDowell’s view, is only our “cognitive life.”\(^95\) We do not have control of our experience—since experience is “passive”, we are simply “acted on by independent reality.”\(^96\) This “passivity” contrasts with “our activity in empirical thought

\(^{93}\) In short, the argument was that if experience is passive, then the best we can hope for is an internal, cognitive sort of \textit{spectatorial} freedom.  

\(^{94}\) de Gaynesford, \textit{John McDowell}, p. 115.  

\(^{95}\) de Gaynesford, \textit{John McDowell}, p. 113.  

\(^{96}\) McDowell says that “the experiencing subject is passive, acted on by independent reality” (\textit{MW}, p. 67). Alternately, McDowell describes “impressions” as “impingements by the world on a possessor of sensory capacities” (\textit{MW}, p. xv).
and judgement.\textsuperscript{97} For McDowell “The idea of a faculty of spontaneity is the idea of something that empowers us to take charge of our lives.”\textsuperscript{98} But what does this power or “control” over our active thinking come to? What does “taking charge of our lives” mean for McDowell?

The control over our cognitive lives involves, as McDowell says, an “active adjustment of one’s thinking to the deliverances of experience.”\textsuperscript{99} One is not in control of what is presented in experience, but one \emph{is} in control of what one does with those (conceptual) presentations. As we saw in the previous section, McDowell’s view of experience as “openness” means that what is “presented” in experience is a genuine “glimpse” of the world itself—not a mere intermediary.\textsuperscript{100} So, when McDowell talks about adjusting “one’s thinking to the deliverances of experience”, he speaks of this “adjustment” in terms of “world-view construction”: i.e., piecing together various “glimpses of the world” into “a belief, or a system of beliefs, about the empirical world—something correctly or incorrectly adopted according to how things are in the empirical world.”\textsuperscript{101} Thus a “world-view”, according to McDowell, is how “one takes things to be in the empirical world.”\textsuperscript{102} Our freedom and “control” over our lives thus extends only to the “activity” of “continually reshaping a world-view in rational response to the deliverances of experience.”\textsuperscript{103}

For McDowell, experience represents a part of our lives that we are not in control of; we are only in control of what we decide to make of experience. But since, according to McDowell, 

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{MW}, p. 8. Since the constraints of rationality are in play here as to what one can and cannot accept, McDowell describes this “control” as “responsible freedom” rather than absolute freedom.

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{MW}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{MW}, p. 29. Elsewhere, McDowell says that “We have to understand the experienceable world as a subject matter for active thinking, rationally constrained by what experience \textit{reveals}” (\textit{MW}, pp. 32-3).

\textsuperscript{100} McDowell says that “It is exactly not the case that impressions, as I conceive them, intervene between perceiving subjects and the states of affairs they observe to obtain. Rather, at their best impressions constitute an availability, to a judging subject, of facts themselves, which she may incorporate into her world view – perhaps by way of explicit judgement, or perhaps less reflectively – on the basis of the impressions” (McDowell, “Experiencing the World,” \textit{RN}, p. 15).

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{MW}, pp. 138-9.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{MW}, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{MW}, p. 114.
the content of experience is already conceptual, “experience is rationally linked into the activity of adjusting a world-view.”\textsuperscript{104} In fact, McDowell says that, “To understand empirical content in general, we need to see it in its dynamic place in a self-critical activity, the activity by which we aim to comprehend the world as it impinges on our senses.”\textsuperscript{105} Although experiences, for McDowell, are just passive impingements over which we have no control, “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.”\textsuperscript{106}

I have quoted McDowell in abundance here in order to focus on his use of language. McDowell tends to employ metaphorical terminology to describe our cognitive life and our experience. For McDowell, experiences are “appearances” or “glimpses”\textsuperscript{107} or “presentations”, while thinking and judging (i.e. our “cognitive life”) involves “world-view” construction. All of these are “picturing” metaphors that seem to call forth the idea of a spectator conception of our knowledge of the external world. What we are in charge of (reshaping), according to McDowell, is a “world-view”. The key word here is “view”. That is, we are in charge of (or responsible for) managing a spectatorial relation or view of the world. Our rationality—our “freedom of spontaneity”—is used to adjudicate between various representations or images of the world—i.e., to decide whether they match up with, or are “appropriately constrained by,” the world

\textsuperscript{104} MW, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{105} MW, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{106} MW, p. 40. He adds: “Ensuring that our empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding.”
\textsuperscript{107} On page 32 of Mind and World McDowell admits that “The notion of a glimpse is distinctively visual.” But, he adds that “we can generalize it to embrace non-visual experiences.” Does he mean to suggest that we can “generalize” this visual metaphor to extend to all cases of experience and knowledge? If so, that would be a nearly explicit admission of indulgence in the spectator theory of knowledge. Also McDowell uses the phrase “a fact made manifest” to describe instances of factual knowledge.
This part of McDowell’s account looks like a remnant of representationalism akin to a form of correspondence. For McDowell, we get it right (i.e., true) insofar as we correctly represent how the world is. The point of engaging in the “continuing activity of adjusting [one’s] thinking to experience” is, presumably, to come to as accurate a “world-view” as possible.

As was admitted in the last section, McDowell has shed the problem of intermediaries getting in the way of a (direct) spectatorial relation to the external world, but, he has not shed the spectatorial relation itself. For example, McDowell divides impressions into two types: impressions can be either “opaque” or “transparent”. McDowell prefers to call his impressions “transparent” because, in that case, having an impression (or presentation) is like looking through a lens or a window—one can see right through to the world itself. Experience, in this case, does not stand as a barrier to our view of the world. On the other hand, McDowell rejects the metaphor of “opaque” impressions. Instead of looking at a scene through a window, an “opaque” impression would be like looking at a painting of that scene. Of course an “opaque” impression might be able to “represent” the scene (or bit of reality), just like a realistic painting can. But, an “opaque” impression, just like a realistic painting, nonetheless always falls short of actually being (or “presenting”) the scene itself—i.e., the genuine article. With that said,

108 As McDowell says, in a passage I have quoted before, “Minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be. How one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it” (MW, p. 11).
109 McDowell shows his allegiance to the correspondence theory of truth when he says: “The very idea of representational content brings with it a notion of correctness and incorrectness: something with a certain content is correct, in the relevant sense, just in case things are as it represents them to be. I can see no good reason not to call this correctness “truth”” (MW, p. 162). Of course elsewhere McDowell describes this “match in content” in terms of the identity of an experience and a fact (see, e.g. MKR, p. 388-9).
110 MW, p. 145.
111 I suppose that likening such impressions to a “window” is more apt than likening them to a “lens”; for it is possible for a lens to produce a distorting effect. The idea is that the act or event of “experiencing” does not get in the way (or stand as a barrier) between the experiencer and the world (as it is in itself). For example, with regard to McDowell’s preferred “transparent impressions”, he says, “there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world” (MW, p. 27). The “image of openness to reality” also plays a part here. Since experience is “openness,” an “experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks” (MW, p. 26).
McDowell’s complaint that the Coherentist’s view of impressions (or “beliefs”) leaves us “frictionless” can be re-worded like this: Coherentism’s view of experience, insofar as it does partake of “opaque” impressions (or non-relational beliefs), is like viewing (or looking at) a painting of a thing rather than the thing itself. We can constantly rework a painting to try to get it as close to “reality” as possible, but even a master painter or a masterpiece (if that’s what one can wind up with) fails to give us the real thing, or, even to provide a perfect imitation or copy of the thing (like a photograph). To extend the comparison even further, we could say that Rorty’s call to give up correspondence or objectivity in favor of “solidarity” likens us all to painters of reality. We are never all going to paint the same picture; the best we can hope for is to work toward a convergence or coherence—so that all of our paintings (of the world) at least look similar.

2. So, for McDowell, our activity and “control” over our lives extends only to the cognitive reshaping of world-views—i.e., to thinking and judging. McDowell associates this aspect of

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112 McDowell makes this charge when he says that “In my picture impressions are, so to speak, transparent. In the picture common to Sellars and Davidson they are opaque: if one knows enough about one’s causal connects with the world, one can argue from them to conclusions about the world, but they do not disclose the world to one” (MW, p. 145).
113 I’m sticking with a two-dimensional metaphor here.
114 Actually, I think that in Rorty’s case we ought to say that we are all “story-tellers” or “novelists” rather than “painters”, because Rorty deliberately shifts his focus to linguistic relations rather than pictorial or representational relations. In fact, Rorty claims to concur with Dewey’s critique of the spectator theory of knowledge. Nonetheless, Rorty’s view simply replaces the emphasis on spectatorial relations with an equally lop-sided emphasis on linguistic relations. For him, our “stories” don’t aim to “hook on to” or “mirror” an independent reality; rather, they aim to provide a narrative setting in which to frame and re-frame our human, cultural relations. But still, our activities aren’t agential and organic, they are linguistic.
115 And for this reason Rorty concludes that it is best to just give up on representationalism as a theory of knowledge: we simply can’t compare our beliefs or experiences to reality—its just all more painting. As such, he simply thinks it is hopeless to come to one correct representation of reality. Hence, Rorty has sometimes been called a relativist (e.g. by Putnam). For Rorty, we are each engaged in painting our own particular view (or version) of “reality”; and no one has the “correct” view. Of course some of us will be better painters than others, but in the end, what counts as “better” is really just a matter of subjective taste—like preferring Picasso to Matisse.
116 ...that is, so that we can at least draw similar conclusions from them.
117 McDowell says: “judging is an active employment of capacities that empower us to take charge of our thinking” (MW, p. 66; see also MW, p. 8). McDowell also equates a “world view” with “theories” or “beliefs” (McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 149).
freedom with the faculty of spontaneity. He says: “The idea of spontaneity is the idea of freedom.”118 McDowell contrasts this faculty of spontaneity, which affords us a freedom and control over our lives, with a faculty of receptivity in which we are passively acted on and constrained by the external world.119 McDowell associates “experience” with this faculty of receptivity. He says: “experience is passive, a case of receptivity in operation.”120 So, our “freedom”, “activity”, and “control” over our lives does not extend to life as it is experienced. According to McDowell, “in experience one finds oneself saddled with content.”121 In experience we do not act on the world, rather the world acts on us.122 As McDowell says, “the course of a subject’s experience [is] made up of impressions, impingements by the world on a possessor of sensory capacities.”123

Here again I have tried to quote McDowell in abundance in order to focus on his own language. As he puts it, our faculty of spontaneity is “active” and “free”, whereas our faculty of experience, i.e. receptivity, is “passive” or “unfree”.124 Insofar as we are thinking, we are “free” and “active”; insofar as we are experiencing, we are “passive” and “acted upon” by the world. As such, when McDowell talks about our experiential relation to the world he has a tendency to use causal locutions.125 For example, he refers to experiences as “impressions”, “impingements”, “impacts”, “upshots”, “deliverances”, “presentations”, or “passive occurrences”. In fact, McDowell explicitly states that “the concept of receptivity is implicitly

118 MW, p. 66.
119 McDowell appeals to this constraint to provide “friction”.
120 MW, p. 10.
121 MW, p. 10.
122 Elsewhere McDowell describes being answerable to the tribunal of experience as being answerable “to the way the world puts its mark on us; that is, and answerability to the deliverances of our senses” (McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 149).
123 MW, p. xv.
124 Here I am using “unfree” as a synonym for “constrained”; the word comes from de Gaynesford.
125 Here I am suggesting that agential relations involve locutions of “acting”, whereas causal relations involve locutions of “being acted on”. In the previous chapter I used this distinction to explain the intimate connection between causation and the notion of passive relations.
causal.” And, he adds that “The receptive actualization of conceptual capacities in perceptual experience would have to be caused by environmental circumstances.” In addition, McDowell often combines these causal locutions with visual language when he describes “experience”. For example, in experience images are forced upon us: we are “passively saddled with conceptual content”, “facts make themselves manifest in experience,” and the world “puts its mark on us,” “presents us with appearances,” “does someone a…favor,” or “makes an impression on a perceiving subject.” Here, causal locutions are combined with presentational imagery to describe how the faculty of receptivity plays the role of a passive spectator.

Obviously, if McDowell’s account implies that we don’t have control over experience, he must have a special notion of “experience” in mind. Often, when I describe my experience to someone I describe what I did—i.e., my actions, not just what happened to me in terms of the images (or information or content) that I received. But the only role that McDowell allows the experiential relation to play is as a vehicle (or “conduit”) for the delivery of content. Experience, for him, is not a practical, active relation; it is a passive relation that involves receiving “glimpses” or “appearances” (much like a camera). Here “experience” cannot mean “doing and undergoing.” It seems to mean just undergoing, where “undergoing” means something like the “taking of such and such to be the case” or the “receiving of an impression”. But it cannot even yet be a matter of “taking”—which connotes an action rather than a mere cause; for that

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126 RN, pp. 91-2.
127 MW, p. 144.
128 McDowell, “Scheme-Content Dualism and Empiricism,” Interpreting Davidson, p. 149.
130 McDowell, “Knowledge and the Internal,” MKR, p. 406. The “favor” is that our representation matches the way the world is.
131 MW, p. xx.
132 Experience is like a camera, in that it is our (mind’s) window (or conduit) to the world. We can choose where to point our camera, but we cannot choose what happens once we point it in a certain direction. The images (“impressions”) that appear in the lens are caused by the world’s impacts on our camera, not by what we do. The experiential relation is passive in that way. We don’t interact with the world; rather we receive content from it. (“caused” versus “free”)
reflects a freedom and control that McDowell restricts only to one’s cognitive faculties—i.e., to the spontaneity to make up one’s mind. On McDowell’s account we don’t interact with the world in experience, rather, the world “impinges” upon us.

I have to conclude from all of this that McDowell’s conception of “experience” is inherently passive and spectatorial, and so, that his use of “experience” is a just an idiosyncratic, philosophical “term of art.” What is more, this notion of a passive, spectatorial relation is propped up by thinking of an “experience” as merely an effect produced by some cause in the world. In other words, “experience” for McDowell is just a mere happening or event, it is separate from our agency, i.e., our ability to interact with the world. Instead, the “world” or “the layout of reality itself” or aspects of that world like “states of affair” or “facts” or “objects” (all of which McDowell opposes to “sense-data” or mental “intermediaries”, etc.) become the causes responsible for bringing about contentful states (i.e., “effects”) called “experiences” or “impressions” in perceiving subjects. Once the world takes on the role of producing these “contentful states,” something like the “mind” or “the spontaneity of the understanding” or “the freedom to employ conceptual capacities” then has to (be posited to) come in to play the role of the only true free-actor in the picture. Thinking and judging, for McDowell, are what we do; “experience”, by contrast, is something that happens to us. Insofar as we are “experiencers” we are just passive receivers.

3. Now, to be clear, I don’t want to deny that the word “experience” is sometimes used to convey the idea of a mere apprehension or undergoing. But what I do want to deny is that that is

133 Simon Glendinning and Max De Gaynesford point out this aspect of his account when they say that, “McDowell’s account of experience is couched in terms of the central component of the causal theory of perception: the effect thesis.” This is “the idea that a subject’s experience of a fact presupposes that it is an effect of or produced by that fact” (Glendinning and De Gaynesford, “John McDowell on Experience: Open to the Sceptic?” Metaphilosophy, (1998), p. 26).
the *only* use of that word. And I especially want to deny that that conception of experience can be understood as *definitive* of our agential relation to the world.

It seems to me that there are at least two typical uses of the word “experience”. In what follows I will discuss these two uses. The first concept, (1), is the one that has tended to be employed in philosophical analyses of experience (i.e., as a “term of art”), whereas the second concept, (2), seems to be the more common usage, in which “experience” is roughly tantamount to “familiarity with”. The first conception construes “experience” as merely an undergoing: the having of a state or episode (of awareness); a mere happening that is separate from agential doing. Experience, in this case, is not an activity; rather one only needs to be equipped with a certain receptive or sensory faculty. For example:

1. He had an experience of a red cube.  

According to this conception of the experiential relation, something always plays the role of an “object” of the experience: in experience something is passively “received”. The “object”—i.e., what is *received*—typically goes by the name “experiential content” or “intentional content” or just “content”. In this case, the “content” of the experience is a “red cube”.

This conception of experience in terms of an “intentional content” is very similar to the traditional empiricist’s notion of an “impression”. But since that time, at least, there has been a debate in philosophy about what sort of thing a “content” is—i.e., what sort of thing an experience is *directed at or about*. For the early empiricists “contents” were something like perceptual (or mental) copies of things.

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134 For example, in an entry on “experience” Wikipedia states that “The concept of experience generally refers to know-how or procedural knowledge, rather than propositional knowledge.”
135 This example is drawn from McDowell’s Woodbridge Lectures, *The Journal of Philosophy*, (Sept., 1998), pp. 431-491. The past-tense locution is not a necessary feature of the formulation here. The sentence “He has an experience of a red cube” could work just as well.
This conception of experiential content, however, gets complicated by the fact that what can play the role of a “content” is not always something that exists (to be copied). For example:

*1. He had an experience of red unicorn.

Of course it is possible to have hallucinations or to be susceptible to illusions or simply, at times, to misperceive things. This fact complicates the matter because, according to this conception of the experiential relation, something has to play the role of the “content” of an experience, something has to be “received”—and it can’t be, e.g., a red unicorn. For this reason, the idea of sense-data—or similar perceptual intermediaries, like representations—were posited to explain what can play the role of a content in illusory experiences.

Of course we have seen that McDowell fervently objects to the conclusion drawn from the argument from illusion, which is that the content or object of an experience must always be something that falls short of the fact itself—an intermediary, like a sense-datum. Instead, for McDowell, what plays the role of an “experiential content” is some object or state of affairs that actually exists in the external world—that is what McDowell means when he says that in experience one is directly open to the world itself.136 Of course McDowell admits that it can sometimes seem like one is having an experience with a “content” (e.g. of a “red unicorn”) when in fact one is not. In such cases (of illusions and the like) there is simply no “content” available for one’s experience—one is simply mislead in thinking that there is.137

In addition to this object-dependence, McDowell also insists that experiential content must be conceptual. This point follows from his acceptance of the principle of psychological nominalism, which was posited in an effort to avoid the Myth of the Given. The idea is that only

136 That is, for McDowell, experiential content is “object-dependent”.
137 This is what McDowell refers to as the disjunctive account of experience. He says, “When we are not misled by experience, we are directly confronted by a worldly state of affairs itself, not waited on by an intermediary that happens to tell the truth” (MW, p. 143).
conceptual contents can factor in judgments as to how things are—i.e. judgments that can yield empirical knowledge. But if the experiential relation to the world is *just* a causal relation, then it cannot yield *representational* contents; that is, it cannot yield genuine “glimpses of the world” to the effect that things are thus and so (e.g. being a “cube” that is “red”). Therefore, according to McDowell, the content delivered via the experiential relation must also have a conceptual structure: it must involve a passive, *rational* (i.e., P-R) relation. As Tim Thornton explains, for McDowell, “Experience has the kind of content that is characterized using a “that-clause” and that enables a harmony between it and the facts that collectively constitute the world.” And, only *certain* subjects are equipped with the capacity to passively receive such contents, viz. those who have acquired a second nature.

We can see that philosophers—especially McDowell—have packed a lot of information into this concept of “experience”. But two things, at least, stand out as central to this particular conception of “experience” as it factors into a philosophical account of the relation between an experiencing subject and the world. First, the relation is *passive*, and second, the relation involves acquiring a “content” capable of yielding knowledge—i.e., a *conceptual* content.

And, given the presumed passivity of the relation, it makes sense that this conception of

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138 Tim Thornton put the point like this: “The only model we have of a reason for a belief is a relation in which both items related are already conceptualized” (Thornton, *John McDowell*, p. 212).
139 This point, in effect, is what makes the Myth of the Given a myth.
140 At one point, Tim Thornton uses the term “conceptualized uptake” to refer to the same relation that I am here calling a passive, rational (i.e., a P-R) relation (Thornton, *John McDowell*, p. 216).
141 Thornton, *John McDowell*, p. 217. As Crispin Wright puts it, “To conceptualize experience is to regard any episode of experience, properly so viewed, as involving a having it seem to one that P” (Crispin Wright, “Postscript to Chapter 8,” *RMW*: 163).
142 This point—that only *certain* subjects or creatures can have experiential contents—will be explored in the next section.
143 Of course, the dispute over traditional empiricism and the associated critique of the Myth of the Given concerns the very possibility of passive, causal relations (viz. experiences or “impressions”) being capable of entering into knowledge relations. Hence, McDowell’s main aim in *Mind and World* is to vindicate an account in which passive relation can be capable of yielding knowledge, i.e., if they are also seen as conceptual. Thus he says, “The misunderstanding is to suppose that when we appeal to passivity, we insulate this invocation of the conceptual from what makes it plausible to attribute conceptual capacities in general to a faculty of spontaneity” (*MW*, p. 29).
“experience” is typically associated with a faculty of receptivity. The emphasis on the passivity of the relation is what makes this particular use of the word “experience” equivalent to a mere undergoing or suffering or “having of a content”, i.e. a state which is the effect of a worldly cause. This point can be seen more clearly by the fact that we can substitute the expression “had an experience of…” with “was conscious of…” or “was aware of…” without any loss of meaning. For example: “He was conscious of a red cube” and “He was aware of a red cube” are equivalent to (1), “He had an experience of a red cube.”

The point I want to make now is that it is problematic to associate experience with a faculty of receptivity, i.e. with mere consciousness or awareness (of a content). The passivity implicit in such a view of “experience” fails to take into account the fact that the notion of experience is also connected to the idea of doing something. That is, such a view fails to account for the agential or active character of experience. As such, it is appropriate to describe the conception of “experience” used in (1) as the idea of a passive spectatorial relation. It is “spectatorial” because it describes experience in terms of a (quasi-visual) relation to a “content”.

The conception of “experience” at work in (1) contrasts with a more commonplace conception of experience. I earlier indicated that this second use of “experience” means something similar to “familiarity with” or “know-how”. But this is a very rough characterization, since this second sense of “experience” is not easily defined; it represents a

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144 Here I mean only to emphasize McDowell’s point that when one opens one’s eyes one is “saddled with content.”
145 In fact “associate” is too weak here. This idea of “experience” reduces the experiential relation to a mere episode or state of awareness or consciousness: an intentional directedness—in which, when someone is awake, something is present (or presented) to awareness.
146 That is, “content” can be either propositional (as in coherentism and linguistic idealism), visual (as in traditional empiricism), or both (as in McDowell’s non-traditional empiricism or Kant’s transcendental idealism). But, in all cases one’s relation to that “content” is passive: it is something that just happens to you (the experiencer). You are caused by the world to “have” it. You don’t do anything; you simply get—i.e., receive—the content by being conscious or awake or aware.
basic sort of life-activity between an organism and its environment. I think that Dewey provides the best description when he talks about it in terms of the connection between doing and undergoing.\textsuperscript{147} And, in contrast with (1), this conception of “experience” does not express a passive relation but rather an active relation. It should thus be called an “agential conception of experience” as opposed to the “passive, spectatorial conception of experience”. For example:

2. He has experience with CPR.\textsuperscript{148} “Experience” in this case indicates a mastery or grasp of some activity or skill. As Dewey says, “The true “stuff” of experience is recognized to be adaptive courses of action, habits, active functions, connections of doing and undergoing.”\textsuperscript{149} This conception of experience involves activities and their consequences in connection with certain contexts, environments, and situations. Its point is not to pick out atomic moments in experience—like specific sensations or contents—but to emphasize an experiential continuity or connection with various life-processes and histories of interaction. It refers not to a mere happening, but rather to a doing or an undergoing—and as such it involves not a passive occurrence but the activity of a living organism. Dewey says that “experience,” “like its congeners, life and history…includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are

\textsuperscript{147} Dewey says that the “close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience” (Dewey, \textit{Reconstruction in Philosophy}, p. 86).

\textsuperscript{148} This particular example refers to a specific ability, viz. the ability to perform CPR (i.e., cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, not the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}). But this conception of the experiential relation is often employed more broadly, to connote a general learning from life-experience. For example, in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} Aristotle says that “a young man is not qualified to be a student of politics; for he lacks experience of the affairs of life” (Bk I: ch 1, p. 5). Similarly, Dewey explains that “From the multitude of particular illnesses encountered, the physician in learning to class some of them as indigestion learns also to treat the cases of the class in a common or general way. He forms the rule of recommending a certain diet, and prescribing a certain remedy. All this forms what we call experience. It results, as the illustration shows, in a certain general insight and a certain organized ability in action” (Dewey, \textit{Reconstruction in Philosophy}, p. 80). Elsewhere Dewey explains that “Experience, with the Greeks, signified a store of practical wisdom, a fund of insights useful in conducting the affairs of life” (Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, p. 354). In other words, at that time, the use of the word “experience” had not yet been solidified as a philosophical term of art.

\textsuperscript{149} Dewey, \textit{Reconstruction in Philosophy}, p. 91.
acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of experiencing.”150

“Experience” as a term of art—i.e., in the sense of (1)—equates it with a receptive awareness of something rather than a doing or undergoing of something. Experience(1) thus becomes an object, something to be (passively) received: a mere “impression” or an “appearance”. Accordingly, experience(1) is used as an equivalent of “sensation” or “perception”; something is sensed or perceived, viewed or spectated, and that something is hypostatized as a “content”. Accordingly, this “term of art” requires the imposition of a causal, or passive, relation between an experiencer and an experience—i.e., a medium for the deliverance of experiences (or “experiential contents”) to experiencers. But in experience(2) nothing is delivered, rather something is done or undergone. So in the context of experience(2), the sentence “He experienced a red cube” would represent the activity of seeing, not the passivity of receiving a content.151 Likewise, the subject’s experience with CPR (in (2)) indicates the fact that he has performed certain activities in the past and it reflects certain capacities for dealing with and coping with future situations. The word “experience” in (2) is certainly not meant to

150 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 8. I should point out that this conception of experience is distinct from, but underlies, a more technical use of “experience” that Dewey employs in *Art as Experience*. There he singles out for discussion “*An Experience*”, which is to be distinguished from the common, run-of-the-mill experience (that I am here designating as (2)). Dewey says that “In contrast with such experience [i.e., (2)], we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency” (Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 35).

151 I have the following sort of question in mind here: Does the red cube cause him to see it? Is it the thing that is performing the “activity” while he just sits there passively? No, I don’t think that that is right. The red cube isn’t doing anything, he is. And the reason that he can see it—just as well as anybody else can—is because he is alive and is an animal with eyes who inhabits the environment. I don’t deny that there are light waves reflecting off the surface of the cube, and that that is what his eyes “pick up” when he sees it. But I propose that instead of trying to make it out so that the inanimate cube causes him to see it, we simply say that his relation to that cube is not causal but agential: it is a case of seeing. I think that this captures the reality of experienced life much better than a locution which states that the subject is passive and the world impresses itself on one’s sensibility.
convey only that the subject received an experience about, i.e. with the “content”, CPR. In (2), “He” stands for an agent, an actor, not a patient or spectator.

4. These two different conceptions of experience in turn yield two different ways of understanding what it means to know something about the world. Both McDowell and Dewey think of knowing as an activity, i.e., as something that we have, to a certain extent, control over. But, since McDowell thinks that experience is passive—as in conception (1)—he must conceive of the knowing relation as something separate from experiencing. Dewey, by contrast, pictures knowing as just a particular form of experiencing. I now want to contrast what the knowledge relation looks like when experience is conceived as a passive undergoing and what it looks like when experience is conceived as an agential relation.

McDowell locates our activity and control in our cognitive ability to think and judge. But that control does not extend to life as it is experienced. Instead, the extent of our control lies in our ability to shape a world-view. And, for McDowell, “shaping world-views is rationally responsible to the succession of appearings to the subject.”\(^{152}\) Those “appearings”, i.e. the impacts of the world on our faculty of receptivity, involve the passive deliverance of conceptual contents. Those contents are what the activity of the faculty of spontaneity is “responsible to”; they constitute the “tribunal of experience”.\(^{153}\) Knowledge, then, involves a relation to a content or to contents, i.e., a relation between a person—or rather an active mind—and a passively received propositional or conceptual content. Thus, the content must be something distinct from

\(^{152}\) MW, p. 142.
\(^{153}\) McDowell puts the point like this: “If the rational answerability is to receptivity itself…then in being subject to the tribunal of experience, exercises of “conceptual sovereignty” are rationally answerable to the world itself. (Recall the image of experience as openness to the world.)” (MW, p. 142).
the knowing. The doing and the undergoing are separate acts—or rather, the one is an act whereas the other is a mere happening.

Since experiences, for McDowell, are already conceptual, they count as “glimpses” of the world. But, those glimpses are passively received and so do not yet constitute knowledge. Knowledge requires an activity on the part of the knower; the (responsible) activity of taking a stand as to how things are in the empirical world. That activity involves endorsing or refusing to endorse the way experience presents things to be.\(^{154}\) The active faculty of spontaneity presides over passively received impressions or glimpses of the world. These impressions or “glimpses” can constitute not only the content of an experience, but also the content of a judgment as well. Hence the knowledge relation—just like the experiential relation—also looks like a *spectatorial* relation: it involves viewing and then deciding whether or not to endorse certain contents as being representative of the way things are.\(^{155}\) As such, the knowledge relation, for McDowell, looks like it simply involves a (“controlled”) glimpse of glimpses.

So it seems that McDowell deploys two types of “spectatorial relations”: active spectatorial relations and passive spectatorial relations. Active spectatorial relations involve judging or endorsing “presentations” or “glimpses” of the world. These judgements are part of the active process of building and shaping a world-view. Passive spectatorial relations involve the passive reception of “presentations” or “glimpses” of the world. These form the contents of world-views. The mind or faculty of spontaneity involves active spectatorial relations to contents, while experience or the faculty of receptivity involves passive spectatorial relations to

\(^{154}\) McDowell says that “In 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: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value” (\textit{MW}, p. 26).

\(^{155}\) McDowell says: “Minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one’s experience represents them to be” (\textit{MW}, p. 11).
contents. The “mind” is where “freedom” comes from, but its control is limited by the passivity of experience. All empirical knowledge has to come through passive impressions.\footnote{In fact, this statement can be taken as an expression of McDowell’s non-traditional empiricism, i.e., what he refers to as “minimal empiricism.”} That is why it is so important to be sure that those passive impressions don’t lie to us—that they reveal the external world. And that is why McDowell insists that experiential content cannot be conceived as an intermediary but rather must involve a direct openness to the world.\footnote{That is, McDowell avoids the problem of external world skepticism simply by making passive, spectatorial relations transparent.} But, even if those passive “glimpses” do directly reveal the world to us, the “activity” of the mind does not allow us to do anything to the world—in experience we are still just passive.

Knowledge does not allow us to act on the world; it only allows us to act on passively received impressions of the world—to construct a “world-view”. It is this picture of the knowledge relation that limits our ability to have anything but a spectatorial relation to the world.

Dewey by contrast, as we have seen before, rejects this spectatorial conception of the knowledge relation. In fact, he sees such a spectatorial conception as having animated the views of a long line of empiricist philosophers. He says,

> We are only just now commencing to appreciate how completely exploded is the psychology that dominated philosophy throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to this theory, mental life originated in sensations which are separately and passively received, and which are formed, through laws of retention and association, into a mosaic of images, perceptions, and conceptions. The senses were regarded as gateways or avenues of knowledge. Except in combining atomic sensations, the mind was wholly passive and acquiescent in knowing.\footnote{Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 84.}
The idea that the Mind’s activity simply consists in the rearrangement or “combining” of passively received impressions or “glimpses” is problematic because it divorces the capacity to come to know about the world from our ability to act on the world. Dewey describes this as the separation of knowing from doing. But, it is even worse than that; for McDowell reduces all doing, all activity and “control”, to the cognitive process of selecting among various passively received impressions. Experience, in turn, is reduced to the mere passive reception of impressions. So in his case it cannot even be said that experience is a “doing” (separate from knowing). Experience(1) (as a term of art) involves being acted on rather than acting. So the problematic separation is not between doing and knowing—as Dewey frames the objection—but rather between doing and undergoing. If the two are not connected in experience then the picture of us as agents looks completely mysterious. The extent of our “control” over our lives becomes an entirely cognitive affair: the agent is trapped within and can only engage “in a continuing activity of adjusting her thinking to experience.”159

Like Kant, McDowell breaks down our natural human capacities into two “ faculties”: a faculty of “receptivity” and a faculty of “spontaneity”. According to this view, “freedom” applies to what we think—i.e., to spontaneity, while “constraint” applies to what we experience—i.e., to receptivity. But then we must ask: where are we to place what we do, i.e. our activity: in thought or in experience? McDowell places what we do, i.e., our “freedom”, activity, or “control”, squarely in the faculty of spontaneity, that is, in our cognitive capacity to think and judge. Thus McDowell only seems to allow for internal doings.160 Experience, then, gets contrasted with this faculty; it looks like something that just happens. But it seems rather intuitive to me, at least, that we ought to answer this question instead by saying that what we

159 MW, p. 47.
160 That is why, in the previous section, I complained that on McDowell’s view freedom and agency seem to retreat into the mind.
do—i.e. what we have agential control over—extends to both what we experience and what we think. Of course there are obvious limits to what we can do in both cases; we only have a limited control over our thoughts and our actions and, especially as children, we often require guidance and instruction. But, what is really problematic about conceiving of “experience” in terms of (1) is that it implies that we have no control whatsoever over our overt actions.

Because what we do seems to apply to both our overt actions as well as to our (“internal”) thought processes, I think that we need to avoid making any sharp separation between doing and undergoing. Picturing experience as merely undergoing—as in conception (1)—and dividing us up into an active faculty and a passive faculty seems to have the disastrous effect of distancing our agency so far from experience as to make us look like aliens in our own skins. Instead, we need to be careful to note that “experience,” as Dewey suggests, “covers all modes of interaction between an organism and its environment.” Accordingly, the conception of experience in (2) characterizes the experiential agent as a fully engaged participant in the world rather than a mere spectator who observes the world behind a wall (or “window”) of passive impressions. This agential conception of experience implies a continuity rather than a separation (into “faculties”) between doing and undergoing. And, even though it is true that we can describe certain experiences as involving undergoing things, such undergoings should not be

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161 Dewey says that “Probably one thing that strengthened the idea that the mind is passive and receptive in knowing was the observation of the helplessness of the human infant. But the observation points in quite another direction. Because of his physical dependence and impotency, the contacts of the little child with nature are mediated by other persons. Mother and nurse, father and older children, determine what experiences the child shall have; they constantly instruct him as to the meaning of what he does and undergoes” (Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, p. 91-2).

162 I doubt that this has ever been the intended implication of philosophers who have used the word “experience” in this way (i.e. a la (1)). In fact, my hunch is that the stifling and restrictive nature of this conception of experience has been hidden by the widespread conflation of the two concepts of experience. A look at any treatise on the nature of mind and action will likely reveal that both of these senses are deployed without any explicit disambiguation. No doubt, this very text may itself be riddled with such conflations. Nonetheless, I am maintaining that this particular equivocation can have dire consequences for our understanding of our lives as agents.

163 This quotation comes from Hidebrand, Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism, p. 36. There Hildebrand is paraphrasing a point made by Dewey in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” in Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude, p. 7.
misunderstood as isolated events, but rather must be seen as always part of the larger, ongoing activity of a living organism, since they are connected to what we do in a vital sort of way.\textsuperscript{164} For example, Dewey says, “suppose a busy infant puts his finger in the fire; the doing is random, aimless, without intention or reflection. But something happens in consequence. The child undergoes heat, he suffers pain. The doing and undergoing, the reaching and the burn, are connected. One comes to suggest and mean the other. Then there is experience in a vital and significant sense.”\textsuperscript{165}

This point about the continuity of experience leads to a different conception of what it means to come to know about the world. Knowledge cannot involve being a mere spectator of nature; rather, it involves being a participant (or agent) in nature. And it is this very participatory aspect of experience that connects thinking about the world with knowing about the world. “Dewey asserts that ‘knowing’ is intelligible only as the outcome of the activities by which we ‘come to know’ the things we do; and all of the different ways of ‘coming to know’ involve corresponding methods of operating on the world.”\textsuperscript{166} The key idea here involves seeing that what is done and what is undergone by an organism are connected in experience, and, that it is that connection that allows the process of knowing to get underway. This basic sort of interaction, in which “changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities,” forms the basis and sets the stage for the more complicated forms of human

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\textsuperscript{164} Dewey says that “Undergoing…is never mere passivity. The most patient patient is more than a receptor. He is also an agent—a reactor, one trying experiments, one concerned with undergoing in a way which may influence what is still to happen. Sheer endurance, sidestepping evasions, are, after all, ways of treating the environment with a view to what such treatment will accomplish. Even if we shut ourselves up in the most clam-like fashion, we are doing something; our passivity is an active attitude, not an extinction of response. Just as there is no assertive action, no aggressive attack upon things as they are, which is all action, so there is no undergoing which is not on our part also a going on and a going through. Experience, in other words, is a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings.” (Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” p. 11.)
\textsuperscript{165} Dewey, \textit{Reconstruction in Philosophy}, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{166} Steven Toulmin, “Introduction” to \textit{The Quest for Certainty}, p. xi.
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interaction that we refer to as “knowing”. And this is exactly what Dewey means when he emphasizes the fact that our ability to interact with the world and to manipulate it is crucial to the learning process. But, this emphasis also implies that experience cannot be seen as merely a passive relation to the world. And so, contrary to what McDowell says, our sensory or receptive faculties cannot merely be “conduits” or deliverers of contents or “glimpses” of the world—needing only to be “endorsed” (by the “active” cognitive faculty) to be registered as facts known; rather, sensations are connected to the vital activities of the organism and serve as cues to stimulate further action or further inquiry. As Dewey explains,

Sensations are not parts of any knowledge, good or bad, superior or inferior, imperfect or complete. They are rather provocations, incitements, challenges to an act of inquiry which is to terminate in knowledge. They are not ways of knowing things inferior in value to reflective ways, to the ways that require thought and inference, because they are not ways of knowing at all. They are stimuli to reflection and inference. As interruptions, they raise the questions: What does this shock mean? What is happening? What is the matter? How is my relation to the environment disturbed? What should be done about it? How shall I alter my course of action to meet the change that has taken place in the surroundings? How shall I readjust my behavior in response? Sensation is thus, as the sensationalist claimed, the beginning of knowledge, but only in the sense that the experienced shock of change is the necessary stimulus to the investigating and comparing which eventually produce knowledge.168

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168 This point stands in direct contrast to the sort of empiricistic “sensationalism” that construes experience as a “tribunal”. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, p. 89-90. And, Dewey continues, “When experience is aligned with the life-process and sensations are seen to be points of readjustment, the alleged atomism of sensations totally
5. The title of this section is nearly identical to a title of one of Dewey’s works on education. Dewey, perhaps more than any other philosopher, focused on education as vital to the maintenance of life. Often, education is understood as merely an intellectual pursuit to be contrasted, dramatically, with the crude and practical business of eking out a living in the harsh environment. Dewey, however, thought that the two—i.e., education and the business of living—could only be artificially disentangled. As Richard Bernstein explains, Dewey’s “slogan ‘Learn by Doing’ was not intended as a credo for anti-intellectualism but, on the contrary, was meant to call attention to the fact that the child is naturally an active, curious, and exploring creature.” In the remainder of this section I want to focus on the idea of “learning by doing”, and I want to show that such learning would be impossible if, as McDowell proposes, experience is just a matter of passive receptivity (i.e., a matter of P-R relations).

A key premise in my (naturalistic) analysis has been that living things are distinguished from other (inanimate) things (i.e. second nature is distinguished from first nature) by the fact that living things are disentropic entities. That is, living things utilize sources of energy to cope with and adapt to a changing environment. This “utilization” means, therefore, that living things

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169 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938. The only difference is that I have placed quotation marks around the word experience.

170 Dewey says that “With the renewal of physical existence goes, in the case of human beings, the re-creation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery, and practices. The continuity of any experience, through renewing of the social group, is a literal fact. Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life. Every one of the constituent elements of a social group, in a modern city as in a savage tribe, is born immature, helpless, without language, beliefs, ideas, or social standards. Each individual, each unit who is the carrier of the life-experience of his group, in time passes away. Yet the life of the group goes on” (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 2-3).

must take in energy in order to expend it in the business of living. Expending energy for living means that organisms must do things to their surroundings, and in turn, an organism’s surroundings impose challenges to the organism—the organism undergoes the effects of its actions. This process of the utilization of energy in adaptation to the environment is primarily what I have meant to refer to by saying that living organisms engage in active relations.

Learning is a particular kind of active relation that involves directing and coordinating one’s energy and attention to a situation, a problem, or an environment. For example, we humans have learned (over the years) how to grow food more effectively and economically (that is, to produce more with less energy). This “know how” depends not only upon what we do to the environment but as well it depends upon what the environment is like, what challenges it sets us—e.g., we must observe and adapt to a growing season. Learning is the key to passing along (to our progeny) this improvement of activity in dealing with the environment. Education or teaching is therefore a vital human activity because it allows us to pass on this know-how (via individuals) to future generations and so to improve our ways of coping in the long-term—i.e., to direct our energies in more effective and productive ways.¹⁷²

According to McDowell, experience is passive whereas thinking and judging are active. This means that thinking and judging do not involve interaction with the world but only an action directed upon passively received presentations of the world, i.e., an activity of a cognitive, spectatorial sort. Knowing, on this view, would not be an overt act but an internal one—dealing

¹⁷² This point is especially important in the case of human society, since, as Dewey points out, “the human young are so immature that if they were left to themselves without the guidance and succor of others, they could not even acquire the rudimentary abilities necessary for physical existence. The young of human beings compare so poorly in original efficiency with the young of many of the lower animals, that even the powers needed for physical sustentation have to be acquired under tuition. How much more, then, is this the case with respect to all the technological, artistic, scientific, and moral achievements of humanity!” (Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 4) All of these various ideas and technologies and ways of coping that get passed along through teaching and through continued societal use from generation to generation have been described in evolutionary terms—most famously by Richard Dawkins—as “memes”. As Rorty succinctly puts it, “A meme is the cultural counterpart of a gene” (Rorty, “Rationality and Cultural Difference,” TP, p. 191).
with passively received impressions. If this were the case, however, the world would be constantly confronting us with appearances or situations or “glimpses” which we could not do anything about—except think about (i.e. actively spectate on them). But, as Dewey says,

Interaction is a universal trait of natural existence. ‘Action’ is the name given to one mode of this interaction, namely, that named from the standpoint of an organism. When interaction has for its consequences the settling of future conditions under which a life-process goes on, it is an ‘act’. If it be admitted that knowing is something which occurs within nature, then it follows as a truism that knowing is an existential overt act. Only if the one who engages in knowing be outside of nature and behold it from some external locus can it be denied that knowing is an act which modifies what previously existed, and that its worth consists in the consequences of the modification. The spectator theory of knowing may, humanly speaking, have been inevitable when thought was viewed as an exercise of a “reason” independent of the body, which by purely logical operations attained truth. It is an anachronism now that we have the model of experimental procedure before us and are aware of the role of organic acts in all mental processes.¹⁷³

The upshot is that, if experience is just passive—just undergoing, then we would be unable to modify our environment and so unable to learn from those interactions with it. Experience, as such, would be out of our control, something that just happens to us. But if experience is in this way made out to be inert and impotent—and thinking is just a matter of accepting or rejecting passively presented appearances—we would be incapable of improving our actual situation. Experience, on this conception, leaves no room for the sort of learning that involves making continuous improvements to our situation: and that’s because it does not involve doing anything.

Therefore learning, and with it, improving our situation, requires that we see experience as an active relation as opposed to a passive relation. In experience something must be done as well as undergone; something cannot merely be had or received or “possessed”. If we take Dewey’s more organic conception of learning seriously, then we must admit that in experience we cannot be merely passive with respect to the environment. And so experiential coping cannot be just as case of having things happen to us. Likewise, the mind (or faculty of spontaneity, as McDowell puts it) cannot constitute an “activity” (or active faculty) if it just sits-back behind a passive wall of experience; rather, what we call “the mind” must emerge from agency, that is, it must present itself in the activities of experience itself—intelligence must be involved in the human organism’s engagement and interaction with the world. For, as Dewey says, “Only action, interaction, can change or remake objects.” And, he continues,

this is because intelligence is incarnate in overt action, using things as means to affect other things. ‘Thought,’ reason, intelligence, whatever word we choose to use, is existentially an adjective (or better an adverb), not a noun. It is a disposition of activity, a quality of that conduct which foresees consequences of existing events, and which uses what is foreseen as a plan and method of administering affairs.174

Dewey’s point is that thought and intelligence—and thus the “mind”—must be seen as a “quality of conduct,” something that comes out into the open in the process of (an agent’s) doing and undergoing things. McDowell, by contrast, sees thought and the “mind” as something separate from conduct, as something hidden behind our passive experiences with the world. That is why McDowell sets out, as he says in Mind and World, to consider the topic of “the relation

between minds and the world”\textsuperscript{175} and to look for a “satisfactory picture of our active relation to our bodies,”\textsuperscript{176} for, he mistakenly assumes at the (very) outset of his investigation that there is a \textit{separation} between doing and undergoing—where “doing” (for him) equals cognitive, conceptual activity and “undergoing” equals passive, experiential constraint. And, for the same reason, McDowell frames his intended reconciliation of mind and nature or world (i.e., knowing or “doing”, and experiencing or “undergoing”)\textsuperscript{177} in terms of a Kantian synthesis or “co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{178} On McDowell’s view, the mind looks like something—viz. a “faculty”—that is needed to \textit{inject} life or agency, so to speak, into otherwise inert, passive experiential occurrences, so as convert them from mere natural happenings into genuine “actions”. In fact, when it comes to the idea of “action”, McDowell baldly states (in notoriously Kantian jargon) that “movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency.”\textsuperscript{179} But, all of these philosophical contortions—i.e., in attempting to bring agency or “mind” \textit{back} into a “naturalistic” worldview—look merely superfluous and unnecessary \textit{unless} one has (mistakenly) assumed, at the outset, that doings and undergoings are separable, and that the latter are to be grouped as mere “happenings”. In fact, conceiving of experience as already an active, agential relation—along Deweyan lines—obviates the need to try to re-connect doing and undergoing by way of a philosophical synthesis. Dewey says,

\begin{quote}
Experience carries principles of connection and organization within itself. These principles are none the worse because they are vital and practical rather than epistemological. Some degree of organization is indispensable to even the lowest
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\textsuperscript{175} \textit{MW}, p. 3. \\
\textsuperscript{176} \textit{MW}, p. 91. \\
\textsuperscript{177} This parenthetical remark is meant only to draw attention to the fact that McDowell conceives of activity in purely cognitive or mental terms and experience in purely sensational or “worldly” terms. \\
\textsuperscript{178} \textit{MW}, p. 4. \\
\textsuperscript{179} \textit{MW}, p. 89.
\end{flushleft}
grade of life. Even an amoeba must have some continuity in time in its activity and some adaptation to its environment in space. Its life and experience cannot possibly consist in momentary, atomic, and self-enclosed sensations. Its activity has reference to its surroundings and to what goes before and what comes after. This organization intrinsic to life renders unnecessary a super-natural and super-empirical synthesis. It affords the basis and material for a positive evolution of intelligence as an organizing factor within experience.\textsuperscript{180}

So it is only when “experience” is conceived as a mere happening or undergoing, i.e. as an event disconnected from doing, that the seeming need for a synthesis arises. Accordingly, McDowell’s account requires a synthesis to (re)connect the active conceptual capacities of the faculty of spontaneity with the passive, receptive occurrences of experience. Indeed, McDowell commits himself to the need for such a synthesis because he views the passivity of experience as providing the necessary epistemological “friction” on our freedom to deploy conceptual capacities—a “friction” he finds lacking in Davidson’s account of coherentism. In turn, McDowell identifies concept use as the synthesizing link that ties the passive occurrences of experience to the active processes of understanding. And so, in order to get knowledge or answerability into the picture, McDowell thus (re)defines experiences as passively received \textit{conceptual} contents. But, simply put, saying that experiences have conceptual content is not the same thing as saying that they are active doings.

\textsuperscript{180} Dewey, \textit{Reconstruction in Philosophy}, p. 91.
6. I have been arguing in favor of the Deweyan slogan that learning involves doing, and I have been using this point as an objection against McDowell’s claim that experience is passive. In simplified form, the argument comes to this:

1. Learning involves doing.
2. The conception of experience as passive involves viewing experience as merely undergoing, not also doing.
3. Therefore, the conception of experience as passive does not allow for learning.

Now, this argument might be objected to, by a defender of McDowell’s view, on the grounds that at least some cases of learning do involve passivity on the part of the learner. I have in mind, specifically, the well-worn technique of rote learning. On this traditional approach to education, a child’s mind can be likened to an empty container or a blank slate, which, through passive sensory intake, can be filled up with information (i.e. “content”). From this perspective, it might be objected that such a traditional approach to learning, though perhaps not as successful as newer, active approaches, still produces results—students can in fact learn using the rote method. In short, the objection is that it is at least possible to learn by simply being told or shown facts.

This objection is rather easy to dispose of; for it needs only to be noted that rote learning does not involve complete passivity on the part of the learning subject. Rote learning primarily involves repetition and regurgitation, both of which require the student to do something.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{181} For example, Dewey states that, “Even…with respect to the lessons which have to be learned by the application of ‘mind,’ some bodily activities have to be used. The senses—especially the eye and ear—have to be employed to take in what the book, the map, the blackboard, and the teacher say. The lips and vocal organs, and the hands, have to be used to reproduce in speech and writing what has been stowed away. The senses are then regarded as a mysterious conduit through which information is conducted from the external world into the mind; they are spoken of as gateways and avenues of knowledge. To keep the eyes on the book and the ears open to the teacher’s words is a mysterious source of intellectual grace.” But of course, “reading, writing, and figuring—important school arts—demand muscular or motor training….Before the child goes to school, he learns with his hand, eye, and ear, because they are organs of the process of doing something” (Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 166).
course our imagined objector might retort that that is only the second half of the rote learning method; the first half of the process involves the student being told—or being “presented with”—this or that fact. And, insofar as the student is being told a fact he or she is a passive learner. But this too is a weak objection; for again it needs only to be noted that listening involves attention, and being an attentive listener is in fact a form of *doing* something. The passive locution “being told” should not mislead us here. In order for the rote method to succeed, students must be active listeners. So what at first seems like a mere passive relation, in actuality involves active participation on the part of the student. In fact, very often we use passive terminology to describe a situation in which a subject is actually *doing* something.

Irving Thalberg, in a paper called “Mental Activity and Passivity,” provides a similar sort of example. He says: “Suppose that a game of hide-and-go-seek is in progress at a children's birthday party. A girl holds perfectly still behind the curtains. That is also *doing* something.”

Our imagined objector could perhaps try a different route. He might argue that McDowell’s notion of passive experience can at least involve a sort of learning in the sense of building a “world-view”. In this case the “doing” that is appealed to need not be overt doing, like repeating something that is said verbally or in writing. Instead, the experiential contents that

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182 Irving Thalberg, “Mental Activity and Passivity,” *Mind* (July, 1978), p. 377. Now, perhaps it is possible to be alive—i.e. to be an agent—and yet be entirely passive. Such situations, if they exist, are extremely rare however. Suppose, for example, someone is beating me with a baseball bat. Insofar as I am just being beaten I am passive. But of course at first I resist; and so I am active. I put my arms up to block the blows, I try to get up and run away, etc. After a while of being beaten this way—and assuming that I don’t lose consciousness—I may just give up: that is, I may stop resisting and stop doing anything at all. In this case, assuming the blows continue, I would be undergoing something, i.e. feeling pain, but I would not be doing anything. Perhaps my acquiescence ought to still to be considered *doing* something, viz. acquiescing. But, for the sake of argument, let’s assume that this situation amounts to complete passivity on my part. Even still, such a case would not prove what our objector wants to prove; for such a case could not possibly be considered a “learning” situation (except, perhaps, in the comical sense that I am “being taught a lesson” or being “taken to school”). At any rate, I think a point made by Wittgenstein may be useful in this context. He says “a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain.—Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (Wittgenstein, Philosopher Investigations, § 284). My imagined state would be much like that of a corpse. Although it might be a mistake to call inanimate things “passive”, since unlike living things they cannot ever be “active”. 
are passively received in experience, as envisaged by McDowell, can be gone-over internally, as it were: they are, by such a process, shaped into a world-view. Such a shaping involves activity, but the “contents” of that activity—i.e. what gets shaped—are nonetheless passively received impressions. In short, the objection is that such a world-view construction process is a case of learning that involves passive experience.

Responding to this objection takes us closer to the heart of what is really wrong with McDowell’s conception of experience as merely a matter of passive undergoings. Dewey responds to a similar sort of conception of experience when he says that, “The failure [of such a view] arises in supposing that relationships can become perceptible [or be ‘glimpsed’]…without that conjoint trying and undergoing of which we have spoken.”183 Here Dewey questions whether we could ever learn about our agential relations to the world if those relations were simply presented to experience, i.e. without our actually participating in such relationships ourselves. He argues that this view of experience would be tantamount to filling “our heads like a scrapbook, with this and that item as a finished and done-for thing [or content].” And, he adds, this “is not to think.”184 Instead, he says, “It is to turn ourselves into a piece of registering apparatus.”185

A brain-in-a-vat, as I imagined it in the previous section, would be just such a “registering apparatus.” Even if a BIV could be said to have direct “experiences” of the world, those “experiences” would simply consists of undergoings or “registerings”. And, it is precisely that conception of “experience” (i.e. experience(1)) that makes it possible to think that a false

184 Dewey says that “Thought or reflection…is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence.…We analyze to see just what lies between so as to bind together cause and effect, activity and consequence.” “Thinking, in other words, is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous” (Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 170).
reality could supposedly be passed off on a BIV. So the real problem with the brain-in-a-vat scenario, therefore, is that a BIV cannot do anything; its undergoings—i.e. its supposed “experiences”—are never the effects of things that it itself has done. Such undergoings would be mere happenings, disconnected from anything that the BIV does. But, since a BIV cannot engage in any sort of overt activity at all, it cannot “register” any sort of connection between what is done and what is undergone (in consequence). And so a brain-in-a-vat, passively receiving (or “registering”) direct presentations of the world, would be unable to learn, precisely because it would be unable to interact with the world. Whatever occurs to a BIV—i.e., whatever it “undergoes”—would be an isolated event, having no connection to what the BIV itself has done (which, presumably, is nothing). But, as Dewey says, it is only “When what we suffer from things, what we undergo at their hands, ceases to be a matter of chance circumstance, when it is transformed into a consequence of our own prior purposive endeavors, [that] it becomes rationally significant—enlightening and instructive.” This sort of “instructive” activity is what would be missing if one were a BIV.

Experience cannot be “instructive” in this way if it is understood as simply involving the passive reception of content, even if that content is construed as already conceptual (as in McDowell’s conception). The conceptual element does not add the necessary ingredient that can allow for learning to take place. What is necessary is for experience to be a genuine agential interaction, one in which doing and undergoing are connected. McDowell’s view of experience, however, severs this crucial connection between doing and undergoing. Dewey describes the

186 “Experience”, for a BIV, is just a series of undergoings; and, importantly, this is just how McDowell conceives of experience in the non-BIV case as well.
188 In fact, one might argue that concepts themselves must be learned and so cannot, therefore, form the basis or foundation of learning. In the next section I will discuss the way in which McDowell thinks he can circumvent this problem.
problem with severing this connection between doing and undergoing in the following way. He says:

Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something. It is not experience when a child merely sticks his finger into a flame; it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence. Henceforth the sticking of the finger into flame means a burn….To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and a forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things.\(^{189}\)

So the heart of problem with McDowell’s view lies in his conception of experience as passive; for if experience is in this way just an undergoing, then nothing is really done. And so the point of my critique is that, if nothing is done, then undergoing (i.e. “experience”) cannot become instruction—it cannot amount to a “discovery of the connection of things.”

Relaxed Naturalism and Second Nature: Experience and the World of the Living

In this section I want to round out my critique of McDowell’s re-enchantment of nature by returning to the topic of relaxed naturalism. McDowell notices that a certain restrictive conception of naturalism—what he labels “the disenchanted view of nature”—threatens our ability to understand experience as a natural phenomenon. McDowell’s response to this restrictive conception of nature is to advance the idea that there can be two sorts of naturalism and likewise two natures: first nature and second nature. I applaud McDowell for his attempt to provide a more liberal conception of naturalism. My only complaint is (and has been) that McDowell draws his distinction between first and second nature in the wrong place. I want to drive that point home in this section.

McDowell draws up his distinction between first and second nature as one between two kinds of intelligibility: the kind that “equates disclosing how something fits into nature with placing it in the realm of law,”\textsuperscript{190} and “the kind we find in something when we place it in relation to other occupants of ‘the logical space of reasons’.”\textsuperscript{191} According to McDowell, the problem with equating all of nature—nature at large—with the realm of law (i.e., first nature) is that “we

\textsuperscript{190} MW, p. 88. It is important to note that McDowell does not equate descriptions in terms of the realm of law with descriptions in terms of causal relations. As McDowell says, “the right contrast for the space of reasons is not the space of causes but, as in my text, the realm of law.” He suggests that this “contrast leaves it possible for an area of discourse to be in the logical space of causal relations to objects without thereby being shown not to be in the logical space of reasons” (MW, p. 71, fn 2).

\textsuperscript{191} MW, p. 70. In point of fact, McDowell does sometimes refer to the distinction between natures in terms of “relations”. But, when he does, he gives the notion of relations a decidedly epistemological cast. For example, he says: “whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are different in kind from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons. The relations that constitute the logical space of nature, on the relevant conception, do not include relations such as one thing’s being warranted, or—for the general case—correct, in the light of another” (MW, p. xv). By contrast, what I have in mind when I refer to two “relations” is an ontological distinction between passive cause-effect relations and active relations in which living organisms do and undergo things. (Calling it a “metaphysical” distinction would perhaps lead to the mistaken interpretation that one of the relations is not to be seen as a legitimate natural relation.)
threaten, at least, to empty it [i.e. nature] of meaning.”\textsuperscript{192} Given this conception of the problem, McDowell thinks that the proper response is to re-enchant nature with concepts, and that once we have allowed conceptual relations into the picture we will have provided our naturalism with all the materials necessary to naturalize experience and intentionality. So, all that McDowell’s notion of second nature is meant to call into question is the idea that nature is exhausted by non-conceptual relations.

What McDowell does not call into question, however, is a certain cause-effect structure of nature at large, in which all natural events are thought of as passive relations in which one thing is acted on by another, which was, in turn, acted on by something prior, and so on. This idea of something’s being acted on is the idea of a passive causal chain of determined events. And, it is the very passivity of this cause-effect structure, I aver, that so-called naturalists (like McDowell) latch on to when they frame-up “nature” in terms of the idea of a “realm of law.” Of course there is nothing wrong with such a conception of natural events, \textit{per se}. In fact, McDowell is right to remind us that this conception of nature marks an advance over a certain pre-scientific world-view in which every event in nature was to be attributed to the active agency of some postulated supernatural or divine being or beings. Furthermore, this non-agential way of viewing all natural relations has yielded generous rewards in terms of our ability to predict and control natural phenomena. I would not dream of questioning the power and proven effectiveness of this conception of nature. But, what I do want to call into question—and McDowell does not—is the thought that this is the \textit{only} way to conceive of natural relations. For, pretty much by definition, such a (“realm of law”) conception of things has, at the outset, extruded action—i.e., agents—from nature. But there \textit{are} agents in nature; we are among them. So, as I see it, the fundamental question facing philosophical naturalism is this: can the non-

\textsuperscript{192} MW, p. 71.
agential conception of natural relations be utilized to construct or describe the activities of agents? I think that McDowell’s own attempt to naturalize experience (by including conceptual relations in this class on non-agential relations) stands as an object lesson for why we cannot expect an affirmative answer to this question.

My alternative proposition is that we posit agency as a genuine, *sui generis* natural relation, standing alongside—not competing with—the passive, non-agential causal relation. This proposal should not be misconstrued as a nostalgic longing for the bygone days of supernatural explanations; for my point is that agential relations are to be extended only to members of the world of the living, not to inanimate objects. The idea is simply that there are *actors* in nature, doing and undergoing things; so not all natural events can be understood simply in terms of things being acted on. But, *being passively acted on* is exactly the sort of relation that McDowell—albeit inchoately—takes to be central to naturalistic descriptions (at large); and this, I will argue, is why his re-enchantment of nature fails. For McDowell, *being acted on* is the naturalistic link that connects the conceptual events of second nature with the non-conceptual events of first nature. Second nature, for McDowell, simply amounts to *being passively acted on* with concepts.

1. Notoriously, McDowell places non-human animals outside of second nature. It should come as no surprise, then, that perhaps the most persistent criticism that McDowell has received from commentators has had to do with his refusal to attribute intentional or experiential states to non-human animals.¹⁹³ In his own words McDowell admits: “I refuse to credit non-human

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animals with orientations towards the world."\textsuperscript{194} McDowell’s attitude toward non-human animal life largely follows from his particular combination of psychological nominalism and empiricism. He claims that only creatures endowed with conceptual or linguistic capacities are capable of receiving genuine experiential contents from the world, i.e., “contents” (or “impressions”) capable of warranting judgments to the effect that such and such is the case.\textsuperscript{195} As a result, he says, “It follows that mere animals cannot enjoy ‘outer experience’.”\textsuperscript{196} Now, it may not seem too radical to insist that an animal that does not possess, for example, the concept of a tree, cannot have an experience to the effect that “that is a tree”. But, McDowell goes further: he adds that non-conceptual creatures “cannot have ‘inner experience’ either.”\textsuperscript{197} This further point has been taken by some critics to imply, for example, that since mere animals don’t have the concept “pain” they cannot feel pain (i.e. have an “inner experience” or “impression” of pain) when they get injured.\textsuperscript{198}

McDowell himself acknowledges that his view of non-human animals “understandably…raises some hackles.”\textsuperscript{199} Nonetheless, McDowell has tried to minimize this seemingly counter-intuitive aspect of his view. He has argued that there are simply two sorts of perceptual sensitivity: one permeated by spontaneity (i.e., by conceptual capacities) and one not so permeated. The difference McDowell draws between these two sorts of animal sensitivity directly corresponds to his conception of the difference between first nature and second nature.

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{MW}, p. 182. The point is, basically, that non-conceptual animals cannot enjoy episodes of intentionality, because intentional states require a combination of receptivity and spontaneity. So here “orientation to the world” can be equated with “awareness of the world.”
\textsuperscript{195} He says “that it is only because experience involves capacities belonging to spontaneity that we can understand experience as awareness, or apparent awareness, of aspects of the world at all” (\textit{MW}, p. 47).
\textsuperscript{196} \textit{MW}, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{MW}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{198} Crispin Wright, for example, complains that McDowell provides a “bluff attempt at a distinction—in effect, we are invited to suppose that there are two ways of suffering: feeling pain and experiencing it…McDowell’s position requires him to regard the surface grammar of ‘feeling pain’ and ‘experiencing pain’ as misleading in its implication of a common component” (Wright, “Postscript to Chapter 8,” \textit{RMW}, p. 164).
\textsuperscript{199} \textit{MW}, p. 182.
The ultimate aim of this section will be to argue that McDowell is wrong to draw the distinction between first and second nature where he does. But before coming to that point, I first want to expose some of the reasons that McDowell seems to be forced to make such counter-intuitive claims about the (experiential) lives of non-human animals.

One reason that McDowell seems to be forced to deny that the “perceptual sensitivity” possessed by a non-conceptual animal can count as a genuine “experience” has to do with his avoidance of the Myth of the Given. It would be a case of the Myth of the Given, he thinks, to assume that mere animals can receive a form of sensory intake or content (i.e., possess a kind of awareness) that is non-conceptual yet nonetheless capable of representing the way the world is (or the way one’s inner life is—in the case of pain, fear, hunger, etc.). Only a conceptual content, according to McDowell, can justify a belief about how the world is, and non-human animals are not endowed with such conceptual capacities. McDowell says,

I have been claiming that it is essential to conceptual capacities that they belong to spontaneity, that is, to a faculty that is exercised in actively self-critical control of what one thinks, in the light of the deliverances of experience. But that means we cannot attribute the conceptual capacities that would figure in the account of ‘inner

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200 As McDowell says, “I am rejecting a picture of a mere animal’s perceptual sensitivity to its environment: a picture in which the sense yield content that is less than conceptual but already such as to represent the world” (MW, p. 121). And, responding to the possibility of “what the cat, or infant, would say [if it was in pain] if it could only speak English,” McDowell says: “That is a form of the picture of the pre-conceptual given, there in pre-linguistic or non-linguistic awareness, waiting (in human infants at least) to be clothed in conceptual garb.” He says: “The view I find in Wittgenstein certainly suggests that the subjectivity of cats and infants is not like that—that nothing is, in that kind of way, given to a cat or an infant. But if this seems like a denial of the subjectivity of cats and infants, that depends on missing the point that nothing is, in that way, given to us either. Our subjectivity is not a matter of this kind of thing plus the conceptual garb” (McDowell, “One Strand in the Private Language Argument,” MVR, p. 295). In terms of the ostensive identification of sensations, McDowell’s thought is that, when one points to something in experience, like a pain, one cannot be pointing to something that lies outside of the conceptual sphere.

201 McDowell says that “this is just another form of the Myth of the Given. The idea is that mere animals already enjoy perceptual experience in which the world strikes them as being a certain way, and the only difference our understanding makes for us is that we can impose conceptual form on the already world-representing but less than conceptual content that, like them, we receive in experience…So the picture is that mere animals only receive the Given, whereas we not only receive it but are also able to put it into conceptual shape” (MW, pp. 122-3).
experience’ I have endorsed—for instance, a capacity to use the concept of pain—to many creatures of which it would be outrageous to deny that they can feel pain.\(^{202}\)

In order to mitigate this “potential embarrassment,”\(^{203}\) McDowell suggests that there must be “different stories to tell about perceptual goings-on in creatures with spontaneity and in creatures without it.” “In the one case,” he says, “we can apply the notion of experience, in a strict sense that connects it with conceptual capacities, and in the other case we cannot.”\(^{204}\)

For McDowell, “experience”—in the strict sense—is a case of receiving an intentionally directed content to the effect that such and such is the case: as such, “experience” is a way of being acted on that constitutes an awareness of the way the world is. Such (intentionally directed) contents must have conceptual structure and so can only be received by creatures with a faculty of spontaneity, i.e. creatures, like humans, who have developed a second nature. But, McDowell is careful to stipulate that this point is not meant to suggest that humans and animals share a “common core” (or form) of receptiveness to—or awareness of—the environment; for, that (way of making the point) would leave open the possibility of a factorizing view, in which both human and animal perception is equipped to take in a non-conceptual “given” element in experience (i.e., a non-conceptual awareness): an element which (only) in the case of humans (in contrast to animals) can be worked up into conceptual shape for use in judgment.\(^{205}\) Instead, McDowell says that the only thing that human beings and animals share is a “perceptual

\(^{202}\) MW, p. 49-50.

\(^{203}\) MW, p. 119. The “potential embarrassment”, as McDowell puts it elsewhere, is that this view “can seem to commit me to the Cartesian idea that brutes are automata” (MW, p. 114).

\(^{204}\) MW, p. 63.

\(^{205}\) McDowell says that “it is not compulsory to attempt to accommodate the combination of something in common and a striking difference in this factorizing way: to suppose our perceptual lives include a core that we can also recognize in the perceptual life of a mere animal, and an extra ingredient in addition” (MW, p. 64). The point is that it would be a case of the highest common factor view (HCF) to suppose that there is a common core of pre-conceptual awareness that both animals and humans share. That “common core” would supposedly involve something that is (pre-conceptually or extra-conceptually) “available to experience” but is not yet a representation or “glimpse of reality” (MW, p. 112). And, McDowell rejects “a picture of a mere animal’s perceptual sensitivity to its environment…in which the senses yield content that is less than conceptual but already such as to represent the world” (MW, p. 121).
sensitivity to features of the environment,” which, in the case of humans, involves a unique \textit{(sui generis)} conceptual sensitivity.\textsuperscript{206}

McDowell’s view, then, is that there are \textit{two} sorts of perceptual sensitivity, a first natural sensitivity and a second natural sensitivity; and only the second sort of sensitivity counts as a genuine “experience” of the world. “So,” McDowell contends, “comparing ourselves with dumb animals cannot require us to separate sensibility from understanding, to exclude intuitions from the scope of spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{207} McDowell thinks that putting the point this way allows him to maintain a Kantian conception of human experience as involving “a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{208} But, he adds, “Mere animals do not come within the scope of the Kantian thesis, since they do not have the spontaneity of the understanding.”\textsuperscript{209} So, only human perceptual sensitivity can count as “experiencing” or “embracing” or “glimpsing” the world, because only human receptivity is capable of conceptually shaping impacts from the world. As McDowell puts it,

The objective world is present only to a self-conscious subject, a subject who can ascribe experiences to herself; it is only in the context of a subject’s ability to ascribe experiences to herself that experiences can constitute awareness of the world….It is the spontaneity of the understanding, the power of conceptual thinking, that brings both the world and the self into view. Creatures without conceptual capacities lack

\textsuperscript{206} \textit{MW}, p. 69. McDowell’s point here is made in direct response to the views of Gareth Evans. McDowell says that “Both Evans and I are committed to there being different stories to tell about perceptual goings-on in creatures with spontaneity and in creatures without it. In the one case we can apply the notion of experience, in a strict sense that connects it with conceptual capacities and in the other case we cannot. But it may seem that Evans’s position makes this implication less embarrassing, because the position supplies us with something we can conceive as straightforwardly common to the two cases: namely, states of the informational system, with their non-conceptual content” \textit{(MW}, p. 63). The problems with Evans’s view however, is that “we must be converting experiential content of a kind we share with mere animals, so that it must be non-conceptual, into conceptual form.” And, “when Evans argues that judgements of experience are based on non-conceptual content, he is falling into a version of the Myth of the Given” \textit{(MW}, p. 114).

\textsuperscript{207} \textit{MW}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{208} \textit{MW}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{209} \textit{MW}, p. 114.
self-consciousness and—this is part of the same package—experience of objective reality.\textsuperscript{210}

But, even though McDowell refuses to credit non-conceptual animals with the sort of subjectivity that “can constitute awareness of the world,” he argues that “that does not commit us to denying [them]…a proto-subjective perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment.”\textsuperscript{211} In making this point, McDowell admits to borrowing “from Hans-Georg Gadamer a remarkable description of the difference between a merely animal mode of life, in an environment, and a human mode of life, in the world.”\textsuperscript{212} McDowell says: “The point of the distinction between living merely in an environment and living in the world is precisely that we need not credit mere animals with a full-fledged subjectivity, an orientation to the world, at all.”\textsuperscript{213} McDowell is careful to describe the sort of “proto-subjectivity” that mere animals are in possession of as a form of “perceptual sensitivity” or “sentience,” but it is one, he says, that “is in the service of a mode of life that is structured exclusively by immediate biological imperatives.”\textsuperscript{214} “A life that is structured only in that way,” according to McDowell, “is led not in the world, but only in an environment.” “A merely animal life,” he explains, “is shaped by goals whose control of the animal’s behavior at a given moment is an immediate outcome of biological forces.”\textsuperscript{215} For McDowell, because the sort of sensitivity that a mere animal can possess is entirely structured by non-conceptual “biological forces”, it falls into the category of first nature.

\textsuperscript{210} MW, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{211} MW, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{212} MW, p. 115; here McDowell cites Gadamer’s Truth and Method, pp. 438-56, especially pp. 443-5.
\textsuperscript{213} MW, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{214} MW, p. 115. He adds: “In a merely animal mode of life, living is nothing but responding to a succession of biological needs” (MW, p. 117).
\textsuperscript{215} MW, p. 115.
McDowell contrasts this first-natural, merely animal “proto-subjectivity” with the “full-fledged subjectivity” that concept-toting human beings are in possession of. McDowell distinguishes this second sort of subjectivity by referring to it as “second nature.” He says: “When we acquire conceptual powers, our lives come to embrace not just coping with problems and exploiting opportunities, constituted as such by immediate biological imperatives, but exercising spontaneity, deciding what to think and do.” And, once we acquire this “second nature” our lives are “no longer determined by immediate biological forces.”

“To acquire the spontaneity of the understanding is to become able,” according to McDowell, to rise “above the pressure of biological need.” It is this “freedom” from “biological need” afforded by the conceptual powers of spontaneity that McDowell thinks can allow one to come into “possession of the world.” “For a perceiver with capacities of spontaneity,” according to McDowell, “the environment is more than a succession of problems and opportunities; it is the bit of objective reality that is within her perceptual and practical reach.”

McDowell connects this Gadamerian point with his broader “Kantian thesis”, specifically, with the second half of the Kantian slogan: “intuitions without concepts are blind.” Of course

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216 MW, p. 115.
217 MW, p. 116. McDowell adds, interestingly, that this “freedom” marks “a distinctive feature of our [human] consciousness.” “Our very experience,” he says, “in the aspect of its nature that constitutes it as experience of the world, partakes of a salient condition of art, its freedom from the need to be useful” (MW, p. 119, emphasis added).
218 MW, p. 119.
219 Of course it is precisely in question (here) whether McDowell’s conception of experience allows him to say that “reality”—or anything else for that matter—is “within practical reach.” It is of no “practical” help to add, I aver, what McDowell adds to this comment: viz., “It is that for her [i.e. ‘within her perceptual and practical reach’] because she can conceive it in ways that display it as that.” “Displaying it as that” may put the world or “reality” within “perceptual reach”—(I have granted McDowell that way of escaping external world skepticism)—but I dispute whether “displaying it as that” can put the world within “practical reach.” McDowell footnotes this additional comment with the following (deferential) remark: “Gadamer’s topic, in the passage I am exploiting, is the role of language in disclosing the world to us; it is language, he claims, that makes the ‘free, distanced orientation’ possible. I postpone any discussion of the connection between language and the spontaneity of the understanding until the sketchy remarks at the end of this lecture; meanwhile I adapt Gadamer’s remarks to my purposes” (MW, p. 116, fn. 6). I will discuss those “sketchy” remarks presently. For now I’ll add only that, in the “Responses” section of RMW, McDowell quotes this passage from Truth and Method: “man’s relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature” (pp. 475-476).
220 Here I am referring to what is block-quoted above (See fn. 210).
McDowell does not want to suggest that mere animals are literally blind, only that their perception of the environment does not also involve an ability to receive conceptualized impacts from “the world”. So whatever their (proto) “subjectivity” is like, it cannot be directed at or about “the world”; their (non-conceptual) subjectivity does not involve access to intentional “content”. Because of this difference, a merely animal mode of existence, on McDowell’s view, is just “enslavement to immediate biological imperatives,” and hence not really “experience” in the full sense of the word. According to McDowell, it is the “joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity [that] allows us to say that in experience one can take in how things are.” And, since dumb animals do not have a faculty of spontaneity, their non-conceptual sensory contact with their environment cannot be a case of taking in “how things are”—thus mere animals cannot be “in possession of the world”.

2. Of course, since McDowell’s point is that only concept-users can have “experiences” and be “in possession of the world”, his refusal to credit mere animals with the second sort of sensitivity would also extend to pre-linguistic human animals, viz., infants. As Gaskin enunciates the point,

According to McDowell, infants and animals ‘see objects’, and have ‘perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment’; but they do not ‘have objects in view’ or have ‘bits of the world perceptually manifest to them as materials for a world view’; they do not live their lives ‘in the world’, but only ‘in an environment’; they are not

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221 MW, p. 117. Again, for McDowell having an “experience” involves taking in a “content”. Only concept users can take in “contents”. Therefore, non-conceptual animals cannot have “experiences.” Barry Stroud says on McDowell’s behalf that, “Creatures with sensory capacities but without conceptual capacities of the kinds human beings so conspicuously possess do not really have experience as McDowell conceives of it. They might be perceptually sensitive to various features of their environment, but they do not have experience of the world” (Barry Stroud, “Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought,” RMW, p. 81).

222 MW, p. 25.
‘in possession of the world’ but have ‘a mere animal ability to cope with a habitat’. Again, they can feel pain and be in other such ‘inner’ states, but ‘when a dog feels pain, that is not a matter of an object for the dog’s consciousness; dogs have no inner world’. What infants and animals have, when they engage perceptually with their environments, is not experience in the sense of that word which we invoke when we characterize mature human cognitive states, for our experience is essentially conceptually structured, but their ‘experience’ is precisely not conceptually structured: in the absence of a capacity to make judgments, infants and animals cannot have experience strictly so called.\footnote{Gaskin, \textit{Experience and the World’s Own Language}, pp. 131-2.}

Here Gaskin (correctly) lumps animals and infants together (in the category of the “non-conceptual”). This means that the sort of interactions that a human infant is born with would have to fall into McDowell’s category of “first nature”. But, there is an obvious and striking difference between human infants and mere animals—i.e., between these two sorts of non-conceptual creatures. The difference, of course, is that a human infant \textit{can}, whereas a mere animal cannot, come to have (or acquire) a \textit{conceptual} sensitivity to features of the environment.

The human infant must therefore have the potential to break free of “first nature” and become, as McDowell puts it, following Aristotle, a “\textit{rational} animal.”\footnote{\textit{MW}, p. 85. McDowell puts the point like this: “We need to recapture the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, but without losing the Kantian idea that rationality operates freely in its own sphere.”} The question, then, is: since neither the non-conceptual infant nor the non-conceptual animal has “awareness”—i.e., the second sort of sensitivity, how can McDowell’s account allow for this rational potential to be actualized in the human case?
Now, we have seen that even though McDowell refuses to credit non-conceptual creatures with “experience”—and even awareness of the world—he is careful to add that this refusal “to find an orientation to the world in such a life...does not commit us to denying that it includes a proto-subjective perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment.”225 I think that this inclusion of the idea of “proto-subjectivity” reflects an awareness, on McDowell’s part, of the need to mark out an area of similarity between rational and other animals—i.e., an area in which both are firmly rooted in natural relations at large.226

For McDowell, the similarity seems to be this: in both the human and the non-human case, being an “animal” amounts to being a passive “subject”—i.e., possessing a form of “subjectivity”, whether “proto” or “full-fledged”—that is susceptible (or sensitive) to impingements from the world.227 It is just that in the one case such impingements can be received by conceptual creatures—creatures with a faculty of spontaneity that “permeates” their (sensory) faculty of receptivity. So, according to McDowell’s account, what we share with other animals is “subjectivity” or receptiveness—we are both subject to being passively acted on by the world. That is why when McDowell describes the “proto-subjectivity” of a mere animal’s life he thinks he can feel comfortable adding that

such a life has just as much room for, say, pain or fear. Perceptual sensitivity to the environment need not amount to awareness of the outer world; I have been defending the claim that awareness of the outer world can be in place only concomitantly with full-fledged subjectivity. Somewhat similarly, feelings of pain or fear need not

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225 MW, p. 119.
226 My wording here parallels the title of McDowell’s sixth lecture in Mind and World: “Rational and Other Animals.”
227 The word “subjectivity” is the common factor in McDowell’s own terminology: “proto-subjectivity” versus “full-fledged subjectivity”. I do not think that the word “agent” could be substituted for “subject” on McDowell’s conception, because for him mere animals are acted on by the world, whereas human animal—due to the engagement of a faculty of spontaneity—are not only acted on but can also, supposedly, act on the world. I will make more of this point later on.
amount to awareness of an inner world. So we can hold that an animal has no inner world without representing it as insensate and affectless.\textsuperscript{228}

So, McDowell allows that, even though non-conceptual animals have no “inner world” and cannot “experience” or be aware of “pain” or “fear”, they can still be “subjects” in the sense of being impinged upon by the world. But—and this is the important point—that is all that McDowell means by “sentient”: being an “animal”, for McDowell, is just being the sort of thing that can be passively impacted (“affected”) by an environment.\textsuperscript{229} Animals are distinguished from inanimate objects, then, only because they are “subject” to the effects of the environment (on their bodies), in the sense that they are the things that suffer (or receive) those impacts. So “sensibility”, as McDowell is using the term, just is the (animal) capacity to register the effects of the environment. But, according to McDowell, impingements upon (the sensibility of) a mere animal don’t register as anything in particular—like a pain or a tickle or a fear: they are just one (meaningless) impingement among a barrage of such impingements.\textsuperscript{230}

To be “aware” of what

\textsuperscript{228} MW, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{229} McDowell again defers to Gadamer here when he says: “As Gadamer describes merely animal lives, they are made up of coping with the ‘pressures’ imposed on them by the environment” (MW, p. 119).
\textsuperscript{230} Of course McDowell is careful not put the point quite as starkly as I have put it here. After all, he concedes: “If we share perception with mere animals, then of course we have something in common with them” (MW, p. 64). Nonetheless, he refuses to call the one case of perception a case of “awareness” or “experience of the world” at all. So, when McDowell says things like “we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form,” he is playing down the fact that, for him, there really is a huge difference between the two types of “sensitivity”—a difference of awareness vs. non-awareness. That McDowell rejects the possibility of animal awareness altogether can be seen in his critique of Nagel’s conception of consciousness, viz. as involving a case of what it is like to be a bat or cat or other non-conceptual creature. McDowell criticizes Nagel’s point by saying that he attempts to “treat what is only a proto-subjectivity as if it were a full-fledged subjectivity.” And he rejects Nagel’s “picture…that bats have a full-fledged subjectivity whose shape is beyond the reach of our concepts” (MW, p. 122). McDowell’s only concession seems to be to allow an instrumental use or application of intentional terms to non-conceptual animals (à la Dennett’s “intentional stance”). So, he says, “nothing in the concepts of pain or fear implies that they can get a grip only where there is understanding, and thus full-fledged subjectivity. There is no reason to suppose that they can be applied in a non-first-person way only to something capable of applying them to itself in a first-person way” (MW, p. 121). As I interpret this point, McDowell is saying that subjective concepts like pain and fear can get a “grip” for us (in application to them) even though they cannot accurately or literally describe what it is like from an animal’s perspective; for, since non-conceptual animals lack an “inner” or an “outer” world, they have no perspective—there
these impacts are—what they mean—requires something more: it requires that the subject (the animal) who suffers the impact possesses conceptual capacities that have already categorized it as a “pain” or a “tickle” or a “fear”. The “impact” cannot “strike the perceiver” as anything in particular, unless the (receptive faculty of the) perceiver is also equipped with the capacity to conceptually shape such contents.\(^{231}\) It is this conceptual capacity that McDowell thinks gets left out when we try to conceive of human relations in terms of first natural, biologically necessitated, realm of law events.\(^{232}\)

For McDowell, since a mere animal does not have conceptual capacities, certain things (or “impacts”) that happen to it—like feelings, emotions, etc.—can’t amount to an awareness of an “inner world”. This point about an “inner world” is McDowell’s counterpart to the claim that, for a mere animal, “Perceptual sensitivity to the environment need not amount to awareness of the outer world.”\(^{233}\) To talk in terms of an “inner world” and an “outer world”, as McDowell does, “is to employ the idea of objects of experience, present in a region of reality.”\(^{234}\) And this idea of “objects of experience” invokes the idea of an ability to receive (conceptual) “contents”. In this sense, an experiential “content” is a something—viz. an object of awareness” present in a “region of reality”.\(^{235}\) On McDowell’s view, such “objects of awareness” can be “present” or “presented to” passive perceivers. But, the type of perceptual sensitivity that a mere animal has does not give it access to the relevant “region of reality”, and so mere animals are not capable of is nothing it is like to be them. As McDowell says, “it is only in the context of a subject’s ability to ascribe experiences to herself that experiences can constitute awareness of the world” (\textit{MW}, p. 114).

\(^{231}\) \textit{MW}, p. 121.
\(^{232}\) For example, McDowell says: “The problem is that operations of sensibility are actualizations of a potentiality that is part of our nature. When we take sensing to be a way of being acted on by the world, we are thinking of it as a natural phenomenon, and then we have trouble seeing how a \textit{sui generis} spontaneity could be anything but externally related to it” (\textit{MW}, p. 89).
\(^{233}\) \textit{MW}, p. 119, emphasis added.
\(^{234}\) \textit{MW}, p. 119.
\(^{235}\) Here, by highlighting the word “something”, I am intending to invoke a point made by Wittgenstein in the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} at § 304—a point I take to be central to his “private language argument”. I will discuss the relevance of this point in more detail presently.
having “objects of awareness” presented to them. “Objects of awareness”, according to McDowell, can only be registered as such—that is, be present in an “inner” or “outer” world or “region”—through the use of conceptual capacities, and animals lack such capacities. So the question of how the human infant comes to “possess the world”, for McDowell, comes to the question of how it comes to possess concepts.236

3. But this question is complicated by the obvious fact—which McDowell admits—that, “human beings…are born mere animals.” McDowell conceives of the mere animal capacity to receive impacts from the world as a phenomenon in first nature. He says: “When we take sensing to be a way of being acted on by the world, we are thinking of it as a natural phenomenon.”237 But, according to McDowell, human beings not only have the capacity to passively receive worldly impacts, they also can acquire the (second natural) capacity to learn how to shape such impacts into a form that is “imbued with intentionality.”238 It is this extra element of intentionality—involving phenomena in the space of reasons—that McDowell thinks the disenchanted picture of nature leaves out. Importantly, McDowell thinks that second nature abilities must be acquired. For, as he says:

Now it is not even clearly intelligible to suppose a creature might be born at home in the space of reasons. Human beings are not: they are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity. This transformation risks looking mysterious. But we can take it in our

236 McDowell says: “Coming to possess the world is in part acquiring the capacity to conceptualize the facts that underlie this already available behavioral possibility, so that one conceives the present environment as the region of the world within one’s present sensory and practical reach” (MW, pp. 118-9). The other “part” (of coming to “possess the world”) must involve the capacity to be a “subject”, i.e., to be sensitive to—and impacted by—the environment.
237 MW, p. 89.
238 MW, p. 90.
stride if, in our conception of the *Bildung* that is a central element in the normal maturation of human beings, we give pride of place to the learning of language. In being initiated into a language, a human being is introduced into something that already embodies putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons, before she comes on the scene. This is a picture of initiation into the space of reasons as an already going concern; there is no problem about how something describable in those terms could emancipate a human individual from a merely animal mode of living into being a full-fledged subject, open to the world.\(^{239}\)

When McDowell says that humans are “born mere animals” he means that they are born mere subjects—simply with the capacity to be passively acted upon. Given McDowell’s conception of “mere animals”, the question, as I see it, is this: how does something with the mere capacity to be acted upon (a subject) become transformed into something with the capacity to act (an agent)? McDowell attempts to make sense of this seemingly mysterious “transformation” by utilizing an analogy with Aristotle’s conception of how one comes to acquire “practical wisdom” in ethical matters. For Aristotle, “the ethical,” as McDowell describes the point, is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons. Thereafter our appreciation of its detailed layout is indefinitely subject to refinement, in reflective scrutiny of our ethical thinking. We can so much as

\(^{239}\) *MW*, p. 125. He continues: “A mere animal, moved only by the sorts of things that move mere animals, could not single-handedly emancipate itself into possession of understanding. Human beings mature into being at home in the space of reasons or, what comes to the same thing, living their lives in the world.”
understand, let alone seek to justify, the thought that reason makes these demands on us only at a standpoint within a system of concepts and conceptions that enable us to think about such demands, that is, only at a standpoint from which demands of this kind seem to be in view.\textsuperscript{240}

McDowell thinks that this point about ethical “upbringing” can be generalized to include “initiation into conceptual capacities, which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics.”\textsuperscript{241} He says: “If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature.”\textsuperscript{242}

Two points are relevant here, in connection with McDowell’s modified Aristotelian conception of our acquisition of second nature. The first point is that such a conception employs an analogy with vision (e.g., “having one’s eyes opened”). The idea is that a second nature allows one to passively spectate (or perceive) with concepts. As McDowell puts it, one can have one’s “eyes opened” to a “detailed layout” (or “tract of the space of reasons”) that can “be in view”. The second point is that the “moulding” of such discriminatory capacities is to be understood as attainable through a process of “habituation.”\textsuperscript{243} This process of conceptual habituation is enabled in the human case, presumably, by what we share with mere animals—viz. passive perceptual sensitivity to features of (or impacts from) the environment.\textsuperscript{244} The similarity

\textsuperscript{240} MW, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{241} MW, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{242} MW, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{243} McDowell himself uses the term “habituation” to describe this process of initiation. He says: “human beings are intelligibly initiated into this stretch of the space of reasons by ethical upbringing, which instills the appropriate shape into their lives. The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature” (MW, p. 84, emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{244} McDowell seems to suggest that this mode of acquisition through habituation can provide the naturalistic link between our second nature and a first nature that is confined to a realm of law. Thus McDowell suggests that this notion of second nature (or “re-enchanted” nature) should allow his account to “defuse the fear of supernaturalism.” “Second nature,” he says, “could not float free of potentialities that belong to a normal human organism. This gives
between human infants and mere animals is that we are both animals—i.e. “subjects”: things can strike us or impinge upon us (i.e., we both have what McDowell calls “perceptual sensitivity”). Both humans and animals can thus become habituated into new forms of behavior. But, the difference is that humans, as opposed to mere animals, can become rational—i.e. “full-fledged”—subjects: things can strike us as being this way or that—i.e. as having a representational or conceptual shape. It is this extra ingredient involving the spontaneity of concept use, according to McDowell, that allows for human infants, in contrast to mere animals, to (potentially) acquire linguistic habits. And, it is the linguistic or conceptual character of these acquired habits that, for McDowell, marks them off as a separate category of nature: second nature. McDowell uses the German term Bildung to refer to this special process of upbringing or initiation (or “evolution”) into second nature.

Before coming to the two points mentioned above about McDowell’s notion of second nature, viz. that it involves a spectatorial capacity acquired through habituation, I first want to

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245 I suppose that in the case of animals this process would be something akin to “conditioning”.
246 I highlight this term (because I think it is problematic for McDowell) because, as the subsequent block quote should indicate, McDowell does not allow for this second natural use of concepts to have arisen from simpler forms of organismic orientations to—or interactions with—the environment. Rather, his point is that concept use can only be passed down (to other organisms) through a sort of training by creatures who already have a mastery of concept use. For his part, McDowell speaks of Bildung merely as effecting a “transformation” and so he eschews what he calls “evolutionary speculation.” He says that “we can regard the culture a human being is initiated into as a going concern; there is no particular reason why we should need to uncover or speculate about its history, let alone the origins of culture as such.” McDowell seems content to say only that “Human infants are mere animals, distinctive only in their potential, and nothing occult happens to a human being in ordinary upbringing” (MW, p. 123). Yet he admits in a footnote that “the good questions we can raise in the evolutionary context come as close as good questions can to the philosophical questions I want to exorcize” (MW, p. 124, fn. 12). Does this mean that he cannot exorcize such a question? Does he think that second nature can be a product of evolution or not? I don’t know; as far as I can see, the point is left an enigma. And, to a certain extent, it seems that McDowell simply refuses to countenance the underlying issue of conceptual acquisition. Nonetheless, he does utilize the notions of Bildung and Aristotelian habituation in his account, and so here I have tried to fill in some of the details that seem intentionally left blank in McDowell’s account. In fact, it has been stated that, at the conference that resulted in Reason and Nature, “McDowell remarked that ‘it must be possible, if necessary by force, to use “nature” in that sense’ [i.e., in the sense of ‘second nature’]” (Mischa Gubeljic, Simone Link, Patrick Müller, Gunther Osburg, “Nature and Second Nature in McDowell’s Mind and World, RN, p. 44, fn. 4). That paper also provides a nice “short survey of the history of the term ‘second nature’.”

247 He says: “I cannot think of a good short English expression for this [process], but it is what figures in German philosophy as Bildung” (MW, p. 84).
consider why McDowell thinks that such a transformation, as he says, “risks looking mysterious.” The answer, I think, has to do with his notion of what a subject is (by nature) and what sorts of relations that a subject can enter into. A subject, for McDowell, is not an agent. A subject must become an agent by acquiring a second nature. A subject is born in first nature, so its relations—even if they’re supposed to eventually extend beyond first nature—are, at least at first, passively determined by the realm of law (or “biological imperatives”). McDowell says that

Dumb animals are natural beings and no more. Their being is entirely contained within nature. In particular, their sensory interactions with the environment are natural goings-on. Now we are like dumb animals in that we, too, are perceptually sensitive to our environment. Sentience is a feature of their animal life, and it should be something animal in our case too. The sentience of dumb animals is one way in which their animal being, their purely natural being, actualizes itself, and our sentience, as an aspect of our animal life, should equally be one way in which our natural being actualizes itself.248

When McDowell talks about the “purely natural being” of animals, he seems to have in mind their capacity to be passively acted on by nature—i.e., to be “subjects”. So indeed such a “transformation risks looking mysterious”; the (mysterious) question is: how can something that is born a mere subject—confined to a realm of passive relations—come to acquire the ability to act on the world, i.e. to be an agent?

The problem McDowell faces here seems to be a consequence of his thinking that second nature relations must arise from, or spring out of, natural relations at large—which he conceives

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248 MW, p. 70. He adds the following parenthetical remark: “(Even if we are willing to suppose that our being is not purely natural, it is at least partly natural.)”
of as passive relations in the realm of law. McDowell seems to believe that the unifying feature of all “natural” relations is that they involve something being passively acted upon. So, if the “sentience” that is “something animal in our case too” is a “natural phenomenon”, in McDowell’s view, precisely because it is “a way of being acted on by the world,” how can shaping—which seems to involve acting on the world (rather than vice versa)—also be a “natural phenomenon” in McDowell’s sense? I don’t think that McDowell can provide an adequate answer to this question.

Nonetheless, McDowell’s utilization of the Aristotelian analogy would imply that he thinks he can answer such a question by appealing to the idea that our “second natures” can be acquired through a process of habituation. McDowell says:

We are looking for a conception of our nature that includes a capacity to resonate to the structure of the space of reasons. Since we are setting our faces against bald naturalism, we have to expand nature beyond what is countenanced in a naturalism

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249 I think that Gaskin sees this sort of question as inevitable (and unanswerable) for McDowell. He does not think that conceptual “shaping” relations can be attributed to natural phenomena as such, since he agrees with McDowell that natural phenomena—as such—are passive transactions in which something (like a “subject”) is acted upon by the world. Accordingly, that is why Gaskin proposes to correct McDowell’s account by allowing the world to “speak its own language.” As Gaskin says: “McDowell plainly faces a threat of inconsistency on this point: on the one hand he rejects the image of the world as speaking to us in its own language, but on the other he wants to accommodate the thought that objects speak ‘to one’s understanding’.” Gaskin, like McDowell, does not want to give up what seems to him a necessary component of any attempt to naturalize intentionality: viz. that intentionality (or aboutness) must involve some sort of passive relation in which one’s “subjectivity” (or consciousness or awareness) is acted on by the world. But, at the same time, Gaskin rejects as “inconsistent” McDowell’s claim that we can at once both shape the worlds impacts and be shaped by them. Thus, Gaskin articulates a position which he thinks can avoid McDowell’s incoherence on this score: “For,” he says, “the world’s ‘testimony’ is delivered [to us] not in an empirical language, as testimony strictly so called is, but in its own language, which, as I have emphasized, is not one empirical language among others, but the transcendental basis of all empirical languages” (Gaskin, Experience and the World’s Own Language, pp. 225 & 227).

250 It seems that I am not the only one who thinks that McDowell has trouble with such a question. Besides Gaskin, Gubeljic, Link, Müller, and Osburg suggest that McDowell’s “thought that to be natural the acquisition of a second nature must be essentially within reach of human beings due to potentialities they are born with might seem to block any inclination to view rationality as ‘a mysterious gift from outside nature’ (MW 88). Still, this can only show that rationality is an essential part of human nature; it remains to be shown that human nature is part of nature in general, insofar as nature embraces both animate and inanimate things. We have seen that McDowell does not seem to have an account that could help to understand how second nature is supposed to fit into nature at large” (Gubeljic, Link, Müller, & Osburg, “Nature and Second Nature in McDowell’s Mind and World, RN, p. 48).
of the realm of law. But the expansion is limited by the first nature, so to speak, of human animals.\textsuperscript{251}

It seems that, for McDowell, the first nature of human animals involves a sort of relation to the world in which one is “subject” to external impingements or to the effects of “biological imperatives”. Given this view of natural relations, it is not surprising that McDowell sees the “expansion” of human animals into second nature as “limited” by a fundamental fact of (first) natural relations: viz. that they are cases of being acted on. And so, McDowell admits, “a mere animal, moved only by the sorts of things that move mere animals and exploiting only the sorts of contrivances that are open to mere animals, could not single-handedly emancipate itself into possession of understanding.”\textsuperscript{252} But McDowell doesn’t think a human being needs to “single-handedly” emancipate itself from first nature; instead, he appeals to the social phenomenon of language learning to explain how mere animal impacts can be transformed (or habituated) into genuine cases of “experiences” or “impressions”—cases in which the received “impact” is a conceptual “content”, and so a meaningful “glimpse” of the world.\textsuperscript{253} It must be, then, that on McDowell’s account it is through “things striking us” that we human animals (i.e., “subjects”) can come to “learn” (i.e. be habituated) to have things “strike us as being this way or that.”\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{251} \textit{MW}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{252} \textit{MW}, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{253} That is, since others are around who can already speak a language, those individuals can habituate the youth into linguistic practices. Such an account of language acquisition, however, faces an obvious regress problem. The question is: if language capacities can only be acquired in an organism by being habituated by another organism that already has language, then who was the first language user, and how did he acquire language?
\textsuperscript{254} It would seem that mere animals have a similar capacity for acquiring a second nature, in the sense that they can acquire new habits of behavior through training, habits that were not part of their first nature. In fact, McDowell admits that “the idea of second nature itself is not exclusively applicable to rational animals. It is no more than the idea of a way of being...that has been acquired by something on the lines of training. It can be second nature to a dog to roll over, say, on the command ‘Roll over’” (McDowell, “Response to Gubeljic, Link, Müller, & Osburg,” \textit{RN}, p. 98). Nonetheless, although mere animals can “learn” different responses to stimuli (or impacts), they cannot learn what they are—i.e., what they mean. Hence McDowell uses the term “second nature” to apply strictly to capacities to “resonate to meaning”. That is why he says that “the intelligibility of [the dog’s rolling over] behaviour is not in any interesting sense \textit{sui generis}, by comparison with the intelligibility of, say, pricking up the
Put in terms of the categories of natural relations that I adumbrated in the previous chapter, the point would be this: on McDowell’s view, a “subject” that partakes of merely passive, non-rational relations (i.e., merely animal impacts) can come—through the process of habituation—to partake of passive, rational relations (i.e., conceptual impacts or impressions). And supposedly, once a “subject” acquires the ability to receive P-R relations, it not only has access to an “inner” and an “outer” world, but its responses then become “actions”, i.e., more than just a matter of being acted on or “responding to a succession of biological needs.”255 Once one acquires a second nature, one acquires what McDowell calls—again in deference to Gadamer—a “free, distanced orientation” to the world.256

This last point suggests that McDowell thinks that coming to possess a second nature not only means that one has acquired a conceptual view of the world, but, at the same time, that one has acquired agency itself—i.e., freedom of action. And this acquisition of second nature, for McDowell, separates us not only from inanimate natural objects and events, but it separates us from all other living things as well. McDowell says:

What is absent from any sane conception of a merely animal mode of life is a disinterestedly contemplative attitude…towards the world at large or towards something in particular in it. But the point is not just that with spontaneity the activities of life come to include theorizing as well as acting. The lack of freedom

ears in response to a noise or chasing a squirrel. Apart from how it originates, the second nature of dogs is just like their first nature” (Ibid.).

255 Of course I have already expressed serious doubts that any passive relation (even a passive, rational relation) can be counted as an “action”—or that active relations can arise out of (or be transformed from) passive ones. So the problem, really, is that McDowell falsely thinks that he has vindicated a notion of “action”. Others, however, don’t even make an attempt at vindication, since they falsely believe that we don’t need to reconcile the notion of action with a purely passive conception of natural relations. They assume that we have non-problematic access to the concept of “action”, although they at the same time describe nature as exhausted by—and fully explicable in terms of—the passive relations (of cause and effect) between inanimate objects. So at least McDowell sees the problem that the passive conception of nature sets us with: viz. the need to vindicate free agency.

256 MW, p. 117.
that is characteristic of merely animal life is not enslavement to the practical as opposed to the theoretical, but enslavement to immediate biological imperatives. Emancipation into the “free, distanced orientation” brings intentional bodily action on to the scene no less that theoretical activity.\textsuperscript{257}

But how can “bodily action” (i.e., agential freedom) be brought “on to the scene” by social habituation when there is no bodily action to begin with—when our only relation to the world (as “subjects”) involves being passively acted on? The very idea of what is characteristic of “merely animal life”, for McDowell, is that it involves a “lack of freedom”—a case of merely being “subject” to impacts or impingements by the world. It seems to me that the envisaged “lack of freedom” is the real limiting feature in McDowell’s account; but that “lack of freedom” is written right in to McDowell’s very picture of what is basic to “natural” (animal) relations. And, it is not only concept use (or “theoretical activity”)—but bodily activity or agential freedom itself—that is supposed to pop-out of subjects on the other side of this “transformation” through habituation. But how can this be? Habituation does not seem to be the sort of process that can create agency out of nothing; rather habituation seems like the sort of process that needs to work through agency, viz. by reinforcing certain actions and discouraging others. But it is precisely action that is missing from McDowell’s picture of a merely animal life. Indeed, action is missing from McDowell’s very picture of natural relations. For McDowell, animals are born mere subjects, they are not born agents.

4. The point, then, is this: McDowell’s fundamental conception of natural relations—i.e., relations in which something is passively acted upon by the world—prevents him from

\textsuperscript{257} MW, p. 117.
articulating a convincing account of how animals (specifically, human animals) can “emancipate themselves” from the world of “biological imperatives” and “lack of freedom” into the world of free agency and action. In so far as we are animals, for McDowell, we are “subjects”.\textsuperscript{258} And, in so far as we are “subjects”, we do not act. The only thing that is special about “subjects” in contrast to inanimate objects, according to McDowell, is that “subjects” are “sensitive”—i.e., they can be acted upon in the sense that they can undergo things.\textsuperscript{259} This picture of animal nature—i.e., as arising from “subjectivity”—influences McDowell’s conception of what it means to “experience” the world. Experience, for McDowell, is a matter of receiving impacts or (conceptual) “impressions” from the world; it is a case of being passively acted upon.

The fact that McDowell bases his conception of animal relations as well as human conceptual “impressions” on “subjectivity”, or mere “undergoing”, is indicative of my complaint against McDowell’s overall view of natural relations: viz. that he conceives of natural relations as exhausted by passive transactions. In the previous chapter I called this view of natural relations as exhausted by passive transactions the “passive conception of nature”. In fact, I think that this passive, mechanistic conception of natural relations is the source of most of the

\textsuperscript{258} This point can be seen when McDowell suggest that “We need to recapture the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, but without losing the Kantian idea that rationality operates freely in its own sphere” (\textit{MW}, p. 85). The idea is that our “rationality” is something separate from our “animality”. Our “animality” is supposed to represent our being “subjects”, while our “rationality” is supposed to represent our freedom or agency. The problem is that this sets up an active-passive dualism: a picture of experience in which doing is separate from undergoing. The question then becomes: which side—doing or undergoing—do we place experience? If we place it on the “undergoing” side then, like McDowell, we line ourselves up with the empiricists. If we place experience on the “doing” side, then it might be said that we are tending towards idealism, or even solipsism.

\textsuperscript{259} He has also suggested that animals, in contrast to inanimate things, are “self-moving” (\textit{MW}, p. 116). But, his notion of self-moving-ness is just an extension of the idea that mere animals are subject to biological imperatives. But this point must be compared with idea that, in coming to acquire a second nature, what McDowell wants to show is how “the shape of our live is no longer determined by immediate biological forces” (\textit{MW}, p. 115, emphasis added). The idea of being determined by biological forces here connotes the idea of being determined by (inanimate) forces existing apart from the agent, in the sense of being out of the agent’s control. And thus, being “determined by biological forces” does not seem to be distinguishable from being determined by chemical forces or physical forces—in short, being determined by non-agential forces. In this sense, a robot, too, could be considered “self-moving”; a “subject” could be “self-moving” in that sense without its being in “control” of its own movements whatsoever: such “movements” could have been determined by the “prime mover” of first natural relations, or—in the case of a robot—a programmer or engineer.
difficulties that have faced our philosophical attempts to naturalize concepts like experience and agency in the past. And, insofar as McDowell partakes of such a view of nature, he has set for himself an impossible goal: viz. trying to explain how activity can spring forth out of passivity—how freedom can pop-out of un-freedom. Another way to put the point is to say that relations of doing and undergoing cannot spring forth out of mere undergoings. So, a passive “subject” cannot learn how to become an agent or be habituated into active relations; nor can a non-agent be “transformed” into an agent (even if concepts are included in nature!). In fact, this point follows from the Deweyan point that I made in the previous section, viz. that learning—which would include learning through (conceptual) habituation— involves doing. Learning requires agency, it cannot create agency.

5. Now, I have already called into question the very possibility that “subjects” who do not act but are merely acted upon, could ever benefit from the effects of habituation. In fact, in the previous section I made a case for the idea that it would be impossible to learn anything if one were merely subject to undergoings. But, in order to illustrate the sort of deformation that the concept of experience undergoes when it is taken to be based upon a passive relation of being acted upon, I will grant McDowell his special notion of conceptual habituation. I will allow McDowell to say that a “subject” can become initiated into capacities in which one can receive (or undergo) conceptual impacts from the world—i.e., “impressions” or P-R relations.

What conception of “experience” does McDowell aim to show to be possible—or to vindicate—by way of his idea of an initiation into second nature? Well, as McDowell says, he wants to show the “difference between a merely animal mode of life, in an environment, and a
human mode of life, in the world.”

He wants to show how a “subject”—a human experiencer—can come to “possess the world.” “It is the...power of conceptual thinking,” he says “that brings both the world and the self into view.”

To talk in terms of an experience of an “inner world” and an experience of an “outer world”, McDowell says, “is to employ the idea of objects of experience, present in a region or reality.”

This idea of experience as involving “objects of awareness” which are “present in a region of reality” involves a metaphor of possession. Acquiring a second nature (and therefore “experience” and “the world”), for McDowell, means coming to “possess” something: viz. representational “content”. Such intentional, representational “contents” are important for McDowell because he thinks they are needed to factor into epistemological relations in the space of reasons.

In order to be representational, for McDowell, such “contents” must also be conceptual or spectatorial: they must represent a “region of reality” as being some such way. And so McDowell also wants to show how acquiring a second nature can be akin to “having one’s eyes opened.” The idea is that a second nature allows one to passively spectate (or perceive) with concepts. For McDowell, access to experiential content is supposed to bring a “detailed layout” or “tract of the space of reasons” “into view.”

My point in emphasizing McDowell’s reliance on visual metaphors here is to show that the best that one can hope to provide, when one is reduced to naturalizing epistemology purely in terms of passive, causal relations is possessive, spectatorial imagery. And McDowell’s conception of experience is a case in point. McDowell has bent over backwards to provide a special notion of experience as involving a relation to a representational content. He has

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260 MW, p. 115.
261 MW, p. 118.
262 MW, p. 114.
263 MW, p. 119.
264 MW, p. 120.
manipulated the traditional representationalist’s conception of experience—arguing that it involves a direct presentational openness—so as to avoid the skeptical problem of our knowledge of the external world. But there is fatal flaw in this sort of account—that is, the account of experience or subjectivity as possessive, as involving a “region of reality” or “objects of awareness” or an “inner world” and an “outer world”. The sort of flaw that I am envisaging is brilliantly expressed by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Witness how Wittgenstein wrestles with his imagined interlocutor in the following passage, from § 304:

‘But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behavior accompanied by pain and pain-behavior without any pain?’—Admit it? What greater difference could there be?—‘And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.’—Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.265

The “grammar which tries to force itself on us here” is the grammar of “content”.266 It is a grammar which inclines us to think of experience as passive and possessive, and likewise, it seems to force a spectator conception of knowing upon us. It involves talking about experience

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266 Consider how Wittgenstein himself responds to the imagined dialogue above. He says: “The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please” (*Ibid.*). It is clear from this follow-up point, I think, that Wittgenstein is rejecting a certain picture if intentionality or *aboutness*. Wittgenstein here frames the point as one about language, but it has implications for a common philosophical conception of “experience” as well: Namely, the conception in which “experience” is passive and possessive—i.e., the conception in which it involves “objects of awareness”, passively received. Experience, like language, is being conceived in one way: as conveying thoughts or contents—as a conduit connecting mind and world.
in terms of “objects” being “present” in a “region of reality,” like an “inner world” or an “outer world”.

Ironically, McDowell attempts to defend an interpretation of Wittgenstein in which his famous private language argument is not to be seen as being directed against the idea of an “inner world.” McDowell says: “The sensation (the pain, say) is a perfectly good something—an object, if you like, of concept involving awareness. What is a nothing (and this is simply a nothing, not ‘not a something, but not a nothing either’) is the supposed pre-conceptual this that is supposed to ground our conceptualizations.” McDowell thinks he can appropriate (or re-interpret) Wittgenstein’s argument as an attack on pre-conceptual givenness. But I think that this move backfires, because Wittgenstein’s target is precisely a conception in which experience is construed “on the model of ‘object and designation’.” That is, Wittgenstein is rejecting a description of experience in terms of its “contents.” But McDowell, by contrast, thinks that the conception of experience as the possession of content is perfectly valid (indeed he thinks it is epistemologically necessary). McDowell’s only concern is with

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267 On the “observational model”—the model of “object and designation”—of (inner) knowledge, it looks like sensations (and other inner states) ought to be objects of knowledge. Wittgenstein’s critique can be seen as directed at the idea of experiences conceived as passive and possessive: the having or receiving of a content (by a spectator), as opposed to the doing or undergoing of something by an agent. But when we think of experience as what is done or undergone we are not advertising to a “something” in the sense of an “inner world” or “object of awareness” or “content”. Rather, we are talking about the interactions of a living agent. But this is not a “nothing” in the sense of behaviorism (or a Cartesian immaterial mind) either. As Wittgenstein says: “‘Are you not [then] really a behaviorist in disguise? Aren’t you at bottom really saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction?’—If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 307).


270 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 293. Wittgenstein says: “Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a ‘beetle’. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people’s language?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something: for the box might even be empty.—No one can ‘divide through’ by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation [or experience] on the model of ‘object and designation’ the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.” Here I take the idea of a “box” to be analogous to the (metaphorical) conception of experience as a possessive container (McDowell’s “region of reality”); and the “beetle” represents the “content” of experience (McDowell’s “object of awareness”).
those who try to conceive of such content as “coming into view” independently of concepts. For McDowell, the possession (of “content”) metaphor seems (epistemologically) crucial, that is why he thinks nature needs only to be re-enchant with concepts. But, that is because for him the basis of our experiential relation to the world must be an intentionality relation—a relation in which one thing, an experience or bodily movement, must be about or directed at (i.e. represent) another thing.²⁷¹ (And such relations, for McDowell, must involve concepts.) In fact, contrary to Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument, McDowell wants to argue that inner experiences—like sensations of pain—do involve an “awareness of something” (viz. an “inner world”); it’s just that in such cases (of inner awareness) “the object of…awareness is really nothing over and above the awareness itself.”²⁷²

Now the whole point of critically highlighting McDowell’s conception of experience comes to this: The only way to avoid picturing experiences as either somethings or nothings is to adopt Dewey’s locution of experience as doing and undergoing. But this locution, in turn, requires a different notion of natural relations. Before coming to that point, however, one might be inclined to ask the question: well what then is the source of experience? What is this thing we are talking about when we are talking about an “experience” (and its “aboutness”)?²⁷³ The answer is: it is not a something but not a nothing either. Rather, it is an interaction. It is the doing or undergoing of some living agent—i.e. its interaction with the environment. My

²⁷¹ See, e.g., MW, p. 89. Here I have in mind McDowell’s suggestion that “intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency.”

²⁷² MW, p. 120. “So,” McDowell says, “the idea of the inner world is a limiting case of the idea of a region of reality.”

²⁷³ For example, I have in mind the sort of question that Wittgenstein seems to be asking himself in the following passage: “‘But you surely cannot deny that, for example, in remembering, an inner process takes place.’—What gives you the impression that we want to deny anything? When one says “Still, an inner process does take place here”—one wants to go on: “After all, you see it [the “content”].”—And it is this inner process that one means by the word “remembering”—The impression that we wanted to deny something arises from our setting our faces against the picture of the ‘inner process’. What we deny is that the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word “to remember”’ (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 305).
experience is “mine” not in any ordinary sense of possession (or privileged access), but rather only in the sense that I am the organism that is doing and undergoing the things at issue. *My* experience is not *mine* in the sense that I am in possession of a special linguistically-shaped object, viz. a “content”—a “something”. Of course, grammatically, we can abstract away the “doing” of experience from the “undergoing” of experience (i.e., we can play a language-game in which we phenomenologically “bracket” the experience from the experiencer—i.e. artificially separate the doing from the undergoing). But that is merely a philosophical exercise—a certain language-game. Such abstractions are what allow us to make up thought experiments in which a stone or a brain-in-a-vat has conscious states—i.e., undergoes or receives “contents”. But, because such a scenario is conceivable does not mean that it is possible—other factors make it impossible: like the fact that experience is inseparable from the doings and undergoings of a *whole living agent*.

The problematic conception of experience and consciousness as possessive and content-involving is aided and abetted by a particularly enticing conception of nature: viz. natural events as passively determined by a relation of causal chains. This passive conception of nature forces us to view natural events as being “natural” by virtue of their being the effect of some prior cause; that is, it forces us to view people and animals as at best “subjects”. Of course once we have succumbed to the idea that this structure of natural relations is universal, we have already eliminated agency from nature at the outset. But, we don’t easily notice that we have done so, because the grammar of “content”—of object and designation or cause and effect—has already forced itself upon us. And so, we wind up facing the seemingly impossible task of trying to reconcile agency and causation—to understand active relations in terms of passive relations.
6. I want to use this complaint about the possessive and spectatorial conception of experience—in terms of the idea of the passive reception of an object of designation—to help to motivate my alternative Deweyan conception of experience as doing and undergoing. I want to show how it fits in with a different sort of relaxed naturalism: one that incorporates agency as a (fully independent) natural relation and distinguishes it from a different sort of natural relation in which something is passively acted upon. This different sort of relaxed naturalism must countenance a pluralism of natural relations: specifically, it must allow us to say that experience involves a relation in which an agent does and undergoes certain things (which, in the case of humans, we often call “experience”). In order to see this conception of experience as doing and undergoing in the correct light, one must see experience as “not a something, but not a nothing either.” That is, doing and undergoing is a unique (sui generis) sort of relation in nature—an agential relation. It is precisely not capture-able in the ordinary locutions of object and designation or cause and effect—which involve the idea of something being acted upon or possessed. Doing and undergoing is a relation that is neither possessive nor passive; rather, it is an active relation in which a living organism interacts with its environment.

When McDowell suggests that we need to “allow that natural powers can include powers of second nature” he means simply that we need to allow a place in nature for conceptual relations. But this sort of re-enchantment does nothing to dislodge the passive conception of nature; it simply adds to it the idea that concepts can be causes. This model turns experience into a passive affair and inevitably leads to a spectator theory of knowledge. So McDowell’s idea of second nature remains tied down to a passive conception of nature in which one event is the effect of some prior cause. And as a result, McDowell’s view is unable to grant independent status to agential action. He thinks animals must be born subjects (i.e. born into first nature) and

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274 *MW*, p. 88.
transformed into agents. Thus, he is unable to allow actions—i.e., the doings and undergoings of living, striving, organic creatures—to count as a genuine natural relations in themselves. But without admitting independent (“natural”) status to agential relations, it looks like the only way to naturalize intentionality is to take the agency out of perceptual or experiential events as such and to explain how they arise in nature by way of passively received contents. Instead, I am suggesting that we can view experience in terms of a unique organic, disentropic activity. And, in order to vindicate this agential conception of experience we have to re-conceive nature as involving some relations that are not just the passive effects of prior causes. Thus the sort of “second nature” that I have in mind incorporates all living things—the world of the living—into the realm of agential relations, relations in which, through a process of cultivating energy, organisms do and undergo things. This different conception of second nature actually adds to our stock of natural relations. It does not try to split-up passive, causal relations into two sorts, those that are conceptual and those that are non-conceptual; rather, it simply adds another sort of natural relation to nature at large: so “nature” includes both active relations and passive relations.

We are then not faced with the false choice of having to decide between universal causal relations and super-natural relations. Non-causal relations—agential doings like experiencing and knowing—need not commit one to the positing of super-natural causes or immaterial substances.

7. In conclusion, we can say that organisms in the world if the living are born agents, doing and undergoing things. They are not born mere subjects, needing to be transformed into agents. But that means that all living organisms, not just humans, are born doing and undergoing things. Humans may be special in the sorts of things that they can do and undergo, but they are not
special in acting on the world and having to face the consequences of those actions. The world of the living is the world of active relations. Thus, on my account of the two natures, we can say that human beings are born into second nature—the active relation of doing and undergoing things is not the sort of ability that can be acquired. Human beings, on my account, do not need to be transformed into agents; they are already agents.

The difference between McDowell’s conception of second nature and the alternative conception that I am recommending can thus be illustrated by the following diagrams:

According to McDowell, all animals are “limited” by first nature, because for him all animals are born into first nature—they are born “subject” to passively being acted upon. Thus second nature, for McDowell, does not designate a distinctive space of natural relations; rather, second nature must involve a “transformation” of first natural relations. On my view, by contrast, second nature is to be seen as an outgrowth of first nature—as a separate space of natural relations. Second nature is the world of the living. The emergence of living organisms (i.e. second nature) depends upon certain conditions in first nature—e.g., environmental conditions like the availability of sources of energy. Such conditions were obviously present on Earth, and they are likely present elsewhere in the universe (that is why my diagram contains more than one instance of second nature). But, once second nature takes hold, it follows its own dynamic pattern of development. The conditions are set by first nature, but second nature is an adaptive
outgrowth of those conditions. The forces that are operative in second nature are the forces that Darwin brought to our attention. They involve the unique adaptive and interactive relations of organisms to their environments.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A:

MCDOWELL’S RELAXED NATURALISM VERSUS THE
DISENCHANTED VIEW OF NATURE

RL = Realm of Law (realm of determinate causal necessity)
SN = Space of Nature (The conception of “the natural”)
SR = Space of Reasons (The space of justification)
SC = Space of Concepts (realm of meaning/normative relations)
X = Content (may represent both conceptual and non-conceptual content)

The series of diagrams presented here is intended to illustrate McDowell’s contention that the Disenchanted View of Nature [DVN] yields an “interminable oscillation” between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. Neither view, according to McDowell, accounts for the possibility of empirical (conceptual) content. McDowell’s “relaxed naturalism” aims to rescue intentionality by combining a “minimal empiricism” with a “psychological nominalism.”

I. Disenchanting View of nature:

Step I: Equate the space of nature with the realm of law. (SN = RL)

(D:1)
Step II: We can represent (D:1) by uniting SN and RL into one circle (this shows that the space of nature is exhausted by the realm of law). Then, we must exclude the space of concepts from the space of nature. \((SC \neq SN)\)

![Diagram (D:2)](image)

The Realm of law is seen (by McDowell—following Sellars) as diametrically opposed to the realm of meaning and hence to the space of concepts. McDowell argues that there are two ways to conceptualize natural occurrences: either as mindlessly determined by causal law or as responsive to meanings or reasons.\(^1\) A disenchanted view of nature assumes that the space of nature must ultimately be understood in terms of the realm of causal law. Hence, according to the DVN, SN/(RL) and SC do not intersect. In the RL there are only causal relations, not conceptual, meaningful, or rational relations—there are no normative relations there at all.

Diagram (D:2) shows that the DVN sets up a “barrier” between nature and the conceptual sphere, i.e., the reason-giving sphere. McDowell argues that this separation between reason and nature has led philosophers to struggle for ways to try to bridge the gap. McDowell traces two such (unsuccessful) attempts: one way leads to the Myth of the Given, and the other way, to a “frictionless” coherentism.

**A. The Myth of the Given:**

One way to try to bridge the gap between reason and nature is to hold that the space of reasons extends beyond the conceptual sphere:

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\(^1\) The latter refers to what Dennett calls taking the “intentional stance”.
This then opens up the possibility for the proponent of the Myth of the Given to argue that, "since SR extends more widely than SC, SR can extend into RL." Events (describable in purely causal terms, like "photons irradiating one’s optical cortex" or "the occurrence of a sense-datum") in the non-conceptual RL can then be said to count as reasons for beliefs.

In (G:2) we see that the space of concepts is wholly contained in the space of reasons, but the space of reasons extends wider than SC, to incorporate the RL. McDowell complains that, although this gives us "contact with the world"\(^2\) (i.e., with SN), it does not give us genuine "empirical content." In (G:2) X is outside of the space of concepts. And, something non-conceptual cannot justify something conceptual. Hence, the move indicated by the arrow is illicit because X cannot provide genuine empirical content. It is in fact a Myth to suppose that non-conceptual things like "photons irradiating one’s optical cortex," "the occurrence of a sense-data," "pure appearances," etc. can be appealed to for justification. It is an error akin to the

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\(^2\) That is, it satisfies the urge for a "minimal empiricism": the idea that our beliefs about the world are made true or false by the world.
“naturalistic fallacy,” according to Sellars, in that it construes a mere cause as capable of warranting a conceptual belief.

This last point is contentious. It amounts to the assertion that the only experiential content possible is conceptual or linguistic content. This is the doctrine of “psychological nominalism,” the “second insight” in my chapter one. It states: the attribution of “intentionality,” “about-ness,” or “empirical content” to something always requires the application of concepts. Mere extra-conceptual Givenness (i.e. X) therefore cannot be reason-giving.

**B. Coherentism:**

The other way of trying to bring reason and nature back together adheres to the principle of psychological nominalism (C:1 = PN). It is to hold that the space of reasons and the space of concepts coincide (McDowell and the coherentist both hold this view\(^3\)):

\[(C:1)\]

The coherentist rejects the Myth of a non-conceptual foundation for belief. Aboutness, *per* psychological nominalism, is a conceptual property. But, the coherentist is still swayed by DVN and so argues that nothing merely natural—like an *experience*—can exhibit such “aboutness”, i.e., count as a *reason* to hold a belief. Only conceptual things can stand as reasons.

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\(^3\) McDowell differs on how that one space relates to the space of nature.
The coherentist thinks that X is merely caused (to be there) and so cannot serve as justification on its own. Justification accrues to a belief, according to psychological nominalism, only by cohering with other beliefs. So X, in this case, provides (conceptual) content but it does not provide empirical grounding, i.e., it does not satisfy a “minimal empiricism” (experience does not function as a “tribunal”). Coherentism is “frictionless,” according to McDowell, because our empirical beliefs (X) about the external world are not made true or false by the external world; beliefs themselves are not intentionally related to the world—only to one another.

II. Relaxed Naturalism:

McDowell argues that (our tacit) adherence to DVN makes it impossible to reconcile the (seemingly) reason-giving power of experience with our conceptual nature. He argues that human beings, at least, have acquired a “second nature” that allows them to pick-up on concepts implicit in the natural world. This means that concept-use can be understood naturalistically—as a practice that one is initiated into (or trained in). Hence, McDowell’s “relaxed naturalism” stipulates that the realm of law is only part of the space of nature, not the entirety of it.
The space of nature also includes the human ability to speak a language, that is, to use concepts. And, according to McDowell’s RN, although concepts must be seen as part of nature, they do not exhaust the (constituents of the) space of nature. Hence, McDowell distances himself from the charge of “bad idealism”.

\[ \text{(R:2)} \]

The space of concepts is part of the space of nature. There is no “barrier” between the natural and the conceptual spheres.

**A. McDowell’s Re-Enchantment of Nature:**

We can see in the following diagram that, according to McDowell’s RN, since the space of nature includes both conceptual and non-conceptual events, “natural” events can unproblematically include conceptual events.

\[ \text{(M:1)} \]
**B. McDowell’s conception of empirical content:**

Given (M:1), we can set aside the realm of law. It need not enter into our considerations about the relation of our concepts to the natural order. X, below, represents true “empirical content” because it is both engaged with nature and it is conceptual. It represents what McDowell means by the word “impression.” It is *sui generis* as compared to the realm of law, but not, therefore, non-natural.

\[(C:1)\]

Empirical content, an impression, is passive because it is an occurrence in the SN. But, it is also conceptual and so is not the kind of input that is at a remove from the active sphere of spontaneity: it can play a reason-giving role in the system. Receptivity is always already in conceptual shape. And, because it is *passive*, it can satisfy the need for an external constraint on our active thinking that the coherentist cannot account for. Passivity, for McDowell, is what gives us “friction” as well as our “foothold in nature.”
APPENDIX B:

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Texts (With Publication Dates):

Works of John McDowell:
MW = Mind and World (1996)
MKR = Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality (1998)
MVR = Mind, Value, and Reality (1998)
RN = Reason and Nature (2005)

Works of John Dewey:
RIP = Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920)
EN = Experience and Nature (1925)
QC = The Quest for Certainty (1929)

Works of Richard Rorty:
PMN = Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979)

Works of Wilfrid Sellars:
EPM = Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (1956)
Miscellaneous Works:
NIQ = Naturalism in Question (2004)

Other Abbreviations:
DVN = The Disenchanted View of Nature
CPN = Causal Picture of Nature
BIV = Brain-in-a-vat
PSP = Practical Starting Point
TSP = Theoretical Starting Point
HCF = Highest common factor
P-NR = Passive, non-rational (relations)
P-R = Passive, rational (relations)
A-NR = Active, non-rational (relations)
A-R = Active, rational (relations)