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Experience and Justification: Revisiting McDowell's Empiricism

Daniel Enrique Kalpokas¹

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Abstract In this paper I try to defend McDowell's empiricism from a certain objection made by Davidson, Stroud and Glüer. The objection states that experiences cannot be reasons because they are—as McDowell conceives them—inert. I argue that, even though there is something correct in the objection (only an accepted content can be a reason), that is not sufficient for rejecting the epistemological character that McDowell attributes to experiences. My strategy consists basically in showing that experiences involve a constitutive attitude of acceptance of their contents.

In *Mind and World* and subsequent works, McDowell defends a minimal (or transcendental) version of empiricism according to which, among other things, perceptual experiences constitute reasons for holding empirical beliefs (McDowell 1994, 2002, 2009a, b). In this article I will evaluate an objection to this thesis made by Davidson (2001b), Stroud (2002), and Glüer (2004). The objection claims that, since McDowell conceives perceptual experiences as devoid of all elements of acceptance or conviction, they cannot constitute reasons for holding any belief. In contrast, my thesis is that, although there is a correct point in the objection (only an accepted content can be a reason), that is not sufficient for rejecting the epistemological role that minimal empiricism attributes to perceptual experience.

In the first section of this article, I briefly reconstruct McDowell's view, such as it appears in *Mind and World*, in order to clarify the epistemological relevance that he attributes to perceptual experience [1]. Although McDowell later changed his position regarding the content of perceptual experience [moving from his claim in

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Mind and World that experience has propositional content to a more recent claim that it has intuitional content (McDowell 2009b)], I will first focus on this book because he originally presents in it, not only his general epistemological framework, but also, and more importantly, the feature of perceptual experience that has been attacked by his critics: that perceiving does not imply accepting the content so received. In the next section, I present the aforementioned objection to McDowell's thesis, according to which experiences are reasons for holding beliefs [2]. Although the objection was originally directed against the notion of perceptual content defended in *Mind and World*, in this section I also consider McDowell's new position on perceptual content and show how the objection could be easily applied to it as well. Thereby, I suggest that in order to defend the thesis that experiences are reasons, a different proposal is needed: not a new conception of the content of perceptual experience, but a theory about the kind of attitude towards its content which is characteristic of perceiving. Thirdly, I try to respond to the objection by showing that a particular variety of acceptance is involved in perception [3]. To do so, I present a conception of perceptual experience that is perfectly congenial with McDowell's minimal empiricism, no matter which of his versions about perceptual content one considers. The conception of perceptual experience I recommend allows us to retain the thesis according to which experiences can be reasons for belief. The final section summarizes my position on the topic [4].

1 The Epistemic Role of Perceptual Experience in McDowell's *Mind and World*

McDowell claims that to make sense of the idea of a mental state's being directed toward the world, such as a belief or judgment, we need to put that state in a normative context. In order to have the content that things are thus and so, a belief must be an attitude correctly or incorrectly adopted in virtue of the way things are. To have empirical content, a belief has to be—in McDowell's expression—"answerable" to the world. A belief is answerable to the world when it is answerable to perceptual experience. The importance McDowell attributes to this point is not merely epistemological; if experience were not a tribunal which could verify or falsify beliefs, thought in general could not have empirical content at all: "experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are [...] if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all" (McDowell 1994, p. xii).¹ The idea is that, if thought is to be able to refer to reality, it has to be constrained rationally (and not only causally) from something outside of itself; but that which constrains thought has to be conceptual to be able to be an epistemic reason. Perceptual experience, as McDowell understands it, combines sensory impressions and concepts, receptivity, and spontaneity.

¹ Also: "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" (McDowell 1994, p. xvii).

Perceptual experience presents to us how the world is in a conceptual and direct way. The content presented by perceptual experience is a state of affairs in the world, which can also be the content of a judgment or a belief.² In virtue of their conceptual character, perceptual contents can be included in the so-called “space of reasons” and thereby in the order of justification.³ Thus, the oscillation between coherentism (which forgets the rational constraint from world to thought) and the Myth of the Given (which inappropriately extends justification beyond the sphere of the conceptual) is avoided. According to McDowell, thought is rationally constrained by the world such as it is presented in perceptual experience. When we go back in the order of justifications, the last step is an experience (McDowell 1994, pp. 28–29); by way of experiences we are not only open to facts, but also in possession of conceptual contents which can be used for justifying observational judgments.⁴ As McDowell claims, “appearances [...] constitute reasons for judgments in suitable circumstances” (McDowell 1994, p. 62). Thus, when we ask somebody why she holds a particular observational belief—for instance, that a certain object is square—her reply could be: “Because it looks that way.” That sentence, which expresses a perceptual experience, can be easily recognized as “a reason for holding the belief” (McDowell 1994, p. 165).

Now, McDowell also thinks that “receiving an impression, having things appear to one a certain way, does not itself imply accepting anything, not even that things appear to one that way” (McDowell 2002, p. 278). Although perceptual experience represents the world in a way which is not under our control, we always have the freedom to accept or reject what experience presents to us when we have reasons to do so (McDowell 1994, p. 11). McDowell illustrates this point through the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion. In the illusion referred to, the two lines look to be unequal in length; that is how the experience represents them. However, a person informed about the illusory character of the case can refrain from judging that this is how things are. In this way, based on certain beliefs, the person could reject the content presented by her perceptual experience. Thus, for McDowell, an experience is something like an “invitation” to accept certain propositions or facts about the objective world (McDowell 2002, p. 278).⁵ As he claims, “We need an idea of perception as something in which there is no attitude of acceptance or endorsement at all, but only, as I put it, an invitation to adopt such an attitude, which, in the best cases, consists in a fact’s making itself manifest to one” (McDowell 2002, p. 279).

² “In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge” (McDowell 1994, p. 9). On p. 26 he says: “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 judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are”. This is the version of perceptual content held by McDowell until his paper “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” (2009b). I will consider his new position below.

³ In this context, justification should be understood as a matter of giving reasons for holding judgments or beliefs. See McDowell (1994, “Lecture I”).

⁴ For a response to an accusation of foundationalism attributed to McDowell, see McDowell (2009a, pp. 253–254).

⁵ According to McDowell, facts are true propositions. See McDowell (1994, pp. 179–180).

One can accept the invitation and consequently believe that things are as one's experience says they are, or one can refuse the invitation (if one has reasons to do so) and not believe that things are as one's experience represents them. Experience only provides, therefore, the content of a possible judgment (plus the force of an invitation, if we assume that an invitation involves a certain kind of attitude),⁶ and that is enough—McDowell seems to think—for giving it an epistemological role in the justification of beliefs.

2 One Objection to McDowell's Minimal Empiricism

Some critics of McDowell have objected to the thesis according to which perceptual experiences are reasons for holding empirical beliefs (Davidson 2001b, p. 290; Stroud 2002, p. 89; Glüer 2004, p. 209). The objection I am referring to states that thought cannot be rationally constrained by perceptual experiences because experiences do not involve—according to McDowell himself—any acceptance of their contents. For the sake of argument, it could be conceded that perceptual experience provides certain conceptual contents about how the world is, certain propositions which are passively received. However, a mere proposition is not a reason; it can only be a reason if we *accept* it as true. Now, once this point is recognized, one should conclude that only beliefs—and not experiences—can play a role in justification. If only propositions that are believed can be reasons, perceptual experience cannot be a tribunal at all.

Here is the objection in Davidson's words: "I do not understand how a propositional attitude which is totally devoid of an element of belief can serve as a reason for anything. [...] An attitude that carries no conviction would be inert" (2001b, p. 290). And Stroud states:

I think the content of an experience alone cannot give a person reason, or be a person's reason, to believe something. The content of an experience is typically expressed in a proposition, and propositions are not reasons, nor do they make other propositions reasonable. [...] It is not simply the content of a person's experience that gives the reason to believe something; it is the person's experiencing, or being aware of, or accepting, or somehow "taking in" that content. (2002, p. 89).

⁶ It is not clear to me how we should precisely understand the metaphor of "invitation." Someone might think that, perhaps, McDowell uses "invitation" as a third option between the idea that experience is inert and the one according to which experience involves the acceptance of its content. I find no textual basis for that possibility in McDowell's works. But let us suppose for a moment that "invitation" refers to a third possibility; what could it be? It might be said, for instance, that in the literal social case, invitations are not neutral because they have a certain force depending on who makes the invitation, and to what one is invited. This could suggest that, insofar as experiences are invitations, they are something like *prima facie* reasons (thanks to Adrian Cussins for suggesting to me this possibility). However, if one has not previously accepted the invitation, the mere appeal to the fact that one has been invited cannot explain or justify one's action. Thus, talking about *prima facie* reasons cannot be but another way of talking about accepted invitations. Another possibility could be to read "invitations" as dispositions to accept a certain proposition. But again, how could a disposition that is not actualized in the effective acceptance of a proposition be a reason for a belief?

Finally, Glüer argues:

A mere proposition is no more a reason than a mere bit of extra-conceptual given. A proposition is a reason only if we take an *attitude* towards it. Of course, q (an empirical belief) is supported by pp (a perceptual proposition) but you have a reason for inferring q only if you hold pp to be true. You have, in other words, to believe that pp . Perceptions, be they conceptual or propositional as you like, are reasons only if you believe that the proposition delivered is true (2004, p. 209).

Understandably, McDowell wants to hold that his non-doxastic notion of perceptual experience does not involve any kind of acceptance or endorsement about how perceived things are, because he is aware of cases in which one does not give credit to what one perceives, that is, cases in which one does not believe that the content presented by one's experience is true or correct (even when in fact it is).⁷ This is the reason why he insists on holding that having things appear to one in a certain way does not itself imply accepting anything. However, I think that there is something correct in the objection: a proposition can be a reason for a subject only if she accepts that proposition.⁸ Clearly, a proposition p (let us suppose a proposition delivered by perceptual experience) can entail another proposition q . However, in order to be a reason for believing q , p must be accepted as true by a subject. If she does not accept p as true, p cannot be *her* reason for believing q . In other words, believing q is to take, trust or accept that q is true; and to have a reason for believing q involves taking, trusting or accepting another proposition p . If this were not so, it would seem that p cannot support q . In effect, if I did not accept p as true, why would I offer p as my reason to believe q ? The very idea of having a reason to believe something involves having (consciously or not) some commitments. For instance, when believing q , I commit myself to defending q by offering another proposition, p . And, in doing this, in turn, I commit myself to defending p . However, if I did not accept p , not only would I not commit myself to defending p , but also I could not defend q by offering p . If I have a reason for believing q , it must be

⁷ In (1994) p. 11, McDowell alludes to the Müller-Lyer illusion, where an informed person judges, contrary to what seems to reveal her experience, that the lines in question have the same length; and in (2002) pp. 277–278, he refers to the case of a person who wrongly thinks her visual experience does not put her in a position to say how things are and, consequently, judges that things are not such as her experience presents them to her.

⁸ I have formulated the objection in terms of propositions because Davidson, Stroud, and Glüer present their objection in such terms, and because McDowell, until (2009b), held that the content of experience is propositional in nature. It is true that there is some recent discussion about what epistemic reasons are. Are they propositions, facts, or mental states? See, for example, Turri (2009). McDowell seems to think that, to the extent that facts can be considered as true propositions, there is no incompatibility between claiming that the content of experiences are facts and/or propositions. Therefore, although it is plausible to see McDowell's position in *Mind and World* as a sophisticated version of factualism, this is not necessarily incompatible with his thesis according to which experiences have propositional content. In any case, I do not need to enter the debate about the ontology of reasons, insofar as my interest in this article concerns not the contents of reasons but the particular attitude involved in perception. If a reader, in spite of these considerations, still believed that my formulation of Davidson, Stroud, and Glüer's objection presupposes a particular ontology of reasons, the same objection could be reformulated referring, in a more neutral way, to contents.

something that I accept as true, correct or adequate. As it is commonly said, reasons are considerations that count in favor of something else.⁹ If these considerations are not accepted by the subject who tries to rationally justify her beliefs, it seems that they cannot count in favor of her beliefs. So, it seems that, in order to provide a rational ground to a certain believed proposition, another proposition must be accepted by the believer of the first proposition.¹⁰

It is true that when asked about why she believes something, a subject can simply cite a proposition. A subject who is asked, “Why do you believe this is square?” (pointing to a square thing) could answer, “Because it looks square” (pointing to the same thing). But in giving that answer as her reason, the subject indicates that she accepts as true the proposition, “It looks square.” Her accepting that proposition as true is required for her having that reason to believe that the thing indicated is square. If this were not so, it would seem that her believing that the object in question is square is not rationally justified.

Now, I believe that, even if we accept this objection, we should not accept that when a proposition constitutes the content of a perceptual experience and functions as a reason for the subject who enjoys the experience, such a proposition has to necessarily be believed or has to become the content of a belief. This would certainly prevent attributing a justificatory role, in the relevant sense, to perceptual experiences. However, the following alternative remains open: that perceiving involves a particular acceptance of its content, a sort of acceptance that, for some reasons, cannot be reduced to that which is characteristic of believing. This would allow us to maintain the particular epistemic role of experience, as McDowell wants, without collapsing it into the one that is distinctive of belief.

Recently, McDowell has changed his view about the content of perceptual experiences. Now he holds that the error committed in *Mind and World* was to attribute propositional content to perceptual experiences, for “If experiences have propositional content, it is hard to deny that experiencing is taking things to be so” (McDowell 2009b, p. 269).¹¹ According to his new position, experiences—for

⁹ See, for instance, Scanlon (1998).

¹⁰ It may be thought that McDowell has a direct reply to the objection considered here: if p is true (or there are good reasons in favor of p), and p , in effect, counts in favor of q , then this fact entitles me to believe q on the basis of p , even in case I mistakenly do not accept p as a reason in favor of q . In such a case, it is only that I mistakenly do not take advantage of this entitlement (see, e.g., McDowell 2004, pp. 214–215, 2009b, p. 132). However, it should be noted that the point of Davidson’s (and others) objection is that, even if I see that p and accept p as a reason in favor of q , my seeing that p cannot count as my reason for believing that q , if experience itself does not involve any attitude of taking p as true. The point is, thus, that I cannot exploit my perceptual entitlement if my seeing that p does not include the acceptance of p . This “subjective” (or internal) sense of epistemic reason is necessary in order to explain how one rationally acquires one’s beliefs and why one justifies them by giving certain reasons. This does not prevent us from acknowledging the existence of “objective” (or external) reasons, i.e. propositions that one should accept as true, in order to rationally justify other propositions (even though one, in fact, does not take them as so).

¹¹ McDowell does not make clear why he changed his mind about perceptual content. He seems to think that, if perceptual content is propositional in character, then one is obliged to attribute to it something like assertoric force. Presumably, that explains why he says now that experiences have intuitional content like “This red cube” (assuming that a non-propositional content cannot have assertoric force). But I think that—leaving aside the fact that I do believe that experiences have some sort of assertoric force—the mere

instance, visual experiences—“bring our surroundings into view” (McDowell 2009b, p. 267), and we are thereby entitled, according to McDowell, to accept that things are thus and so. His new thesis states that experiences have intuitional conceptual content. Even though intuitional content is not equivalent to the discursive content expressed in a judgment, it is expressible by demonstrative expressions such as “This red cube.” Thus expressed, such content could be part of a judgment; for instance of the judgment “This red cube is the one I saw yesterday” (McDowell 2009b, p. 270). Thus, having something in view makes possible a demonstrative expression that one could use to make the intuitional content explicit, but that possibility does not need to be actualized (McDowell 2009b, p. 270).

Even under this reformulation of the content of perceptual experience, McDowell still reaffirms his old thesis according to which “not only beliefs but also experiences can be reasons for belief” (McDowell 2009b, p. 270). Nevertheless, as in *Mind and World*, McDowell insists on the idea according to which perceptual experiences do not suppose any attitude of acceptance: “Experiencing is not taking things to be so. In bringing our surroundings into view, experiences entitle us to take things to be so; whether we do is a further question” (McDowell 2009b, p. 269).¹²

The problem with McDowell's new version of the content of perceptual experience is that it does not escape from the objection made by his critics because the objection can be taken as directed against the lack of acknowledgment of an attitude of acceptance in perceptual experiences, whatever the nature of perceptual content is (propositional or not). Thus, McDowell's critics could argue that, since he

Footnote 11 continued

fact that experiences have propositional content (if they actually have it) does not compromise us to attributing assertoric force to them. One can just entertain a proposition, without taking any attitude towards it. If perception involves some sort of acceptance of its content, this does not come merely from the fact that it has propositional content.

¹² As an anonymous reviewer points out to me, when one considers McDowell's works written after *Mind and World*, one can see that his position is more intricate. For instance, he claims “But more typically, perceptual belief-acquisition is not a matter of judging, of actively exercising control over one's cognitive life, at all. Unless there are grounds for suspicion, such as odd lighting conditions, having it look to one as if things are a certain way (...) becomes accepting that things are that way by a sort of default, involving no exercise of the freedom that figures in a Kantian conception of judgment” (McDowell 2009b, p. 11. See also McDowell 2009b, p. 139). For discussion, see Gustafsson (2012). In this article, Gustafsson correctly holds that just as McDowell takes unreflective perceptual belief-formation to require a capacity for critical assessment, he also takes the capacity for critical assessment to require that one's default attitude towards experience is a matter of unreflectively accepting that things are as one experiences them. I agree with Gustafsson about this point. Notwithstanding this, I think that my point remains because one can still ask how having it look to one as if things are a certain way becomes reflectively or unreflectively accepting, believing that things are that way if experiences do not involve, in themselves, any attitude of acceptance that things are, or look like, a certain way. To claim, correctly to my mind, that perceptual belief-acquisition is typically a matter of unreflective acceptance of the content of experience does not explain, in itself, why this is so. In effect, let us suppose that I have an experience as if p is the case. Why should I form (reflectively or unreflectively) the belief that p if my experience does not involve an attitude of acceptance that p ? (A comparison with imagining that p could be of help here: in imagining that p , we do not typically form the belief that p because imagining that p does not involve—at least in ordinary cases—any acceptance that p is the case). As I hold in the following section, what explains (reflective and unreflective) perceptual belief-acquisition is the presence of a particular kind of acceptance in perceptual experience. Experiences can be reasons for holding beliefs because they have “assertoric force”, even in cases in which they are unreflectively accepted.

now attributes to perceptual experience the function of merely *presenting* certain intuitional contents (as something different from *accepting* them in a judgment or a belief), he has not proved yet that perceptual experiences in themselves—and not beliefs—have the appropriate epistemic role in justification. For example, they could argue that if a person, who is perceiving a red cube, does not take things to be such as her experience presents them to her, then she is not enabled by her experience to know there is a red cube in front of her.¹³ In effect, if intuitional contents are to be the subjects of judgments or beliefs, it seems that they should be accepted as properly presenting the way the world is. Otherwise, why would one be disposed to predicate something of them in a judgment?¹⁴ Thus, even if it were conceded that intuitional contents are suitable for being perceptual reasons, as McDowell wants, they would still be epistemologically inert (as propositions were before) if there is not an attitude of acceptance associated with them. Thus, in spite of the reformulation, the objection remains. For the epistemological problem we are considering here, the main difficulty is not in the nature of perceptual content, but in how to explain that perceptual content can be a reason when no attitude of acceptance towards that content is acknowledged.

Hence, I think that the later developments of McDowell do not appropriately answer the objection presented by his critics; however, I also think that it does not follow from this that perceptual experiences cannot be reasons at all. The obvious alternative consists in conceding the force of the objection and drawing, nonetheless, a different conclusion. This can be done by attributing some sort of acceptance, different from that involved in believing, to perceptual experiences. What is not obvious at all, though, is how to develop and justify the recommended alternative. In the rest of the paper, I will orient my argumentation towards that remaining task.

3 Acceptance in Perceptual Experiences

Although some of McDowell's critics think that perceptual experiences are mere causal linkages between beliefs and the world,¹⁵ the objection they make does not presuppose that particular notion of experience. Rather, the objection assumes that

¹³ In McDowell (2013a, p. 145), McDowell claims: "An experience that enables someone to know there is something red and rectangular in front of her, again in the most straightforward way, makes present to her not a state of affairs, but an *object*: something presented in the experience as red and rectangular and in front of her." The point of McDowell's critics may be that, in order to know that there is something red and rectangular in front of one, one needs to *accept* that one is seeing something red and rectangular in front of one.

¹⁴ I am supposing here that the person aims to make a true judgment.

¹⁵ For example, Davidson claims: "To perceive that it is snowing is, under appropriate circumstances, to be caused (in the right way) by one's senses to believe that it is snowing by the actually falling snow." (Davidson 2001a, p. xvi). (Davidson does not distinguish between perceiving, experiencing and sensing). As experiences do not have propositional content —Davidson believes— they cannot be reasons at all. Consequently, Davidson famously claims that only believed propositions can be reasons for holding beliefs. See, for instance, Davidson (2001a, p. 141). See also Glüer (2004, p. 207) and Stroud (2002, p. 87).

experiences have representational contents, as McDowell claims, but denies that such concession implies, in itself, that experiences are reasons for holding beliefs. For that reason, in what follows, I will assume that experiences do have representational contents.¹⁶ Considering that the objection, even when it was originally directed toward McDowell's propositionalist version of perceptual content, can be easily extended to his new thesis on the content of experience; and taking into account that the point in dispute is whether there is an attitude of acceptance in perceptual experience or not, I will remain neutral regarding what kind of content perceptual experience has. For my purposes, it will make no difference which version we work with.¹⁷ I will concede to McDowell that even experiences with intuitional content can be reasons for beliefs if a certain kind of acceptance is acknowledged. Thereby, I want to focus my attention on the particular kind of attitude involved in perceiving.¹⁸

Some philosophers have claimed that perceptual experiences involve a certain attitude of acceptance of their contents. For example, Heck uses the Fregean term "assertoric force" in order to characterize the purport of representing how the world is of perceptual experiences (2000, p. 508).¹⁹ Pryor uses the term "phenomenal force" to describe the way experiences present propositions to us. According to him, experience represents propositions in such a way that it "feels as if" we could tell that those propositions are true just by virtue of having them so represented (2000, n. 37).²⁰ Finally, Byrne claims that there is "a non-factive propositional attitude that is constitutively involved in perception" and that this attitude is to be understood in terms of believing (2011, pp. 81–92).²¹ Although I am sympathetic to those

¹⁶ This has been disputed. See, for example, Travis (2004) and Brewer (2006). I cannot discuss this topic here. My aim in this paper is to respond to the specific objection I have just outlined, which does not concern the problem of whether experience has content or not, but rather whether, assuming it does have content, experience involves a particular attitude of acceptance of its content. Responses to Travis and Brewer can be found in Ginsborg (2011), Schellenberg (2011) and McDowell (2013a, b).

¹⁷ Discussing what kind of content perceptual experience has (propositional, intuitional, or other) would require another article. Crane (2009) criticizes the idea that experience has propositional content. Some authors have also argued that, if experience has intuitional content, it cannot provide direct access to facts. See Echeverri (2011). McDowell acknowledges this point in (2013a); however, he believes that this is not an impediment to hold that experience can justify judgments and beliefs, or hold the factive view of experience. See McDowell (2013a, p. 147). I think that McDowell is right on this last point: the fact that I actually see this red cube implies that there is a red cube in front of me.

¹⁸ Many philosophers think that only entities with propositional content can be reasons (see, for example, Sellars 1997; Davidson 2001a; Rorty 1979; Brandom 1994, among many others). In *Mind and World*, McDowell holds that reasons are propositional in nature; however, in "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", he holds that even states with non-propositional content (intuitional content) can also be reasons (see also McDowell 2013b, p. 265). Although this is undoubtedly a difficult issue, I tend to favor the propositional conception of reasons because I do not clearly see how states with non-propositional content could support, or have the appropriate logical relations with, states with propositional content such as judgments and beliefs. In any case, for my purposes here I do not need to enter this discussion. My argument is that, even if experiences have non-propositional content and they can be reasons for holding beliefs, this can be so because perceptual experiences involve an attitude of acceptance of their content.

¹⁹ See also Burge (2003, p. 543).

²⁰ Silins and Siegel also use the term "phenomenal force." See Siegel and Silins (2015).

²¹ He thinks of Armstrong's conception of perceptual experience (see note 45, p. 81). See also Sellars (1978).

proposals to the extent that they all acknowledge an attitude of acceptance in perceptual experience, I cannot adhere to them, however, because they do not explain why perceptual experiences involves such an attitude, nor do they take into account some important features of experiences. My proposal is distinctive insofar as it posits that perceptual acceptance is constitutive not only of perceiving, but also of the very content of perceptual experience.

I think that there is a constitutive kind of acceptance in perceptual experience in this sense: in experience, when appearances are properly understood, one takes the world to be such as it appears. Let me explain this. Let us assume, as many philosophers and psychologists do, that in perceptual experience physical things are presented to us from a certain perspective.²² Nothing can be seen, for example, all at once. When we see a book, for example, we see it from a certain side; when we touch it, we touch this part and not that one, etc. Now, even though we always perceive objects from a certain perspective, we are able to perceptually identify not only mere appearances, but complete objects, states of affairs, and properties.²³ When a certain side of a book appears to us, for instance, we understand that the object we perceive is a book (or that there is a book over there). We are able to do so because we understand that the side in question is an aspect of a whole book. Similarly, when I touch a small part of my keys, it is often the case that I immediately understand (when I actually do) what object I am touching. I am able to do so because I understand that what I touch is a part of my keys. And when I hear the first notes in the piano, I recognize (when I do) what work the pianist is playing. I can do this as I understand that what I hear is a part of an entire piano work. Generally speaking, when we pay attention to the perceived appearances, we are able to identify and recognize the whole objects which appear to us.²⁴ It is not the case that appearances are intermediaries between us and the objects we perceive; rather, appearances are the objects themselves which we perceive from certain perspectives. The idea is that we perceive objects by perceiving some aspects of them. Appearances are relational properties that can be publicly perceived. Their constitution depends (among other things) on the objects' properties and the perspective from which we perceive them. Appropriately located, two different subjects equipped with similar capacities could perceive the same appearance of a certain object; for example, from the same position, two people could see a circular object as elliptical; or they can see the same part of a book. Similarly, located in the same room at the same time, two people would hear the beginning of the same symphony or the same part of a conversation.

According to this point of view, there is more in the content of experience than what is directly presented from certain perspective. Aspects that are not actually

²² See Husserl (1970, 1982), Sellars (1978), Searle (1983), Brewer (1999), Peacocke (2001), Noë (2004). I think that McDowell also acknowledges this point in (2009b, p. 271).

²³ Of course, though unusual, we can identify appearances as such. For a discussion about why we do not usually perceive only appearances, but complete objects, see Strawson (2002), Noë (2004), and Smith (2010).

²⁴ Taking into account this fact, Noë has stated that perceptual content has a double aspect: what he calls "factual content" (we see a book) and a "perspectival content" (the particular side of the book that appears given our location). See Noë (2004, ch. 3).

presented also constitute part of perceptual content. As Smith has recently defended, in experience there is what is presented and what is co-presented.²⁵ This is the so-called phenomenon of amodal perception.²⁶ Co-presented aspects constitute, in part, perceptual content because they are anticipated with the presented aspect. This anticipation is about how the object would appear in subsequent experiences if, for example, we moved our head to the left, changed our perspective, touched another part of the object or the object itself rotated. In this sense, perceptual anticipations can be discursively grasped by conditionals of the form: “If I move (or the object rotates) thus and so, I will see (touch, etc.) thus and so”.²⁷ The implicit understanding of those conditionals is part of perceptual content because if someone, in reference to a certain object, is not aware of any of them, then she cannot have any expectations about what she perceives, and thus she cannot give an appropriate sense to the perceived object. Briefly speaking, she cannot know what kind of object she perceives. Thus, when we perceive the appearance of a certain object, we put at work an indefinite number of expectations in virtue of which we are able to understand the presented appearance as the sign of (the presence of) such-and-such object.²⁸

Perhaps someone could have the temptation of denying that perceptual experience involves constitutively *perceptual* anticipations about co-presented aspects of things which are perceived. The objector could acknowledge that there are anticipations associated with the perception of solid objects, but deny that those anticipations are perceptual. That is, the objector could claim that perceptual content only includes what is presented (the aspect actually perceived), not what is co-presented. In such a case, presented aspects could be accompanied by beliefs about the rear aspects of perceived objects.²⁹

This objection has received well-known answers. For example, it has been responded that it distorts our phenomenology. In effect, in considering the phenomenological character of our perceptual experience, it does seem to us as if we perceive whole objects and as if the unperceived parts of the objects are perceptually present (Noë 2004, pp. 62–64, 85–86; Nanay 2010, p. 243). Another

²⁵ Smith (2010). The idea was originally stated by Husserl in terms of “internal horizons”.

²⁶ Nanay characterizes amodal perception in these terms: “We perceive a part of a (perceived) object amodally if we receive no sensory stimulation from that part of the object”, Nanay (2010), pp. 241–242. Although amodal perception is usually defined in terms of occlusion, Nanay characterization is more general. It includes, for example, the wall’s color in case of partial illumination, the details in a room, the window’s shape, etc. All these things are hidden from view. “They are present *as absent*”, as Noë puts it (Noë, 2012, p. 18).

²⁷ See Husserl (1970), Lewis (1929) and Smith (2010). Of course, I do not mean that, in order to perceive, one has to have an explicit knowledge of those conditionals; rather, the knowledge involved is usually implicit. Noë claims that this sort of implicit knowledge is practical in character. I find his thesis plausible even in those cases in which objects—not the subject—change their position. Surely, this requires some kind of ability to wait for a certain object to rotate in order to verify whether one’s perceptual expectations are correct, focus the attention on one particular region of the visual field, or have certain expectations about what one will perceive while an object moves.

²⁸ The suggestion that appearances are signs of their corresponding objects can be originally found in Price (1953). See also Millikan (2004).

²⁹ This seems to be Sellars’s position. See Sellars (1978).

typical answer to this objection is that it is unconvincing because even though belief is a common effect of experiences, the phenomenology itself is belief-independent (Smith 2010, pp. 736–737; Noë 2004, p. 60, 2006, p. 415). For example, even if I believe the object I am seeing is a mere façade of a solid object, it can still appear to me as a voluminous object with a rear aspect. If phenomenology can remain in the absence of belief that the object has rear aspects, then co-presentation cannot be explained in terms of beliefs.³⁰

Taking into account the phenomenological character of perceptual experience, other proposals try to explain amodal perception in non-doxastic terms. For instance, Noë (2004, 2012) holds that the occluded aspects or parts of material objects are perceptually present because they are perceptually “accessible” or “available” to us. Nevertheless, his proposal faces its own problems because, in exposing his view, Noë truly conflates two different claims that should be separated. The first one is this. Speaking about different cases of amodal perception, Noë claims, for example: “the cat, the tomato, the bottle, the detailed scene, all are present perceptually in the sense that they are perceptually accessible to us. They are present to perception as accessible” (Noë 2004, p. 63). In a few words, “perceptual presence is availability” (Noë 2012, p. 19). The second one is the following: “my sense of the presence of the whole cat behind the fence consists precisely in my knowledge, my implicit understanding, that by a movement of the eye or the head or the body, I can bring bits of the cat into view that are now hidden” (Noë 2004, pp. 63–64).

Now, I believe that we should carefully distinguish these two claims because it may be the case that we have the required practical knowledge to bring the occluded parts of an object into view, even when these parts, for some reasons, are not currently accessible to us. Even in such a case—it is sensible to think—one still could amodally perceive the occluded parts of a perceived object. In other words, it is plausible to think that, possessing such knowledge, one could perfectly have some expectations about how the perceived object would look from other perspectives even if the occluded parts of the object were not currently available to us. And vice versa, even when we see an unknown object, where we have no expectations about its backside, its hidden part may still be perceptually accessible to us (for instance, we could move in such-and-such way in order to perceive it). For these reasons, I think that it is the relevant kind of practical knowledge, not accessibility, what explains the phenomenon of amodal perception.³¹ Of course, there is a close connection between expectations (or anticipations) and the perceptual availability of the currently unperceived parts of an object. On the one hand, if these parts were not available to our perception at all, in any circumstances, it would be impossible for us to learn how the back of the object is. On the other hand, availability is, in part, a function of our expectations: if a perceived object seems to be perceptually

³⁰ For further objections to the so-called belief-account, see Nanay (2010).

³¹ It is true that Noë also claims that “The ground of this accessibility is our possession of sensorimotor skills” (Noë, 2004, p. 63). This claim suggests that, to a certain extent, he is aware of the distinction I am tracing. But, then, he should clarify what his thesis exactly is. I believe that Noë should claim: we can perceive the hidden parts of an object as available because we have some expectations or practical knowledge about how these parts would look like if we moved in such-and-such way.

available to us, it is because we have some expectations or knowledge about how the object would appear if we moved in such-and-such a way. To sum up, availability is closely related to our expectations or our practical knowledge about how moving our body would change what we see, but it does not determine amodal perception. Instead, it is such kind of practical knowledge what explains this phenomenon.

Recently, Nanay (2010) has presented some objections to Noë's enactive approach, which may be thought to go against my view as well. However, this is not exactly so. Nanay presents three objections to Noë's enactive approach. The first one points out that the enactive approach does not take into account background knowledge, a kind of knowledge that is crucial for most of the cases of amodal perception. In effect, on Nanay's view, amodal perception relies heavily on our background knowledge about how the occluded parts of an object may look like. If I have never seen a cat, I will have difficulties attributing properties to its hidden part behind a fence. This would not happen if I were familiar with cats. Therefore, the perceptual presence of the cat's hidden part will be very different if we know how its hidden part looks like and if we do not. But according to Noë, what matters is the accessibility to the occluded part of the cat, not my knowledge about how cat's occluded part looks like. Since my access to the cat's hidden part is the same whether or not I know how the occluded part of the cat looks like, it follows from this view that I would have the same kind of experience in both cases. Thus, it follows from Noë's point of view that background knowledge is irrelevant to amodal perception. However, this is not commonly the case (Nanay 2010, p. 247).

Nanay's second objection to "the access-account", as he calls it, is the following: let us suppose that the cat has just disappeared behind a door. Certainly, I have some kind of access to the cat's hidden part in the next room: I could go to the next room and have a look at it. Thus, it seems that, from the point of view of the access-account, we should say that the cat's hidden part is perceptually present to me. However, this is clearly wrong (Nanay 2010, pp. 247–248).

Finally, Nanay holds that it is unclear what the access-account would say in the case of amodal completion of the occluded parts of two dimensional figures, because there is no head or eye-movement—Nanay claims—that would give us perceptual access to the occluded parts. However, we still perceive them amodally. Thus, the access-account is wrong (Nanay 2010, pp. 248–249).

Now, as it should be noticed, Nanay does not distinguish between the two claims that I have distinguished in Noë's works (that according to which amodal perception is a matter of accessibility and the one according to which is a matter of practical knowledge or implicit understanding). He only concentrates on Noë's first claim. As a result, Nanay's objections leave Noë's second claim untouched, the part of his explanation about amodal perception that I believe is correct. Consequently, I could agree with Nanay's objections whereas I retain part of Noë's account because, as I have claimed, perceptual presence is, in my view, a matter of expectations or anticipations, not of accessibility.³²

³² Indeed, an answer to Nanay's third objection may be found in Noë (2004, pp. 67–73).

In his turn, Nanay (2010) argues that amodal perception is a matter of mental imagery. Nanay generally characterizes mental imagery as a quasi-sensory or quasi-perceptual conscious experience that exists for us in the absence of those stimulus conditions that typically produce its genuine sensory or perceptual counterpart. Moreover, Nanay distinguishes between mental imagery and visualization. The first one is passive and unintended; the second one is active and intended. Now, according to Nanay, when we represent the occluded parts of perceived objects, we use mental imagery in the first sense. We perceive objects as a whole because we represent their occluded parts by means of mental imagery.

Without denying that mental imagery may have some role in perception, I would like to express a reservation about this proposal. Since Nanay explicitly acknowledges that background knowledge is crucial in amodal perception, it is not clear to me why he insists on explaining this phenomenon in terms of mental imagery and not in terms of that kind of knowledge. Background knowledge is not only relevant in the sense that, once acquired, it allows us to imagine the unperceived parts of an object, but also and crucially, in my opinion, *while* we perceive the object. In effect, if we know how the backside of certain object looks like, we will typically have some expectations about it. These expectations may determine the way in which we perceive an object, as Noë sometimes claims. In seeing a tomato, for example, it is as if the tomato has a backside because we see it as if, by moving our body in such-and-such a way, or by the rotation of the tomato, we could see its backside. So, it is not clear why Nanay dismisses the possibility that it is this kind of background knowledge the one which actually operates while we perceive the objects from which some aspects or parts are presented to us.

Now, taking into account what I have said about perceptual experience, it can be claimed that perceiving, in the relevant cases considered here, is a way of identifying, recognizing, or knowing how things, properties, and states of affairs are in virtue of how they appear.³³ Certainly, knowing (identifying or recognizing) what object, property or state of affairs is present to us when we only perceive, strictly speaking, an appearance of it is an important cognitive achievement.³⁴ My

³³ As Noë nicely expresses: “perceiving is a way of finding out how things are from how they look or sound or, more generally, appear” (2004, p. 81). Of course, one can have a perceptual experience of something without being able to identify it and, thus, without knowing what kind of object is (Dretske 1969). Some authors have even reflected on whether there is perception without awareness (see, for instance, Dretske 2006). However, note that I am talking about perception in the epistemological context in which one needs to be able *to give* a perceptual experience as a reason for a belief. It is in this context that I claim that some sort of identification is required. Cases of perception in a non-epistemic sense, or without awareness (if they are possible) are not important here.

³⁴ I use here the terms “identification” and “recognition” to refer to a non-doxastic capacity. It is not the case that, in perceiving a certain object, for example, one merely forms the belief that the perceived object is such-and-such object or sort of object, as if perceiving such object merely caused the identificatory belief. Of course, as a consequence of perceiving an object, one can form such a belief. But, my idea is, rather, that in perceiving a certain appearance of an object, to the extent that one is aware of what object, or sort of object, one perceives, one perceptually identifies or recognizes the object one perceives. In this sense, it may be possible for someone to see an appearance as (the presence of) a certain object, even when that person does not believe it to be so. Depending on how one conceives perceptual content (as propositional or intuitional), this involves the use of propositions or not. For example, if we consider McDowell’s propositionalist version of perceptual content, it could be claimed that the perceptual

suggestion is that this cognitive achievement is due to the fact that, by perceiving the appearances of things, we are able to take those appearances as meaning objects (or the presence of them).³⁵ This involves a certain sort of acceptance: we accept that a certain appearance means (the presence of) a certain object or property. Thus, when we give the appropriate meaning to an appearance, we understand that a certain object or state of affairs is present to us. This sort of acceptance is reflected in the fact that, when we take an appearance as meaning the presence of certain object or state of affairs, we have some expectations about how the perceived item would look if we moved (or the item rotated) in such-and-such a way. This particular sort of acceptance is constitutive of perceptual content because without it we could not understand that we perceive objects (as something different from perceiving mere appearances), nor could we give the appropriate meaning to appearances. For instance, in order to perceive that there is a book over there, one has to be able to understand the meaning of certain appearances; that is, one has to be able to take the faces of the book as meaning the presence of a book. Similarly, in order to see, from certain perspective, that something is circular, one has to be able to understand that the way in which its shape appears (for example, as elliptical) means that it actually is circular. In the same vein, it can be said that, in hearing a certain sound, one is able to hear that a car is approaching when one understands that the heard sound means that a car is approaching. In this sense, I hold, one accepts that things are as they appear.

I have claimed that appearances mean (the presence of) objects, properties, or states of affairs. Let me explain now the notion of meaning involved here. As I use the term, appearances mean (the presence of) objects in the sense that Grice speaks of natural meaning.³⁶ In this sense, when x (a certain appearance) means p (the presence of an object, property or state of affairs), x entails p . Correlations between x and p must not be accidental. The connection or dependence between x and p must exist in nature.³⁷ Notwithstanding this, we should not think that mere non-accidental

Footnote 34 continued

identification of a book involves the proposition "This is a book". In contrast, if we consider McDowell's idea according to which perception has intuitional content, perceptual identification may involve a non-propositional content such as "This book". In this case, the perceptual presentation of a book as a book may count as a case of perceptual identification of a book. Although I tend to think that McDowell's first version is the correct one, I cannot argue here in favor of this particular point.

³⁵ According to Burge (2010), perceptual constancies are capacities to represent a particular or an attribute as the same from different perspectives, produced by different proximal stimulation. Those constancies simply occur in the perceptual system and "do not depend on knowledge or conceptual understanding", (Burge 2010, p. 14). I personally have some doubts about this thesis that, I am afraid, I cannot develop here. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that, even if one accepts Burge's account, it must be complemented in order to explain how a subject, not her perceptual system, is able to perceptually identify or recognize objects and properties such as books, pencils, trees, or cars. Without possessing the relevant concepts, a subject could not be able to perceptually identify those kinds of things. (On this point, see Siegel 2006).

³⁶ See Grice (1989).

³⁷ As Dretske claims, coincidental correlations are not sufficient for the purposes of transmitting information. According to him, the correlation must be assured by a law of nature or principle of logic (Dretske 1981, ch. 3). An alternative view can be found in Millikan (2004, ch. 3). I do not need to choose between them. For my purpose, it is enough to claim that relevant correlations must be non-accidental.

relations are, in themselves, meaningful.³⁸ In my view, rather, non-accidental relations become meaning-relations when we introduce a possible interpreter of these correlations. Until interpreters are introduced onto the scene, there are only correlations between certain events or conditions, on the one hand, and other events or conditions, on the other hand. Natural meaning-relations only arise when interpreters can read the proper correlations as meaning something.³⁹ So, for example, we can say that the face of a book can naturally mean (the presence of) a book to a subject when she is equipped with the proper conceptual capacities (If the subject lacks the proper conceptual resources, the face of the book cannot naturally mean the presence of a book to her. Faces of books naturally mean books only to those subjects who possess the relevant conceptual capacities).⁴⁰ In that case, the face of the book entails (the presence of) a book. Thus, a mere appearance of a book (a mere façade of it), though it can *seem* to naturally mean (the presence of) a book to a subject, is not a natural sign of (the presence of) a book. A subject can wrongly take it as a natural sign of a book, but a face of a book naturally means (the presence of) a book only when it is a face of a book. If there is no book, the face only seems to naturally mean (the presence of) a book. As philosophers usually claim, natural signs cannot be false.⁴¹ The error only arises when a subject wrongly takes an appearance as naturally meaning the presence of a certain object.⁴²

I would like to stress here the importance of conceptual capacities in perception. In spite of the fact that it could be said that natural meaning is a matter of non-accidental correlations in nature, *understanding* that appearances mean (the

³⁸ Dretske (1988, p. 55) claims that natural signs do not require the idea of a subject for whom an event, property or condition naturally means something. I disagree. Dretske's version of natural signs seems to be a version of naturalized Platonism, according to which there would be meanings in the world independently of all possible users. Just as I explain below, independently of all possible conceptual interpretation, states or conditions naturally mean nothing.

³⁹ As Millikan claims, "The notion of a sign makes intrinsic reference to a possible interpreter", Millikan (1984, p. 118).

⁴⁰ See the second example presented by Grice (1989, p. 213).

⁴¹ See Grice (1989, pp. 213–224), Millikan (1984, p. 31).

⁴² Chisholm (1957) famously distinguished between three different uses of appear words ("appear", "look", "seem", "sound", "feel", and the like): epistemic, comparative and non-comparative. For example, locutions such as "x appears to S to be so and so" may express, in some contexts, the epistemic use of "appear". Locutions of the form "x appears to S in the way in which things that are...appear under conditions which are..." typically express the comparative use of appear. Finally, in a statement of the form "x looks red", "looks" may be used in a non-comparative (or phenomenal) sense. Chisholm's distinction does not exactly fit my purposes. Notwithstanding this, to the extent that the way a thing appears to one can be a reason for believing that it is such-and-such a thing, I may say that this use of "appear" bears a resemblance to Chisholm's epistemic use of "appear". Something similar happens with Chisholm's comparative use of "appear". Instead of saying, as Chisholm would do, "that book appears in the way in which books might normally be expected to appear" (I am paraphrasing Chisholm (1957, p. 45)), I may claim: "the way that book appears to one can mean (that there is) a book over there because that is the way in which books normally appear from this perspective". In such a case, the way that book appears from a certain perspective would be compared with the way books normally appear to have from that perspective. This may explain, among other things, why the appearance of a book can mean (that there is) a book over there. This could be held even when the way the book appears to one is a mere appearance, that is, even when what appears to one is not actually a book (though it looks as if it were a book).

presence of) a certain object or property requires—I hold—the work of conceptual capacities in perception. In effect, in order to perceptually identify a book, say, it is not sufficient that the book merely affects our visual system (in case the identification is visual); rather, one must be able to see some aspects of the book *as* (the presence of) a book. This requires that one knows what a book is, how books typically look like from different perspectives, and how the ways in which a book looks like may vary in virtue of these perspectives. Since these perspectives depend on our movements with respect to the book and the movements of the book itself (for instance, in case it were on a gyratory platform), this kind of knowledge is also relevant in order to understand that, in seeing a certain aspect of a book, a book is over there. In other words, since perceptual content includes both, what is directly presented and what is co-presented, conceptual practical knowledge is crucial to perceptually represent the co-presented aspects of a book. In seeing a certain aspect of a book from certain perspective, it appears to us as if the object we currently see is a book because, and to the extent that, apart from the way the book affects our visual system, we have the relevant conceptual capacities, that is, the concept of a book and some expectations about how the hidden aspects of the book would look like in case we moved (or the book rotated) in such-and-such way.

As I have claimed, in the content of perceptual experience there are two different, though closely connected, dimensions: appearances—aspects that are directly presented—and the aspects of the objects, properties, or states of affairs which are co-presented with the appearances. Now, in those cases where a subject rightly takes an appearance as naturally meaning (the presence of) a certain object, property, or state of affairs, the perceived object, property, or state of affairs enters into the content of that experience by means of its appearance. In effect, as I have claimed, the natural meaning of appearances depends on the fact of being the appearances of the objects, properties or state of affairs which they are appearances of. Appearances are aspects of the very objects, properties, or states of affairs the subject (when she is right) takes them to mean. The co-present aspects of the object that also constitute the perceptual content in the form of expectations represent other aspects that the object actually has, if the appearance actually means (the presence of) that object. In contrast, in those cases in which a subject wrongly takes an appearance as naturally meaning (the presence of) a certain object the appearance is a mere appearance. Even though it could *look like* the appearance of a certain object, the expectations that constitute part of the perceptual content of that experience do not actually represent other aspects of the object in question. Hence, whatever the case is—veridical or non-veridical experience—the content of the experience depends, in part, on our taking perceptual appearances as meaning (the presence of) such and such object or state of affairs.

As a consequence, we should distinguish two different kinds of acceptance: the constitutive acceptance of perceptual content in perception, and the one that takes place when one believes a proposition. The first one is constitutive of the content of the experience because it is the acceptance that certain appearance naturally means (the presence of) such and such object or state of affairs. The second one, in contrast, is constitutive of what a belief is, but not of its content. The contents of beliefs are propositions, and propositions do not need to be believed in order to be

what they are. When someone believes that p , p is a content which does not need to be believed to be the one it is. In contrast, when we perceive an object from a certain perspective, the object appears to us in a determinate way. By taking that appearance as naturally meaning (the presence of) a certain object or state of affairs, we accept, in the very perception, that the object whose appearance we perceive is present to us.⁴³

Here I would like to insist on a crucial point: this sort of acceptance, which is—I hold—characteristic of perceiving, should not be confused with the kind of acceptance involved in believing a proposition, for the following reasons. Firstly, there is a point to make about perceptual phenomenology: it may appear to me as though the object I currently see is a book; indeed I may have some expectations about the backside of the object, expectations concerning how books typically look like from other perspectives, even in case I do not believe so. (I may believe, for example, that what I see is a mere façade). Nevertheless, even in this case I may perceptually take the appearances as meaning (the presence of) a book. Secondly, as it has been claimed above, perceptual acceptance is constitutive of the content of experience, while the acceptance involved in belief is not constitutive of the content of belief. In effect, in order to perceive a book as a book in front of one, one must be able to take the appearances of the book as meaning (the presence of) a book in front of one. If one did not accept that such appearances mean (the presence of) a book, one would not be able to perceive a book in front of one. In contrast, the attitude of believing that there is a book in front of one does not typically constitute such propositional content. In abandoning such a belief, the propositional content that there is a book in front of one could still be the content of any other propositional attitude. So, if my thesis is correct, there cannot be perceptual content without the acceptance of appearances as meaning such-and-such a thing. To hold that perceptual acceptance is no more than believing in a proposition would be equivalent to directly denying that perceptual experience has any content at all. It would be reducing—as Davidson and his followers do—the role of experience to being the mere cause of perceptual beliefs. Although I cannot discuss this point here, I would like to indicate that, in my opinion, McDowell offers strong reasons to reject that point of view.⁴⁴

Let us see now how my proposal applies to McDowell's two versions of perceptual content. Let us assume that perceptual experience has propositional

⁴³ It is usually accepted that one can entertain different contents (p , q , etc.) with the same attitude (say, belief), or entertain the same content with different attitudes (belief, doubt, desire, etc.). According to my view, if one sees that p , one could also believe, of course, that p , or doubt that p , etc. Notwithstanding this, in considering the particular nature of perceptual content, I also hold that there is a kind of acceptance that is constitutive of the content of perception. In the particular case of perception, then, the attitude is essential for the constitution of its content: I cannot perceive a book as a book if I do not take the way it appears to me as the presence of a book. To hold this thesis is not incompatible, I believe, with acknowledging the traditionally distinction between content and attitude. In effect, once I take myself to perceive a book, I may believe, doubt, etc. that there is a book in front of me. The constitutive acceptance that is distinctive of perception is due to the fact that, in perceiving, things appear to us from a certain perspective. This does not happen in the case of the other attitudes.

⁴⁴ See McDowell (1994), "Lecture I and II", and "Afterword, Part I". I argue against Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom's thesis in Kalpokas (2012, 2014, 2015).

content, as McDowell originally argued. In such a case one could say that the fact that certain appearance looks like, say, the face of a book means *that* this is a book. In virtue of her experience, thus, whose content is that this is a book, one could come to believe, if there are no considerations against it, that this is a book. In contrast, if we assume that the content of experience is not propositional, as McDowell claims now, we could say: this appearance (this face of the book) means this book. Accordingly, one could justifiably make the judgment, for example, "This is a book." In both cases, since perceiving involves the acknowledgment of the presence of objects, properties, or states of affairs, perceptual experiences can be reasons for holding the relevant empirical beliefs and judgments. In both cases, then, it is the experience of a whole object what allows us to justify our judgment or belief. The crucial point here is that, whatever the nature of perceptual content may be (propositional or intuitional), perceptual experiences could be epistemic reasons because, contrary to what McDowell holds, they involve an especial attitude of acceptance of their content: that of taking what appears as the presence of an object, property, or state of affairs.

In claiming that appearances mean (the presence of) objects, properties and states of affairs, I also leave room to accommodate the possibility that, in certain specific circumstances, appearances themselves can work as perceptual reasons. In effect, although it is true that, when we ordinarily take appearances as meaning (the presence of) such-and-such object or property we do not commonly make any explicit consideration about the former, this may be the case when we are asked by someone else, or we doubt whether the object or property that is currently in front of us is really the object or property that we think we perceive. For example, let us suppose that someone asks me "why do you hold that the object you currently see is a book?" pointing to a certain object over the table. A natural answer may be "Because it looks that way". In such a case, the way the book in question looks is offered as my reason to claim that the object I currently see is a book. Similarly, if, in certain circumstances, I doubt whether what at first sight appears as a book is actually a book, I could reasonably explore the object, look at it from different perspectives, etc. Predictably, if I know how books typically look, this kind of exploration could allow me to recognize the object I see as a book (in case it actually is one). Here, again, the immediacy with which we usually take appearances as meaning such-and-such a thing is replaced by an explicit consideration of them in order to discover the true meaning of the appearances in question. In these cases, once the meaning of the appearances is clearly established, the meaning-relation between the appearances of an object and the object of which they are appearances could be the reason to believe or judge that the object one perceives is such-and-such object.

At this point it may be important to highlight that appearances can only fulfill this role of being epistemic reasons because they can be taken as the appearances of the objects (properties, etc.) of which they are appearances. In other words, their meaning depends on their reference to the objects (properties, etc.) they are appearances of. The appearance of a book, say, can only indicate (the presence of) a book in virtue of its being, precisely, the appearance of a book. When this meaning relation loses its character of immediacy, it can take some effort to relate the

appearances to the objects (properties, etc.) of which they are appearances. In such cases—I hold—a consideration of appearances themselves can be of help in order to identify or recognize the objects (properties, etc.) in question. So perceptual reasons can certainly take the form of either “because I see this or that object, property or state of affairs”, or the form “because it looks/appears that way”. In the first case, in perceiving a certain appearance we unreflectively understand that the appearance means (the presence of) such-and-such a thing; in the second one, in contrast, we are involved in an explicit consideration of the presented appearance.

Let us consider now the sort of cases that motivates McDowell’s idea according to which perceiving does not involve any attitude of acceptance of the content of experience. One can see that p without accepting p —in the sense of believing that p —even when one actually sees that p because, for example, one wrongly thinks that perceptual conditions are abnormal (McDowell 2002, p. 277; 2009b, p. 158). This does not show, in my opinion, that there is not any kind of acceptance in perception. In such cases, things do appear to one as being such-and-such way. According to my point of view, when one perceives certain appearances, one forms certain expectations about the perceived object, no matter whether one has some doxastic considerations against them or not. Those expectations are constitutive of the content of our experience. In the cases considered by McDowell, one is actually confronted with two contradictory demands, one that is delivered by her perceptual system, which says that p is the case, and another that is delivered by her doxastic system, which claims that p is not the case. It is as if one were to decide between two contradictory, though *prima facie* trustworthy, testimonies. Who should one believe in? It is not important here to research how to decide, in general, between those two possibilities. The important thing is that this sort of cases presents to us two contrasting demands. That is the reason why the conflict can be so vivid.⁴⁵

Now, at this point someone may doubt that my proposal is congenial to McDowell’s minimal empiricism. For example, my appeal to the notion of natural meaning might be questioned by holding that this notion belongs to the sort of naturalistic program that McDowell opposes in *Mind and World*. The objector may point that, since natural meaning seems to make no room for falsity, natural meaning relations cannot belong to the normative order into which McDowell situates mental states such as judgments, beliefs and perceptual experiences.

However, this is not so. According to my view, the notion of natural meaning is dependent on a subject for whom something (an appearance) means something else (an object, property or the presence of them). It is true that when a certain appearance naturally means (the presence of) an object or property, and a subject takes that appearance as meaning (the presence of) that object or property, error is not possible. But this is so because natural meaning is factive. Error arises when a

⁴⁵ Of course, one can finally decide, wrongly, to believe that not p even in case, as in McDowell’s example, one actually sees that p . In such a case, one would end up dismissing one’s experience as a reason to believe that p . But one may reasonably think that in such situation the force of the experience will not be completely extinguished. Confronted with a supposedly trustworthy testimony that contradicts one’s experience, a natural response may normally be “Really? It actually seems to be as though p is the case”. Dismissing “the demanding voice of the experience” is not equivalent to claiming that experience has no voice at all.

subject wrongly takes an appearance as meaning (the presence of) a certain object or property. Natural meaning relations belong to the normative context where McDowell locates perceptual experiences because, in perceiving certain appearances, a subject could rightly or wrongly take these appearances as meaning (the presence of) such-and-such object or property. The appeal to natural meaning relations is not incompatible with acknowledging the normative nature of perception.

Moreover, I believe that my proposal is perfectly compatible with McDowell's disjunctivism. For instance, let us consider McDowell's following characterization of disjunctivism:

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. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experience. (McDowell 1998, pp. 386–387).

According to McDowell, in the non-deceptive cases we have “an indefeasible warrant for believing that things are as the experience is revealing them to be” (McDowell 2010, p. 245).⁴⁶ If the appearance is a case of the fact itself being disclosed to the experience, falsity or error is not possible. Of course, a subject could wrongly dismiss such appearance; but this does not prevent McDowell from claiming that perceiving is factive.

My proposal could be easily framed in McDowell's disjunctivism. As I have already claimed, when one takes an appearance as meaning (the presence of) such-and-such object or property, and the appearance actually means (the presence of) such-and-such object or property, error is not possible. One actually perceives that such-and-such object or property is present. In this case, I would claim—as McDowell does—that experience provides an indefeasible warrant for believing that things are as the experience reveals them to be. Of course, one could wrongly dismiss such an experience, but this does not prevent us from claiming that natural meaning is factive. In contrast, when one wrongly takes a certain appearance as naturally meaning (the presence of) such-and-such object or property, what one experiences is what McDowell calls “a mere appearance”. This is not a case in which a fact (or an object) is itself made perceptually manifest to one.

Another reasonable doubt may be that of whether my speaking of natural meaning commits me to non-conceptualism in perception, because if this were so, my proposal would certainly be incompatible with McDowell's conceptualism, a fundamental aspect of his minimal empiricism. But, as can be appreciated from what I have claimed in this section, my use of the notion of natural meaning presupposes conceptualism. The face of a book, for example, when is seen by a subject from a certain perspective, can naturally mean (the presence of) a book over

⁴⁶ See also McDowell (2011), pp. 30 and ff.

there only if the subject in question possesses the relevant conceptual capacities; that is, in this case, the concept of book. For a person who lacks the concept of book and, consequently, does not know how books typically look like, the face of a book cannot naturally mean (the presence of) a book. Thus, according to my use of the notion of natural meaning, the reference to the possession of conceptual capacities is crucial because without them, appearances could not mean what they ordinarily mean for us. The experience of a book as a book depends on the capacity to take a face of a book as (the presence of) a book, and this capacity depends, in turn, on the possession of the relevant conceptual capacities.⁴⁷

To sum up, my proposal combines McDowell's conceptualism and disjunctivism with the idea that perceptual appearances mean such-and-such a thing, in order to strengthen his minimal empiricism. This combination makes justice to the objection originally made by Davidson, Stroud, and Glüer against McDowell's empiricism but, at the same time, allows us to retain his thesis according to which experience is a tribunal.

4 Conclusion

The "emendation" of McDowell's conception of experience that I have recommended states that experiences not only make certain contents available to be judged, but they also provide accepted perceptual contents for believing that the world is thus and so. To accept perceptual content in perception is not to acquire (reflectively or unreflectively) a belief, as McDowell seems to think. In perception we take things to be such as they appear (in the specific sense in which I have explained above). If this is correct, the objection to McDowell's main thesis is answered because there is not any impediment to think yet (at least within the limits of the objection considered in this paper) that they can constitute epistemic reasons for holding beliefs. How we perceive the world can be a reason to believe that things are as perception presents them to us, because perceiving constitutively involves accepting that things are as they appear to us.

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⁴⁷ Of course, in claiming this I am not denying that a subject who lacks the concept of book could see a book as a mere volumetric entity or material object. But the important thing is that such a subject, in perceiving the face of a book, could not understand that the perceived object is a book. Now, does perceiving a book as a mere volumetric entity require possessing conceptual capacities? If conceptualism is true, even in such a case, some conceptual capacities need to be in play in experience. For McDowell's conceptualism, see McDowell (1994), "Lecture III", "Conceptual Capacities in Perception" and "Avoiding the Myth of the Given", both in McDowell (2009b).

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