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# Separating McDowell's two Myths of the Given - or on how to best explain the conceptuality of the space of reasons

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## Abstract

In his book, *John McDowell on Worldly Subjectivity*, Tony Cheng argues that recent changes to McDowell's theory of perceptual justification should lead him to accept that experiences possess non-conceptual content. In this paper, I take issue with Cheng's conclusion. Instead, I argue that McDowell should adopt Travis's position, where experiences aren't taken to possess content at all. I argue that we can distinguish two separate Myths of the Given in McDowell's writings. While McDowell often seamlessly moves from one to the other, I argue that it is difficult to see how he can justify this due to his recent alterations to his position. I argue that if we reject one Myth and retain the other, then McDowell can both hold on to a version of his view that the space of reasons is the space of the conceptual, all the while he accepts Travis's arguments to the effect that experiences are devoid of content. Finally, I consider some arguments McDowell might present against accepting Travis's position. While these objections do not convince me, what is notable about them is that, if they are sound, then they will equally count against Cheng's intermediary position where non-conceptual contents are ascribed to experiences. Hence, I conclude that there are no grounds on which McDowell can reasonably endorse that experiences possess non-conceptual contents. Either he should stick to his conceptualism, or he should follow Travis and reject that experiences possess contents at all.

**Keywords** John McDowell · Conceptualism · Charles Travis · Truth · Perceptual justification · Tony Cheng

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The book *John McDowell on Worldly Subjectivity* by Tony Cheng is foremost a very thorough, rigorous, and loyal portrayal, not only of McDowell's conclusions, but also of his conception of the dialectical situation within which his arguments are situated. While the book covers an impressive array of McDowell's thinking, I want to focus on the issues predominantly discussed in chapter 7. This chapter is the first where Cheng significantly challenges McDowell's view of things. There, Cheng critically investigates whether McDowell has provided us with an adequate argument for his claim that what is given to us in experience must be conceptually structured. The discussion engages closely with the idea of the Myth of Given as it figures in McDowell's arguments for conceptualism about experiential content. Cheng's central argument is that while McDowell has adequately motivated that experiences must figure in the sui generis space of reasons, he hasn't provided adequate arguments to the effect that the space of reasons is exhausted by the space of the conceptual. This, to Cheng's mind, leaves McDowell with the option of retaining his central views on the justificatory role of experience in relation to judgement, while adopting the popular view within the cognitive sciences that experiences possess non-conceptual content. In the following, I want to argue that, while Cheng's position starts from the correct objection to McDowell, it fails to follow this line of objection to its proper resting place. Such an approach to McDowell's thought would be better off in concluding along with Charles Travis that experience lacks content all together.

McDowell's core claim is that accounts of experiential justifications are mythical if they extend relations of rationality beyond the scope of the conceptual. It is, however, unclear precisely how we should understand the claim that the rational cannot extend beyond that which involves our conceptual capacities. As Cheng (2021, p. 130) points out, McDowell's argument for the conceptual nature of experience starts from the question: "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" (McDowell, 1994, p. xii). The idea that experience can provide justification for thought is what McDowell calls 'Minimal Empiricism'. McDowell (1994, pp. xiii; 9; 35; 42) is clear that his primary argument in favour of Minimal Empiricism isn't concerned with knowledge, but rather with the very intentionality of thought and its dependence on the justificatory potential of experience.

McDowell's treatment of Minimal Empiricism can be decomposed into two separable demands on what experiences provides for self-conscious thinkers. First, experience must give thinkers access to that which confers truth upon their thoughts. We must in McDowell's (1994, p. 26) words conceive of experience as direct "openness to the layout of reality". It is this requirement which moves him towards disjunctivism, in so far as such disjunctivism allows one to conceive of perceptual experiences as direct encounters with the surrounding world.<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to McDowell, our

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of the present debate, disjunctivism isn't the central issue. I will ignore this element except where it becomes explicitly relevant. For the purpose of this argument, disjunctivism figures as a consequence rather than a premise. I provide a more thorough treatment of McDowell's argument for disjunctivism in (Gersel, 2024).

experiential justification for thought cannot fall short of an encounter with what confers truth upon our empirical judgements. Secondly, whatever is given in experience must be provided with a form that allows the self-conscious subject to reflectively appreciate the warranting status of the relation between what is given and the judgement made. “We cannot put limits of the self-scrutiny of reason” (McDowell, 1994, p. 52).

In his critical treatment of McDowell’s argument for conceptualism, Cheng focusses almost exclusively on the second form-question and less on the first issue of the nature of the truth-conferring worldly relata. I want to suggest that this leads Cheng onto an unfortunate route towards ascribing non-conceptual content to experience, rather than developing McDowell’s insights towards the conclusion that experiences do not possess content at all.

Cheng (2021, p. 128) focusses on McDowell’s change of view in the article “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” and argues that these alterations leave McDowell with no reasonable objection to the ascription of non-conceptual content to experience. However, that article is explicitly written as a contribution to McDowell’s ongoing debate with Charles Travis. And as can be seen from the subsequent development of that debate, its central premise concerns the nature of the worldly relata, where the form of what is given in experience is derived as a consequence.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while I think Cheng is technically right that McDowell, with the changes to his position, has no way to object to ascribing non-conceptual content to experience, neither does he have any positive motivation for doing so. For, as I will aim to show, changing the content of experience from conceptual to non-conceptual would fail to engage with the very challenge from Travis which motivated McDowell to change his view in the first place. Moreover, I think that these considerations on how to develop McDowell’s mature view will allow us to hold on to the core insight that the scope of the rational is restricted to the scope of the conceptual, only what this scope covers should be differently understood.

## 1 What is it that must be conceptual for experiences to justify?

Our concern is the justificatory relation between what is given to us in experience and our perceptual judgements. We are thus dealing with a phenomenon consisting of at least three elements: what is given in experience, the justificatory relation itself, and the perceptual judgement. The question is which of these three elements constitutively involves our exercise of conceptual capacities. Trivially, our perceptual judgements involve the exercise of our conceptual capacities, as these are simply our capacities for thought; this much all agree upon. The Myth of the Given, as McDowell (1994, p. 8) understands it, consists in theories which allow that we can form judgements that are perceptually justified, all the while they ascribe an

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<sup>2</sup> See Gersel (2018a) for an overview of the early debate and McDowell (2018) and Travis (2018) for its continuation.

involvement of our conceptual capacities that is too limited to make sense of how it could be justifications, rather than mere exculpations, which were provided by experience.

This leaves us with at least two possible interpretations of the Myth. It could either be a failure to acknowledge that our conceptual capacities are involved in the relational process of moving with warrant from what it is given in experience to the issuing of a judgement. On this interpretation, Mythical theories are those which portray *the relation* which occasions warranted perceptual judgements as occurring independently of our exercise of conceptual capacities. We can call this ‘the Relational Myth’. Alternatively, the Myth could be a failure to acknowledge that our very *reception* of the experiential relata involves the exercise of our conceptual capacities. We can call this ‘the Receptive Myth. Interestingly, McDowell’s own account of the Myth of the Given fluctuates between descriptions that favour either the Relational Myth or the Receptive Myth.

In his book, Cheng (2021, p. 130) separates two McDowellian claims. There is the premise Cheng calls ‘Sellars Rationalism’ (or ‘SR’) which states that the space of rational relations is *sui generis* and distinct from the space of natural relations. Furthermore, there is the claim that rational relations can only exist between conceptually structured relata (which Cheng calls ‘the Kant-Davidson thesis’ or ‘KDC’). Cheng’s (2021, pp. 135–137) core argument is that McDowell fails to adequately support KDC, while his endorsement of SR can be accepted as a stipulative claim. However, when we look closer at these separate claims, we can see that whenever McDowell defends SR, he typically highlights the Relational Myth. On the contrary, when his focus is on defending KDC, he highlights the dangers of the Receptive Myth.

In the introduction to *Mind and World* (xv), McDowell writes: “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”. The notion of natural law here alluded to concerns the causal relations between natural occurrences, not the nature of the occurrences themselves. It would be a category mistake to talk about the law of the composition of an atom. Whereas we can talk about the law of gravity, which concerns the causal relations between natural occurrences. McDowell’s focus here is thus on how one occurrence can affect another. In the present case, the comparative parallel within the space of reasons to the natural causal relation within the space of nature, must be how having an experience can cause us to form a judgement in that peculiar way where it makes it rational for us to judge as we do. McDowell’s (1994, p. xv) focus on the Relational Myth becomes even clearer as he continues: “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” [my italics].<sup>3</sup> The different forms of intelligibility which McDowell (1994, pp. xix–xx) thinks figure in the logical spaces of nature and reasons are different forms of explaining why something occurred, that is, different forms of presentations of the relations between a happening and what brought it about. In our case,

<sup>3</sup> See also McDowell (1994, pp. xviii; 42–43).

the happenings to be explained are our perceptual judgements and what brings them about are our experiences. In the space of natural law, non-normative notions, such as force, link together explanandum and explanans, which is why this type of intelligibility can only provide exculpations (McDowell, 1994, p. 8). Within the space of reasons, the explanandum and the explanans are linked by normative relations, which is why our experiences can provide justification. It is precisely this contrast McDowell (1994, p. xv) draws out when he writes: “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”. The Relational Myth can thus be understood as the claim that we can stand in *normative relations* to what is given in experience without our *standing in this relation* involving the exercise of our conceptual capacities. The central question is of course what more we can say about the nature of these normative relations which provide intelligibility within the space of reason. And about how and why standing in these relations involves the exercise of conceptual capacities, beyond the trivial sense in which our ensuing judgements are of course concept involving.

We can now contrast McDowell’s defence of SR on the basis of the Relational Myth with his defence of KDC. In the latter case, we can see that his focus shifts to the Receptive Myth. This Myth targets our account of the experiential relata of the normative relation, rather than targeting a proposed explanation of our standing in the relation itself. As mentioned, the Receptive Myth claims that an account of experience is Mythical if it doesn’t acknowledge the involvement of our conceptual capacities in our reception of what is given in experience. Clearly, these are two different types of Myth. However, McDowell regularly shifts seamlessly between them. The most illustrative example is the shift from lecture 1 Sect. 3 to lecture 1 Sect. 4 of *Mind and World*. In Sect. 3, McDowell (1994, p. 8) discusses how “the idea of the Given offer exculpations where we wanted justifications”, which is clearly a case of the Relational Myth. However, without mentioning a change of focus and terminology, on the next page he writes “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” (McDowell, 1994, p. 9). This latter quote clearly concerns the nature of the experiential relata, and not the relation itself. Hence, McDowell’s concern has seamlessly shifted from SR to KDC, and he has simultaneously shifted from supporting his conclusion with the Relational Myth to employing the Receptive Myth. This trend of tying his defence of KDC to the Receptive Myth is echoed throughout McDowell’s writings.<sup>4</sup> Later on, still in *Mind and World*, he writes: “if we think that the way to exploit the passivity of experience is to deny that spontaneity extends all the way out to the content of experience, we merely fall back into a misleadingly formulated version of the myth of the Given.” (McDowell, 1994, p. 13). Notice, that in this quote, the Mythical stance concerns the lack of conceptual involvement in what is given in experiences, their content, rather than the lack of conceptual involvement in our

<sup>4</sup> See also McDowell (1994, pp. 25–26) and McDowell (2009, pp. 257–258).

standing in justificatory relations to what is so given. McDowell thus repeatedly shifts between two different forms of Myth in his discussions.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to determine why McDowell thinks this transition between the two forms of the Myth is acceptable. At times he writes as if he simply overlooks their difference. As if he cannot conceive of the idea that conceptual capacities are involved making it such that the self-conscious thinker can appreciate the warranting relation, if not by being involved in constituting the experiential relata as well. For example, he writes: “Avoiding the Myth requires capacities that belong to reason to be operative in experiencing itself, not just in judgements in which we respond to experience” (McDowell, 2009, p. 258). Clearly, this is simply a fallacy of exhaustion. One can deny that capacities belonging to reason are *just* operative in the judgements we make in response to experience without accepting them to be operative in the experiencing *itself*. One could, as I will, argue that capacities belonging to reason are involved in the subject’s coming to grasp the judgements *as warranted* by the experience, while denying this is due to these capacities being involved in the experiencing itself.

At other times, McDowell writes as if he must indeed provide a link which moves him from the Relational Myth, from which he starts, to the Receptive Myth that supports his experiential conceptualism. He comes closest to providing this link, when he in *Mind and World* writes: “but we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities” (McDowell, 1994, p. 7).<sup>6</sup> Were this the case, then we could see how one could seamlessly move from the Relational to the Receptive Myth, as implication and probabilification are relations that can hold between conceptual relata. However, as I will discuss next, McDowell’s later changes to his view make it difficult to see how he can hold onto the idea that the only warranting relations are akin to implication and probabilification.

## 2 McDowell’s new position, recognitional capacities and Cheng’s critique

As earlier noted, if McDowell provides any support for his seamless shifts between the Relational Myth and the Receptive Myth, then it must consist in a defence of the claim that the only warranting relations (the concern of the Relational Myth) we can conceive of are between conceptual items (the concern of the Receptive Myth).

<sup>5</sup> In an earlier article (Gersel, 2018b), I defended McDowell’s understanding of the Myth of the Given against objections from Travis. Those arguments display my own failure to appreciate the distinction between the Relational and the Receptive Myth and the different work they are performing in McDowell’s argumentation. My current position is that the Receptive Myth is a fictional obstacle and should be ignored. In contrast, I think avoidance of the Relational Myth presents a genuine requirement on adequate theories of experiential justification; a requirement by no means satisfied by many dominant contemporary theories of mind.

<sup>6</sup> See McDowell (1994, pp. 52–53) for a repetition of this point.

McDowell's central support for this intermediary premise is his claim that we can only understand warranting relations along the lines of implication or probabilification.<sup>7</sup> As 'warrant' is a contested term, it is important to specify that, since McDowell moves from the premise of Minimal Empiricism to the discussion of warranting, it means a judgement's being warranted can mean no more than that it has been sufficiently rationally supported in a way accessible to the self-conscious thinker.<sup>8</sup> This and no more is what is needed to satisfy Minimal Empiricism. McDowell's claim is thus substantial when he restricts warranting relations to relations that are only available between truth-bearing relata, such as the relation of implication. By restricting warranting relations to relations such as implication, McDowell claims that for a subject to be warranted in issuing a judgement, the subject *must* start from something which possesses truth and then appreciate how there is a truth-preserving relation between that from which he starts and the judgement he makes on its basis.<sup>9</sup>

In his early theory, McDowell (1994, p. 26) takes this to be a very simply form of truth-preservation, focussing on those basic case where the thinkable fact experienced has identical content to the thinkable content of the perceptual judgement. His focus is on the obvious truth-preservation of any move from the factive perceptual entertaining of propositions, such as, that spring has sprung, to ensuing judgements sharing the same content, again, that spring has sprung (1994, p. 27). Clearly, truth will be preserved by any move from an inherently factive perceptual propositional state to a judgemental state with identical propositional content. Such moves are not only inherently valid, they are also inherently sound.

Cheng's critique of McDowell's conceptualism focusses on the change McDowell (2009, p. 259) makes, when he acknowledges that the conceptual content of the thinkable fact I experience may fall short of the conceptual content of the perceptual judgements this experience serves to non-inferentially warrant. McDowell's example concerns an experience of a bird which is a cardinal. McDowell acknowledges that such an experience might enable a bird-knower to non-inferentially come to know that the bird is a cardinal. However, he rejects that the content *that bird is a cardinal* is part of the conceptual content of the experience itself. Hence, on this novel view, experiences can provide warrant for judgements whose content extends beyond the content given in the experience itself.

In making this change, McDowell introduces the notion of non-inferential knowledge owed to recognitional capacities; capacities which allow us to non-inferentially move beyond the content of our experiences in forming warranted perceptual judgements. McDowell (2009, p. 259) writes: "And as I have urged, content whose figuring in such knowledge is owed to the recognitional capacity need not be part of the content of the experience itself." Cheng's (2021, p. 140) argument, in short, is that

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<sup>7</sup> From now on, I will stick with implication, as the probabilistic qualification makes no impact on my arguments.

<sup>8</sup> See Gersel (2018b) for further elaboration on how we should understand this requirement of accessibility.

<sup>9</sup> Note that McDowell makes the stronger claim that the truth-bearer must be conceptual, which is what Cheng rejects. However, both Cheng and McDowell see experiential justification as a warranting relation between truth-bearers, which is what I will challenge the cogency of.



if we allow such moves beyond the conceptual content present in experience to be rational due to the exercise of recognitional capacities in making the move, then this should equally allow us to make mention of recognitional capacities in making a rational move from the non-conceptual contents of experience to conceptual judgements.<sup>10</sup>

The first thing to notice regarding McDowell's new position is that it tacitly accepts that we can talk of the rationality supporting involvement of conceptual capacities in the *relational step* from the experience to the ensuing judgement. Capacities to recognize things as falling under concepts are surely conceptual capacities. Hence, on McDowell's novel view, he already accepts a relational form of conceptualism, which claims that conceptual capacities are significantly involved in constituting the rationality of *the relational moves* from what is given to what is judged. Hence, the idea that we can avoid the Relational Myth by conceiving of the warranting relation itself between experience and judgement as involving the exercise of conceptual capacities is operative in McDowell's own thinking.

Moreover, the involvement of such recognitional conceptual capacities serves to make rational a perceptual judgement, even though the truth of the non-inferentially known judgement isn't entailed or implied by the content of the conceptual contents experientially given. According to McDowell (2009, p. 261), the content of my experience may classify what is seen as a particular bird or animal of a particular shade of red, but from this content alone, there is no valid inference to the conclusion that it is cardinal. Hence, McDowell is now accepting a form of warranting relation which isn't a form of implication or anything of its kin. The warranting relation is still a truth-preserving relation between truth-bearers, as I couldn't have experienced that particular bird without it being a cardinal, given that it is. However, the conceptual content given to me in experience doesn't *imply* that it is cardinal in any sense of implication which acknowledges a distinction between Sense and reference, which McDowell surely does. Cheng's point is that if warranting relations can move beyond implication when exploiting recognitional capacities, as long as truth-preservation is retained, then what grounds does McDowell have for rejecting that exercises of such recognitional concepts can enable us to make warranted moves from non-conceptual experiential contents to a series of perceptual judgements whose truth is ensured by the veracity of those very non-conceptual contents. Thus, the moment, McDowell acknowledges the exercise of recognitional capacities as a form of warranting relation between experience and judgement which differs from implication, then there seems to be no support for his conflation of the Relational and the Receptive Myth. Therefore, we are left free to refute the mythical status of the Receptive Myth and, thereby, we can reject conceptualism about experience. So much for McDowell's change of view and Cheng's employment of it in motivating non-conceptualism about experiential content. Now on to why this response is too meagre.

<sup>10</sup> For a similar argument to this effect see my Gersel et al. (2017).

### 3 Truth-conferrers and the concrete-abstract divide

McDowell is clear that he regards as problematic any picture which limits our conscious experiential access to a set of mental items falling short of external reality. In *Mind and World*, he writes: “It cannot be a matter of picturing the systems adjustments to the world from sideways on: that is, with the system circumscribed within a boundary, and the world outside it” (McDowell, 1994, p. 34). Later on, he elaborates as follows: “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” (McDowell, 1994, pp. 42–43).

McDowell thus clearly thinks that our experiential reasons must consist of awareness of the very external reality which confers truth upon our thoughts. Now, there is a minimalist use of the notion of ‘facts’ where facts are simply defined as whatever confers truth upon thoughts. Russell (2010, p. 6) employs this minimal notion when he writes: “When I speak of a fact...I mean the kind of thing that makes a proposition true or false”.<sup>11</sup> I want to use ‘fact’ in this definitional sense, where a fact is simply what confers truth upon a thought. The substantial question becomes what types of entities facts are, given that they have to be fit to play this role of truth-conferrers. When ‘fact’ is understood in this sense, neither Travis nor I have any beef with McDowell’s claim that we perceive facts. However, McDowell follows Frege’s (1956, p. 307) unfortunate characterization of facts as thoughts that are true.<sup>12</sup> On this view, the facts which provide the worldly constraint on our thinking are pictured as being of the same ontological type as those thoughts which they confer truth upon. As McDowell writes: “The constraint [from experience] 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” (McDowell, 1994, p. 28). Or in other words: “that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world” (McDowell, 1994, p. 26).

In the last section, we saw that there is no need to accept that a warranting relation to something beyond the conceptual must be a case of the Myth of the Given. For, as argued, we can reject the Receptive Myth as a valid form of criticism, while holding onto the importance of the Relational Myth. Of course, it would be falling into the Relational Myth to claim that a mere pointing, as a gesture void of conceptual involvement, is sufficient to place one in a warranting relation to some relata which isn’t conceptual. But it is simply begging the question against his opponent, when McDowell repeatedly insinuates that the best description, we can give of how one stands in warranting relations to the non-thinkable, is as a bare pointing. Taking the Relational Myth seriously includes characterizing our move from experience

<sup>11</sup> See also Austin (1950) and Longworth (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in that text, Frege (1956, p. 292) makes clear that he does not think elements of a thought-like kind can confer truth upon our empirical thinking. Given Frege’s care in distinguishing the abstract from the concrete, I take one to get the most faithful reading of Frege ideas by considering it a slip when he equates facts both with truth-conferrers and with true thoughts.

to judgement as involving conceptual capacities that go far beyond the simple gesture of pointing. Following Sellars (1997), we can explain how a conceptual recognitional capacity inherently involves the ability to situate one's ensuing perceptual judgement in a whole inferential network of other judgements. To Sellars, it even includes the ability to elucidate the conditions under which this recognitional capacity is well-functioning, such as by having knowledge of the influence of lighting conditions on our capacities to recognize colours. As we have seen, even McDowell acknowledges that such a recognitional use of our conceptual capacities is conceivable and amounts to more than simply pointing. In this paper, I won't engage into the positive description of what such recognitional uses of our distinctively conceptual capacities involve.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I want to present an argument as to why there had better be such an account, because if we are to hold onto McDowell's own idea that our warranting relations do not stop short of the facts, again in the minimal sense, then we had better stand in warranting relations to something which isn't a content at all, be that of a conceptual or non-conceptual kind.

The core objection raised by Charles Travis (2007, 2018) is that content-bearing elements are the wrong type of entity to be truth-conferring.<sup>14</sup> Contents are denizens of the abstract; this goes as much for conceptual as non-conceptual contents. One cannot shin one's knee on a content, nor does a content occur at a given time and space. Entertainings of contents are concrete occurrences; more precisely they are psychological occurrences belonging to an individual at a time and place. One can be in Paris in April when one thinks that spring has sprung. But as Frege (1956) makes clear, thoughts, that is the content of judgements and the like, aren't concrete. Were they psychological occurrences, then they couldn't be shared between different people. Nor could the same thought be entertained on multiple different occasions by the same individual, as each such entertaining would be a distinct psychological occurrence. This follows simply from Leibniz law, as the one entertaining might have properties, such as being done late at night, which the other lacks.

What this shows us is that contents cannot be the type of thing which confers truth upon our empirical thinking. Surely, what makes my empirical thinking true or false is the makeup of the world that I think about. And the world I think about consists of concrete objects of the type one can shin one's knee on and also concrete occurrences of the type which happen at one time and then, if missed, are in the past forever. If it is true that I went to the party and shinned my knee on the table, then that thought has its truth conferred upon it by facts of the kind which include the very table I shinned my knee upon and its history, as well as the spatio-temporal event which consisted of wine and dancing at a particular place at a particular time. Neither of these elements are abstract in the sense contents are. Hence, if as McDowell claims, we must conceive of our thinking as answerable to the world itself, then we are stopping short of the world that confers truth upon our thinking if our warranting relations reach no further than to contents of various kinds.

<sup>13</sup> See Travis (2013) for an illuminating attempt, and my Gersel (2017) for another partial account taking outset in Evans's (1982) thoughts specifically on singular reference.

<sup>14</sup> The same point is raised in Austin (1950).

Truth-preserving relations exist between various contents; truth-conferring relations, at least for empirical thinking, exist between denizens of the concrete and contents, which are denizens of the abstract.

Notice that McDowell's (1998) invocation of De Re senses for thoughts does nothing to stop this charge. There may be certain thought contents which are only available for thought if the world is such that these thoughts are true. However, the truth these thoughts possess isn't conferred upon them by the De Re status of the Sense of the thought; it is conferred upon the thought by more mundane items, such as the table in front of me and its history. The De Re sense-bearing thought may be unavailable for thinking had the concrete reality not been so arranged that the thought is also true, but this dependence of its availability upon the layout of reality does not make the thought itself a truth-conferrer. Certainly, I can become aware of something concrete by being confronted with a de re sense. The clearest example is when someone speaks to me and by grasping their De Re sense-bearing thought, I come to be aware of the concrete particular they are referring to. However, the crucial point is that I come to be so aware of the world by way of being aware of a true abstract repeatable thinkable, whereas that which makes my thought true is a concrete unrepeatable occurrence. It is because the thought is made true by something that isn't the thought itself, that I acquire awareness of the world by grasping the thought. However, we are interested in unmediated awareness of that which confers truth, and that cannot be something conceptual which is always on the side of the elements that can be true. McDowell might suggest that De Re senses play a different role in enabling perceptual awareness than they do in enabling testimonial awareness. And surely, their role might be different, for example when exercised in perception this might involve various kinds of perceptual phenomenology. Yet, it is difficult to see how these differences could possibly affect the main problem, which is that in so far as these De Re senses remain concepts, then they are abstract. McDowell's whole point is that concepts with the very same senses that we encounter in perception can be reemployed in thoughts which are surely abstract. However, in so far as we are aware of the concrete fact that makes our thought true under the guise of the abstract perceptual representation, then such awareness is mediated by a conceptual, that is abstract, non-spatio-temporal, and repeatable, representation of the concrete. In so far as we are aware of the world in its concreteness, this awareness cannot be conceptually facilitated. Either way, one cannot align McDowell's dual commitments both to our immediate awareness of that which confers truth and to the conceptual structuring of this awareness.

#### 4 A McDowellian reply?

Despite having had ample opportunity to do so, McDowell (2018) continues to reject Travis's (2007, 2018) proposal. This proposal acknowledges that conceptual capacities are involved in the relational move of forming warranted perceptual judgements in light of experience, while it denies that this requires that what is given in experience is some form of content, whether conceptual or not. If McDowell accepted this view, he could hold on to his idea that experience

provides openness to the world we think about. He could hold on to the claim that experiential warranting relations stop nowhere short of what confers truth upon our thinking. Moreover, he could hold on to the claim that the space of reasons is the space of the conceptual, only he would take the spatial metaphor to range over justifying relations, not over the relata of those relations. He could acknowledge the need to avoid the Relational Myth and claim that whenever someone is justified in judging, then we can only make intelligible his judgement as being caused by a relational move that involved the exercise of his conceptual capacities. However, McDowell would have to give up on the claim that the Receptive Myth is a genuine myth, that is, he would give up the claim that the relata of all relations within the space of reasons must themselves be conceptually structured.

Yet, for some reason, McDowell holds off on agreeing with Travis on this point, despite otherwise being amenable to changing his view in light of their exchanges. This raises the question of why such recalcitrance. I think that in considering this question, we can see why there is no reasonable stopping point between McDowell's full conceptualism about experiential content and Travis's rejection of experiences as content-bearing all together. In other words, if one takes outset in McDowell's thoughts and his discussions with Travis, then there really is no stopping point at the precise place where Cheng wishes to end, namely with ascribing non-conceptual content to experiences.

First off, I think there is no easy avenue for arguing that our empirical thinking doesn't have its truth conferred upon it by denizens of the concrete. Surely, we are doing violence to our conception of empirical reality if we do not think of it as fundamentally consisting of concrete spatio-temporal entities, be they objects, events, happenings, the historical, or what have you. As we have seen, McDowell motivates his Minimal Empiricism by trading on the idea that we cannot take our thoughts to have intentional reach to a world that sits beyond what can warrant our thinking. Hence, if our thoughts refer to concrete entities, then it is these concrete entities that confer truth and falsity upon our thinking, that much is the fundamental Fregean idea of explaining truth in terms of reference. Hence, following Frege's claim that reference settles truth, and McDowell's demand that thought's intentionality cannot reach beyond what can provide warrant for thought, we had better accept that we can stand in warranting relations to something concrete. McDowell is thus forced to accept that he somehow has to provide a positive response to Travis's challenge that the concrete has left the space of reasons all together on McDowell's account. We can see that this is indeed the route the debate has taken in their later exchanges (McDowell, 2018). Hence, a simple rejection of Travis's point about the concrete-abstract distinction and its relation to what confers truth cannot be McDowell's reason for retaining his conceptualism. How McDowell attempts to respond to this challenge and the cogency of that response is beyond the scope of this paper. However, his solution is certainly complex, if not obscure. Hence, it would be much easier to simply reject the Receptive Myth and accept that the exercise of our recognitional conceptual capacities, can make warranted those judgements we base upon our experiences of the very concrete aspects of the world which confers truth upon those

very judgements. Surely, one could ask for no better warrant than forming one's judgements on the basis of experiential awareness of that which makes them true.

If we are to find a cogent argument for McDowell's continued adherence to conceptualism, I think we need to look back to the criticism he raises against Evans (and later Peacocke) in *Mind and World*. Notably, McDowell (1994, p. 53) acknowledges that the relations of implication and probabilification can exist between the non-conceptual contents which Evans ascribe to experience and the relevant judgements. Hence, his objection cannot simply be that Evans's conception of warranting relations doesn't follow the implication-model of warrant which McDowell favoured at that time. Instead, McDowell thinks that the problem with Evans' theory is that it places unacceptable limits on our potential for rational self-scrutiny. For McDowell (1994, p. 53) in order for relations to be warranting "the relations themselves must be able to come under the self-scrutiny of rational thinking". Notably, this idea that the space of reasons must be open to self-scrutiny is a point on which both McDowell and Travis (2013) agree. Hence, this shared assumption would be a fertile target for an objection to Travis's idea that experiences simply facilitate awareness of concrete layout of reality, what he calls the historical, without any employment of content. In fact, if one follows Kant in thinking that the conceptual involves spontaneity, and that all exercises of spontaneity imply the potential for self-scrutiny, then it follows directly from the Relational Myth that one cannot stand in warranting relations which cannot be self-scrutinized.

The question then is what is required for such a warranting relation to fall under scrutiny. McDowell (1994, p. 53 fn. 7) himself raises the pertinent question in a footnote: "why can we not acknowledge that the *relations* between experience and judgements have to be rational, and therefore within the scope of spontaneity, without being thereby committed to a concession about experience itself?"

As far as I can see, McDowell presents two avenues for answering the above question in the negative.<sup>15</sup> At times it seems McDowell's argument is a general version of the argument that one cannot scrutinize a relation in thought without each of the relata being conceptual. For example, he writes: "This means that the putatively rational relations between experiences, which [Evans' non-conceptualism] does not conceive as operations of spontaneity, and judgements, which it does conceive as operations of spontaneity, cannot themselves be within the scope of spontaneity – liable to revision, if that were to be what the self-scrutiny of active thinking demands" (McDowell, 1994, p. 52). While I once found this objection to the view of Travis convincing (Gersel, 2018b), I now have my doubts. There is certainly a sense in which I can come to realize that my judgement wasn't warranted by my

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<sup>15</sup> A reviewer suggested a third objection on the form that Travis cannot explain what enables the sensory experience to play its warranting role. It cannot be the very *exercise* of a recognitional capacity which accounts for the experience's potential for warranting, for this exercising of the recognitional capacity is a case of exploiting this potential and thus cannot be its own enabler. McDowell, in contrast, can say that the warranting potential of the sensory experience is explained by its possession of conceptual content. However, I think Travis can simply say that my *possession* of the recognitional capacity is what enables the warranting potential of the experience, whereas my *exercise* of this capacity amounts to my exploitation of this potential in forming a warranted judgement.

experience, if I say, come to realize that cardinals do not live in the state where I am at. Note, I can scrutinize this even though I cannot entertain my very experience of the red bird itself in thought. That I cannot do this is trivial, as nothing concrete can be entertained in thought, only an abstract representation of it. For McDowell's argument to work, he must have some more substantial form of scrutiny in mind than the one just considered, as this form of scrutiny is surely available even if we claim that experiences lack content.

Yet, McDowell can neither be worried about my inability to scrutinize the presence of the implication between the experience and my judgement, for McDowell himself now denies that experiential warrant relies on strict implication between experiential content and judgement. McDowell could argue that the problem is that I cannot scrutinise any truth-*preserving* relation between the experience and the judgement, but that would simply amount to begging the question against the view that the relation isn't between two content-bearing relata. If we do not need to check for implication, but are merely interested in truth-assurance, then why isn't it adequate that I can attend to my experience and use my recognitional capacities to realize that the concrete tract of the world I see *confers* truth upon my judgement. The problem with McDowell's argument is that I can realize that I was at fault by considering the extent of my capacity for recognition in light of the conditions under which I am judging, without such reflection requiring my experience itself to have content entertainable in thought. What more than this is required for adequate self-reflective scrutiny of my warrant for judging as I do?

McDowell thus needs to further unfold the lack of self-scrutiny objection if it is to get a hold against Travis. However, for present purposes, the point isn't so much whether this possible objection of McDowell's is cogent. The issue is instead that if it is cogent, then it concerns a purported problem with scrutinizing the warranting status of relations to non-conceptual relata. And if that objection is cogent, then it is equally damning for Cheng's view which, like Evans, attributes non-conceptual content to experience.

McDowell also mentions another objection taking outset in the requirement that if something is to figure as my reason then I must be able to articulate this reason. McDowell (1994, p. 165) writes: "In the reflective tradition we belong to, there is a time-honoured connection between reason and discourse". And he continues: "Reasons that the subject can give, in so far as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts" (McDowell, 1994, p. 165). On McDowell's understanding of the discourse connection, the requirement cannot simply be that we must be able to express what our reason was. Surely, I can refer to my experience of the world, say, that I saw the tree's colour, and explain that this was my reason for judging as I did. Why should the possibility of such reference to my experience require the experience itself to involve something conceptually structured. I can also refer to my neighbour's poodle without this entailing that my neighbour's poodle is conceptually structured. McDowell must operate under a special idea of how we refer to the reason for which we judged which requires that we aren't simply satisfied with reference to the correct item using a concept with a contextually relevant sense. Maybe the idea is that since rationality is subservient to the way in which something is given to me, then the sense of how I refer to my experience has to figure as part of

that experience itself, which means the experience must itself involve the exercise of conceptual capacities. Now I do not see how this argument is to run in more detail. Of course, articulations must be sensitive to sense if they are to figure as articulations of reasons. But why think this requires that what one refers to must itself include senses. Maybe our use of our recognitional capacities consists precisely in realizing, not only that our perceptual judgement is warranted, but also under which senses we must refer. However, such worries aside, the point regarding Cheng's conclusions is the same as with the last attempt at understanding McDowell's potential objection to Travis. If we must indeed understand our warranting experiences as including distinctions at the level of Fregean sense, then this objection will be as damning to Cheng's non-conceptualist account of experience as it is to Travis's rejection of experiential content. Fregean senses are distinctions at the conceptual level, and non-conceptual content do not possess senses, though they may of course possess other forms of mode-of-presentation. However, it is unclear why the move from a non-conceptual mode-of-presentation to a judgement with Fregean sense could be rationally accomplished by the use of our conceptual capacities, while the move from a perspectival perceptual encounter with the concrete to a judgement with Fregean Sense couldn't be.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted a couple of things. I have distinguished two separate threads in McDowell's understanding of the Myth of the Given and explained their relation to his defences of conceptualism about experience and the sui generis nature of the space of reasons. I have argued that we can separate a Relational Myth which serves to establish the sui generis space of reasons, and a Receptive Myth which McDowell attempts to employ in order to establish that experiences must possess conceptual content. While McDowell is not explicit about these two versions of the Myth, he is required to support the connection he sees between them. Like Cheng, I agree that after McDowell's change to his view, he can no longer provide this connection, which means that we can give up the Receptive Myth as an illusory demand on experience. However, this is a good thing, because it allows McDowell to accommodate Travis's objection to his theory of experience that it fails to put us into contact with the concrete particulars of the world which confer truth upon our thoughts. Now Cheng takes the rejection of the Receptive Myth to lead us in a different direction, though Cheng of course doesn't employ my terminology of a Receptive Myth. He thinks McDowell should hold on to the aspect of his theory which claims that experiences possess content. But instead of holding onto conceptualism, he should come to accept the position currently prevalent in the cognitive sciences which attribute non-conceptual content to experience. However, as I argued in the final section, I do not think that there can be any motivation for McDowell to accept Cheng's intermediary stopping point. Cheng's own view fails to address the objections from Travis which has to some degree caught hold of McDowell, as Cheng also thinks of experiential warrant as a relation to an abstract experiential content. Moreover, any McDowellian objection to the view that it is only relations of warranting, and



not the relata of these relations, which must involve exercises of conceptual capacities, would equally be an objection to Cheng's view that experiences possess non-conceptual content. Hence, if McDowell is to reject his conceptualism at all, then he should accept the claim that experience lacks content all together. Experience simply enables our direct awareness of the concrete reality which confers truth upon our thinking. Moreover, by exercising the right conceptual recognitional capacities, our judgements can stand in warranted relations to what we experience, while the warranting status of these relations is open to self-reflective rational scrutiny. Conversely, if McDowell wants to force us to remain conceptualist about experiential content, then he is faced with two challenges. He needs to explain how his theory doesn't leave our warranting relations falling short of the world, when these relations are between abstract content bearing relata and not between concrete reality and abstract contents of judgements. Secondly, he needs to further elaborate on the link he continues to maintain between the Relational Myth and the Receptive Myth, despite his current acknowledgement that the exercise of recognitional conceptual capacities allows for warranting relations which aren't cases of truth-implication. For my part, I take the lesson to be that occupying positions in the space of reasons does indeed constitutively involve the exercise of conceptual capacities; only the conceptuality of the space of reasons ranges over rational relations, such as those of warranting and justifying, and not over the warranting relata themselves.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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