

TWO DOGMAS OF COHERENTISM*

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Summary

This paper discusses two dogmas attributed to Davidson's coherentism. The first dogma says that perceptual experience is only a causal link between the world and beliefs. The second one says that only beliefs can justify other beliefs. Against these two statements it is argued that the conception of perceptual experience as a mere causal link between the world and our beliefs makes the world unknowable. Moreover, the article presents some additional reasons against that conception: it misses the phenomenological and perspectival character of perception, and its independence from belief. Finally, Davidsonian externalism is considered. It is shown here that Davidson's conception of experience makes it impossible to individuate the contents of beliefs. The article concludes rehabilitating the empiricist idea according to which perceptual experience can be used to justify beliefs.

1. *Introduction*

Any theory which attempts to explain how we can get to know our environment has to take into account the role that perceptual experience plays in empirical knowledge. Traditional empiricism claims that perceptual experience is essential to explain the *source* as well as the *justification* of empirical knowledge. As a theory about the source of empirical knowledge, empiricism affirms that all our knowledge comes from experience. As a theory of justification, instead, it claims that all knowledge about the world is justified, lastly, by experience. The first strand of empiricism is practically uncontroversial nowadays. It seems obvious that without perceptual experience we could not know the empirical world. However, the second strand

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of empiricism—as a theory of justification- has been severely criticized and rejected by distinguished philosophers in the second half of 20th century. For instance, Rorty has considered the linguistic turn as an opportunity to abandon the notion of experience as an epistemic tribunal between mind and world (Rorty 1998, 150), and, consequently he has developed an explicitly anti-empiricist variety of pragmatism (Rorty 1999). Davidson has also tried to definitively defeat empiricism (in its epistemic strand) by criticizing what he calls “the third and last dogma of empiricism”—the schema-content dualism (Davidson 1984a, 189). Finally, following Rorty and Davidson’s anti-empiricist “impetus”, Brandom proudly claims that the term “experience” has no place in the inferentialist semantics that he articulates in *Making It Explicit* (Brandom 2000, 205).¹

The two aforementioned aspects attributed to experience –as a source and justification of empirical knowledge- remained indissolubly united in classic empiricism. For the recently mentioned philosophers, however, those two aspects can and must be separated, for they understand that the idea that experience justifies our beliefs is a dogma of empiricism. For them, the term “experience” has only a causal meaning: experiences are causal intermediaries between beliefs and the world, not reasons for holding beliefs.² As a result of the affection of our sense organs, we have a belief; but experience in itself is not an episode with cognitive content. Experience causes beliefs, but it does not justify them; it put us in direct contact with the world, not in a cognitive way but in a causal one. It is argued that experience cannot justify a belief because it lacks propositional content. In Davidson’s words:

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the bases or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified. (Davidson 2001a, 143)³

In this paper I will focus my attention on Davidson’s work, and I will consider the thesis expressed in the quoted passage, in which the

1. Cf. also Brandom 1994, 1998 and 2002. In the case of Rorty, Davidson and Brandom, their anti-empiricism attitude comes from Sellars. See Sellars 1997 and 1975. BonJour, in other times a champion of coherentism, has recently abandoned it. See BonJour & Sosa 2003.

2. Cf. Rorty 1998, 140f.

3. Cf. also Davidson 2005.

epistemic character of experience is denied⁴, as the first dogma of Davidson's coherentism. This dogma is closely associated with a second dogma, according to which "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson 2001a, 141). Both dogmas constitute the heart of Davidson's coherentism. In what follows, in order to provide new reasons in favor of certain attempts to defend the epistemic character of experience,⁵ I will try to make the serious problems that those dogmas generate evident. Since Rorty's and Brandom's conception of perceptual experience is very similar to Davidson's, I think that many of the objections that I will present against the latter can be directed against the former as well.

2. *Coherentism, truth and experience*

In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" Davidson defends a coherentist point of view about knowledge based on certain epistemological and semantic remarks. His purpose is to show that "coherence yields correspondence" (Davidson 2001a, 137).⁶ If coherence is a proof of truth—Davidson argues—then we have a reason to think that many of our beliefs are true, for we certainly have a reason to believe that many of those beliefs are coherent among them. What brings truth and knowledge together is meaning. If meanings can be given by means of truth conditions, then the knowledge that sentences satisfy those conditions gives us knowledge about their meanings too. However, the knowledge that those conditions have been satisfied cannot be obtained—Davidson says—by confrontation: "No such confrontation makes sense, for of course we can't get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware" (Davidson 2001a, 144). Instead of confrontation, Davidson appeals to coherence: if coherence is actually a proof of truth, then it is proof of the judgment that truth conditions have been satisfied as well. Davidson's slogan that synthesizes this point of view is "correspon-

4. It is useful and usual to distinguish the terms "perceptual experience", "perception" and "sensation". However, since Davidson does not make an explicit distinction between those terms, in this paper I will use them interchangeably. Mainly, I will use "perceptual experience" and "perception" as equivalent. The usual differences between those terms are not relevant in the following discussion.

5. I think of McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999).

6. In "Afterthoughts" Davidson withdrew some statements from his original "A Coherence ...". His later point of view does not affect what I will say in this paper.

dence without confrontation” (Davidson 2001a, 137). Now, even though they are in a coherent system, certainly some of our beliefs are (and can be) false. Thus, mere coherence cannot prove that *each* belief is true. All that coherentism lets us hold is that, in a coherent set of beliefs, *most* of our beliefs are true (Davidson 2001a, 138f.).

Here, it is important to remember that Davidson’s coherentism pretends to be an alternative conception to foundationalism. As it is widely known, foundationalism—in its empiricist version—aims to justify the building of knowledge by appealing to entities such as sensations, perceptions, experiences or sense data.⁷ Davidson thinks, however, that the idea that those items can justify beliefs is wrong because how items which do not have propositional content can enter into logical relations with items which do have propositional content cannot be explained. As a consequence, Davidson says that knowledge and meaning depend only *causally* on experience (Davidson 2001a, 146), and that only beliefs can justify other beliefs (Davidson 2001a, 141). Here we have the two dogmas that I have attributed to Davidson’s coherentism.

Now, Davidsonian coherentism aims to be an epistemological outlook which—in contrast with empiricism—does not make skepticism about the external world “inevitable” (Davidson 2001b, 286).⁸ If—as it is usually said—epistemological intermediaries between us and the world are responsible for skepticism, we should get rid of them and only preserve causal intermediaries (Davidson 2001a, 144). Thus, according to Davidson, when we causally interact with the environment, it causes beliefs in us. Beliefs—perceptual and non—are justified, not by perceptual experience, but by other beliefs also caused by the world (Davidson 1999, 105f.).

Even though Davidson thinks that there is no way to “get outside our beliefs and our language so to find some test other than coherence” (Davidson 2001a, 141),⁹ he affirms—in contrast with Rorty—that we need to explain how we can know and talk about an objective world which we have not produced. That is why Davidson is interested in showing that coherence yields correspondence. However, in this very aim, which is to explain how we can know the objective world, the problems of Davidsonian coherentism arise evidently. Indeed, if it is true that—having gotten rid of epistemological intermediaries—the relation between the world

7. In the paper I am commenting on, Davidson does not make any distinction among those different items.

8. Cf. also Davidson 1999, 105.

9. Here Davidson quotes approvingly Rorty (1979, 178).

and us is exclusively causal; if it is true that sensations, perceptions or experiences can only cause beliefs, but not justify them; and finally, if it is true that “we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware”, then, how can we *know* that objects and events which cause our sensations are the ones we think they are?¹⁰

Experience—according to Davidson—does not put us in cognitive contact with the world either in a direct or in an indirect way. It is only a causal intermediary. Davidson says, for instance:

We look, hear, smell, and touch, and we are caused to believe there is an elephant before us (...) To have an experience in the cases in which we are interested is just to be caused by our sense organs to have an empirical belief. (Davidson 2001b, 289f.)

It is this causal, non-cognitive conception of experience which generates what I will call “the problem of cognitive accessibility”. To know that there is an elephant before us we have to perceive it. However, if looking, hearing, smelling and touching were not ways of knowing the environment (but only causes of perceptual beliefs), we would never be able to know what caused our belief that there is an elephant in front of us¹¹. In other words, if those modalities of perceiving were only causal intermediaries between beliefs and reality, as Davidson suggests, we would not have any cognitive access to the entities that affect our sensibility¹².

10. This is not the same problem considered by Brewer and Campbell, that is, the problem of how to identify an object in the world Cf. Brewer 1999 and Campbell 2002. Rather, my objection points out the fact that, according to Davidson’s conception of experience, we are blind about how the world is. In Davidson’s view, perceptual experience does not open us to the world, but it only affects our senses. In doing so, Davidson makes something similar of the world to the Kantian *Ding an sich*: the incognizable source of our sensory affections.

11. In fact, there is the temptation to say that, if perceptual experiences of an elephant are not more than perceptual beliefs, caused by our sense organs, about how it smells, how it is heard and how it looks, then, strictly speaking we do not perceive the elephant at all. We have only perceptual beliefs about it.

12. It has been objected to me that Davidson could argue that, in a situation in which by looking at an elephant I acquire the belief that there is an elephant in front of me, I may also acquire the belief of second order that I acquired my belief of first order by looking (i.e. by visual experience and not by hearing). This objection does not solve—I think—the problem of cognitive accessibility. If we could not know what the causes of our first order beliefs are—as I argue—why to suppose that the belief of second order can do the job? How could my belief of second order tell me that my belief of first order was caused by an elephant if perceptual experience cannot reveal to me the cause of my original belief? At best, I could know that my belief of first order was caused by visual experience (and not, for instance, by hearing), but nothing at all

In “Empirical Content”, in the context of radical interpretation, Davidson suggests an answer to the objection according to which coherentism makes the world unknowable:

Our basic methodology for interpreting the words of others necessarily makes it the case that most of the time the simplest sentences that speakers hold true *are* true. It is not the *speaker* who must perform the impossible feat of comparing his beliefs with reality; it is the *interpreter* who must take into account the causal interaction between world and the speaker in order to find out what the speaker means, and hence what that speaker believes. Each speaker can do no better than make his system of beliefs coherent, adjusting the system as rationally as he can as new beliefs are thrust on him. But there is no need to fear that these beliefs might be just a fairly tale. For the sentences that express the beliefs, and the beliefs themselves, are correctly understood to be about the public things and events that cause them, and so must be mainly veridical. (Davidson 2001c, 174)

However, this answer does not solve the problem of cognitive accessibility. Here again, if it is true that we cannot make any confrontation between what we believe and the world (for “we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware”), if perceiving is not more than being “caused by our sense organs to have an empirical belief”, why would the interpreter have a sort of access to the world that the speaker could not have? What else than “make his system of beliefs coherent, adjusting the system as rationally as he can as new beliefs are thrust on him” can the interpreter do? If, in general, perception does not provide us with a cognitive access to the world, then it seems obvious that this applies to the interpreter in the situation of radical interpretation as well: the best the interpreter can do is to compare her *beliefs* about the linguistic behavior of the speaker—caused by the speaker—with her own *beliefs* about the world—supposedly caused by it. As it is manifested, the world in itself here is not a term of comparison which beliefs are contrasted with.¹³

is said about the specific object which caused my belief. The problem of cognitive accessibility derives from the lack—in Davidson’s philosophy—of recognition of the intentional character of experience. On that feature of experience, Cf. Anscombe 1965 and Searle 1983.

13. At this point it could be argued that the nature of radical interpretation by itself warrants that beliefs are about their typical causes, and then, that the direct perception of those causes is not necessary. As it is known, Davidson thinks that the principle of charity recommends attributing to the speaker a large number of true beliefs, consistent among them and with the interpreter’s beliefs. However, it has been objected that the fact that the interpreter should attribute to the

Thus, there is indeed an undesirable consequence of Davidson's coherentism which follows from the two dogmas that I have attributed to it: the cognitive inaccessibility of the external world. Then, if the remarks exposed above are correct, the direct but exclusively causal link posited between reality and us does not prevent the skeptic question; on the contrary, it turns that question into a more demanding one, for the question about which the cause of our beliefs is arises inevitably from the inside of Davidsonian coherentism without any possibility of answering it suitably. The combination of the first dogma that I have attributed to Davidson's coherentism (the relation between experience and belief is causal, not logical), with the second dogma ("nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief") is what makes—paradoxically according to Davidson's aims—skepticism about the external world inevitable.

Another way to express this point is the following: Davidson thinks that justificatory relations can only have their place inside a body of beliefs. This means that there are not (nor can there be) justificatory relations between beliefs and the world. Notwithstanding, and although he thinks that we cannot get outside of language and of our beliefs, Davidson wants to explain how we can know and speak about a world "which is not our own making" (Davidson 2001a, 141). However, it is worth noting here that there is a striking and unexpected similarity between representationalism and coherentism. While representationalism posits epistemic intermediaries between us and the world, coherentism eliminates those intermediaries in order to posit only a causal link with reality; but in both cases a dichotomy is supposed between what is inner and outer to the network of beliefs (or representations). That dichotomy is what makes the problem of cognitive accessibility arise. The skeptic question arises again naturally: if our contact with the world is only *causal*; if justification cannot take place but *into* a body of beliefs, how can we know that those beliefs describe the world "which is not our own making"? From a historical point of view, this coherentist view about justification can be understood as a radical-

speaker a large amount of beliefs which the interpreter *holds* to be true does not imply that those beliefs *are* true. It should be demonstrated that the interpreter's beliefs are true. In order to fill in that gap, Davidson introduced the argument of the omniscient interpreter. The argument, however, has been objected by many interpreters and Davidson himself has abandoned it. That is why Davidson tries to solve the problems generated by his coherentism by means of his externalism. Davidson introduces the omniscient interpreter argument in Davidson, 1984b, 201. Cf. also Davidson 2001a, 150f. For objections to the omniscient interpreter argument, see for instance Génova 1999, Haack, 1993, chap. 2; Stroud 1999, 148; Ludwig 1992. Davidson abandons the argument in Davidson 1999b, 192.

ization of the Modern epistemological model which Davidson aims to leave behind.

Whether this objection is correct or not, there are some additional reasons for rejecting the Davidsonian conception of experience. We should remember that, in Davidson's view, since experiences, sensations or perceptions lack propositional content, they cannot have logical relations with beliefs and, for that reason, they cannot be used for justifying them. Notwithstanding, as we have seen, experience causes beliefs. Consider what Davidson says in response to an objection formulated by McDowell:

For him [McDowell], first there are the appearances and then we decide whether things are as they appear; for me, there is no distinction between things appearing to me a certain way and my taking them to be that way [...] Where he has appearances I have perceptual beliefs. (Davidson 2001b, 289)

Reasonably, McDowell distinguishes between appearances and beliefs (McDowell 1994). The first are the immediate results of our interaction with the environment and they are the first cognitive occurrence which discloses how the world is. Since, for McDowell, the experience—the appearance—is conceptualized from the beginning, it can be adduced as a reason for justifying a belief. Davidson, in contrast, rejects the appearances—epistemic intermediaries inserted between nature and belief—and then he states that the first epistemic result of our causal interaction with the world is perceptual belief.

Now, in contrast to what Davidson holds, and in agreement with McDowell on this point, I think that the epistemic distinction between belief and perceptual experience is crucial, not only because the idea of experience as a cognitive way to access to the world seems recommendable when facing skepticism, but also because there are some reasons for thinking that both belief and experience constitute different states with their own contents.

First, it is worth noting that, when we ordinarily talk about “seeing”, “touching”, “hearing”, etc., we imply that those acts are about objects with respect to which senses provide us some kind of information. That is, when we talk about those acts, we not only understand that perceptual experience causes beliefs, but also that in experience the world is *presented*

as being thus and so.¹⁴ What the ordinary use of verbs of perception suggests is that the world *appears* in front of us, in different conditions and according to some perceptual modality, as being thus and so. We usually say that we touch—for instance—an apple, that we feel its texture, its weight, etc., and not merely that we have certain beliefs about the apple caused by our touching it. Likewise, we normally say that we see an apple, with its particular color, form, shade and brightness, and not merely that we are caused, by looking, to have certain beliefs about the apple. I do not think that this argument is conclusive, but I think that it certainly has certain weight. Since our ordinary linguistic practices do not speak in favor of Davidson's conception of perceptual experience, I believe that it would be necessary to explain—from Davidson's point of view—how and why the use of perception verbs is misleading.

Secondly, in accordance with the grammatical remark made above, there is an essential aspect of perceptual experience usually stressed by philosophers of perception: its phenomenological character. In perception—it is usually said—the world appears to us as being thus and so. Davidson's conception of experience misses the phenomenological character of perceptual experience. This has a very important consequence. The fact that the world reveals itself in perception under some modality and in determined conditions explains the fact that we can be conscious *of* the world. There is a crucial difference between being conscious of an accepted proposition which refers to an object or event in the world, and being conscious (by perception) of that object or event in the world. The Davidsonian conception of perceptual experience not only forgets the phenomenological character of experience, but it also seems to imply—consequently—that we can at most be conscious of beliefs that refer to the world, but not of the world itself.¹⁵

Let me clarify this point. Let's assume—for the sake of the argument—an intuitive conception of experience according to which, in perception, the world is presented directly to us as being thus and so. Taking McDowell's expression, we can call it the conception of experience as openness to the world.¹⁶

14. In ordinary speaking, when we say, for instance, that we see an apple, we do not say merely that the apple *causes* the belief that there is an apple there, but also that we *perceive* the apple in itself from a certain point of view.

15. Rorty, who has a very similar conception of perceptual experience, gets to say that “there is nothing to be known about an object except what sentences are true of it”. Rorty 1999, 55.

16. Cf. McDowell 1994 and 1998. On the adverb “directly” used in this context, cf. Snowdon 1992.

It is not that we perceive the world through certain representations (sense data, Humean ideas, sensations, etc.) which refer to the world. That idea has been rightly criticized by Davidson and others. Instead, according to the conception of experience as openness, when we perceive, for instance, a tomato, we perceive the tomato with its properties (color, form, etc.) from certain point of view. The idea that the perceived object—the tomato—constitutes, in part, the content of the experience is sometimes associated to the conception of perceptual experience as openness.¹⁷ Now, according to this conception, when we perceive an object, we are conscious of the object by means of being conscious of its appearances, by means of how it looks from our point of view. In this conception of experience, to perceive something is not to have a perceptual belief. Empirical beliefs are representations of the world (even perceptual beliefs);¹⁸ to perceive—from the conception of experience as openness—is not to represent the world; rather, it is to be *presented* to the world as being thus and so. There are not epistemic intermediaries between mind and world—in the case we are considering, perceptual beliefs—by means of which we are conscious of the world. As I said, it is because of the world manifests itself in perception, that we can be conscious directly of it.

Consider now a third argument against Davidsonian conception of perceptual experience. Davidson says that to have an experience is “to be caused by our sense organs to have an empirical belief” (Davidson 2001b, 289f.); however, it can be argued that belief is different from perceptual experience because doxastic content does not pick up every aspect contained in the content of experience.¹⁹ When we pay attention to what we see, it is clear that things are always presented to our sensibility from a certain perspective. We not only perceive how things *are*, but also how things *look* from the position in which we are. We perceive that a plate is round, for instance, and that it looks elliptical from here. Those apparent properties which constitute the base of our perceptual comprehension of the world are not mere subjective sensations, but objective properties—

17. This thesis has been stressed by disjunctivists. Cf. Snowdon 2009; McDowell 1998a and 1998b; Martin 2009.

18. I am not attributing to Davidson the notion of representation criticized by him. My use of the term “representation” here is harmless; by that term I just mean something which is in the place of other thing (an object or event) for somebody. On a harmless notion of representation in Davidson’s work, cf. Neale, “On Representing”, with Davidson’s “Reply to Stephen Neale”, Hahn (ed.) 1999.

19. I pick up here an argument presented by Noë against the causal theory of perception in order to use it against Davidson’s view of experience. Cf. Noë 2004, 169 and ss.

though relational—of things, which depend not only on how things are, but also on the position into the space from which we perceive them.²⁰ As Noë has stressed (Noë 2004), the perceptual content has a dual aspect: on the one hand, in perception the world is presented as it is, independently of any perspective (the “factual dimension” of the perceptual content); on the other hand, however, we always perceive things from a certain particular perspective (what Noë calls the “perspectival dimension” of the perceptual content). It is this last perspectival dimension of the perceptual content which cannot be accommodated in Davidson’s framework for experience-belief relationships.²¹

Fourthly, some cases have been adduced in favor of the independence of perceptual experience with respect to belief, which can be interpreted as drawing a distinction between the content of experiences and the content of beliefs. As we have seen, Davidson considers that an experience can never justify a belief. For the same reason, it cannot contradict the content of a belief nor conflict with it. However, there are situations in which we know that things are not as they look. According to my visual experience, it seems to me that the two lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion differ in length even though I know that they are of the same length.²² In a similar way, my visual experience can show me that a stick submerged in water is broken even though I considered that the stick has not been broken by the mere fact of being introduced into water. In neither of both cases are we obliged to believe that things are as they look according to our experience of them. Now, if it is true that perceptual experience can *contradict* (or to be in conflict with) what we believe, then it surely can also be in *accord* with the content of a belief. And if this is possible, then it cannot be true that experience is only a causal link between beliefs and the world, as Davidson says. In fact, if experience can contradict or accord

20. Noë calls them “P-properties”. Noë 2004, 83.

21. For the sake of the argument, here I am making the concession that Davidson can explain the factual dimension of the perceptual content; but I do not actually think so. As we saw, for Davidson experiences do not have content at all. The point of the argument is this: even though Davidson wanted to explain certain facts about perceptual experience by appealing to the propositional content of beliefs caused by experiences, this misses the perspectival dimension of the perceptual content.

22. Noë presents this example to show that perceiving is something different from judging. Cf. Noë, 2004, 188f. McDowell uses the same example to show that it must be possible to judge if experience accurately represents how things are. In that sense he assumes that there is an epistemic difference between perceptual experience and belief. Cf. McDowell 1994, 11. The original use of this example comes (at least it seems to me) from Gareth Evans, who uses it to show that experience is independent from belief. Cf. Evans 1982, 123.

with the content of beliefs, it can be stated that perceptual experience has an epistemic content; then it can enter into rational relations with beliefs. In such a case, the appealing to experience could serve to justify or criticize what we believe about the world.²³

Davidson could argue that those examples show not a conflict between what is perceived and what is believed, but a conflict between a perceptual belief and a non perceptual belief. For instance, he could reply that what the Müller-Lyer's example shows is a conflict between the perceptual belief "The two lines differ in length" and the non perceptual belief "The two lines are equal in length". Or he could say that the observer of the Müller-Lyer lines is caused by her sense organs to have the perceptual belief "It looks as if the two lines differed in length", even though she does not believe "The two lines differ in length" (the observer would actually believe "The two lines do not differ in length").²⁴ In the first case there would be a genuine conflict between beliefs, in the second, there would not.

23. How exactly can experiences be in agreement or disagreement with beliefs? The answer depends on the sort of content attributed to experience. There are several possibilities to be considered. For instance, in *Mind and World* McDowell assumes that perceptual content is propositional. I am not sure whether perceptual content is propositionally articulated, but if this thesis were accepted, it would be easy to explain how experience can contradict or accord with beliefs. It would just be a matter of confronting propositions. However, McDowell has recently changed his view. In 2009 he says that experiences have intuitive conceptual content, which is different from discursive content expressible in a judgment. Intuitive content can be verbally expressed by means of demonstrative expressions such as "This red cube". Expressed in that way—McDowell thinks—the intuitive content can be a part of a judgment (i.e. "This red cube is the one I saw yesterday". 2009, 270). If perceptual content is what now McDowell calls "intuitive content", how can experience contradict or accord with beliefs? Well, in my opinion, the intuitive content "This red cube" not only can provide the subject of a judgment, but also it can be in agreement with the belief "This cube is red", and in disagreement with the belief "This cube is blue". Take our example: the intuitive content "These two different lines in length" can be in disagreement with the belief "These two lines are not different in length". According to my development of McDowell's ideas, the intuitive content can be expressed by a judgment, but this fact does not imply that the very intuitive content is a judgment or a proposition. The intuitive content is a non discursive content which, however, can be unfold into a judgment, as in the examples above. Even though the intuitive content lacks a predicative element, it is obvious that not just any judgment based on it is adequate. The purpose of my use of the Müller-Lyer lines and similar cases in the text is quite general: I use it to make clear that we can make vivid a distinction between experience and belief by using an intuitive notion of experience. I think that both McDowell's first and second thesis about the conceptual character of perception are promissory ways to explain the relationships between experiences and beliefs.

24. This latter possibility was suggested to me by an anonymous referee. Besides the general objection I present in the text, it is possible to make a particular and previous remark related to the very sense of the sentence "It looks as if the two lines differed in length". What does "looks" mean in that sentence? As Austin once noticed (1962, 36), the use of the verb "looks" is

However, this answer does not work. There is a general reason for rejecting those possible replies. Beliefs are vulnerable to reasons, they can be defeated by other beliefs; perceptual experiences, in contrast, are not susceptible to that kind of modification; that is, while we can abandon a certain belief when we recognize that there are good reasons for thinking that the belief is false, we do not stop perceiving that things are thus and so simply by the fact that we have good reasons for thinking that things are not thus and so (in our case, we continue perceiving the difference in length of Müller-Lyer lines even though we are told that the lines are equal in length). Note that this argument is sound even in the case of the belief “It looks as if the two lines differed in length”. If the Müller-Lyer illusion effectively involved that belief (and not a contrast between the visual experience and the belief about the lines, as I originally presented the case), it would be possible to defeat it by means of adequate reasons. However, that is not the case. For all I know, every empirical belief can be questioned and abandoned if we have convincing reasons against it.²⁵ Interpreting the Müller-Lyer illusion as consisting of a contrast between two beliefs does not make justice to the nature of the visual illusion. Thus, as in the case of previous arguments, it can be concluded that perceptual experiences are not beliefs, but occurrences with their own content.²⁶

restricted to the general sphere of vision. But according to Davidson, experiences—in this case, visual experiences—only cause beliefs; they do not present (or open to) the world to us. Strictly speaking, in his view of visual experience nothing can look anyway because visual sensations lack any content, they are just causal linkages between our beliefs and the world.

25. One final—although not Davidsonian—alternative can be suggested: it could be argued that beliefs about appearances are immune to reasons because it is not possible to doubt their truth. Some logical positivists held this point of view. However, they did not hold that experiences are mere beliefs.

26. It is interesting to consider here the following possibility: perhaps, by adequate training a subject who knows that the Müller-Lyer lines are of equal length might learn to see the lines just as they are. In that case, the mentioned illusion would disappear for the experienced observer. (I give thanks to an anonymous referee for the suggestion of this possibility). However, that plausible case does not undermine my argument. Still it would be true that there is a certain illusion at first sight, for the non-experienced observer. For her it would be true that it is not the case that things always look the way they are. Besides, even in the case of the experienced observer it would be true that her new ability to perceive the Müller-Lyer lines as equal in length would not be the result of reasoning (as if reasons would have refuted her original perception), but of a certain kind of training (if to perceive involves certain kind of practical abilities—as Noë says—to perceive is a matter of *know how*, not of *know that*). Finally, the case of Müller-Lyer illusion is only one sort of case that can be adduced. There are other cases where there is a clear difference between experience and belief and where there is not any illusion. Cf. McDowell 2009, 158 and 2002, 277.

In consequence, I think that it can be said that, since we do perceive the world as being thus and so,²⁷ it perfectly makes sense to judge if the world is such as experience exhibits it. Usually, when perceptual experiences conflict neither with each other nor with beliefs, no doubt about how the world is arises. In contrast, when a conflict takes place between experiences or between a perceptual experience and a belief, we have to solve that kind of cognitive conflict and decide which of the cognitive states mentioned is correct. No doubt, it can happen that we should revise our trust in a perceptual experience because of a belief, or vice versa, that we should abandon a belief in virtue of what we experience. The general presumption in favor of the veridical character of most of our experiences does not compromise us to give them an epistemic status of infallibility. Our trust in experiences is always revisable on the light of further experiences and beliefs. As it can be seen, it is very important to recognize the epistemic character of perceptual experience because, otherwise, it could be incomprehensible how experience could be the source of empirical knowledge if it did not have any content to transmit.²⁸

Thus, once the epistemic difference between perceptual experience and belief is recognized, and it is also recognized that the former has a content that can be correct or not in virtue of how the world is, a different conception of justification can be introduced: not only a belief can justify another belief (as Davidson says), but also a perceptual experience can justify (or be justified by) a belief. The fall of the first dogma of Davidson's philosophy causes the fall of the second dogma.

To sum up, I have offered different reasons against Davidson's conception of perceptual experience (and, in consequence, against his thesis about what kind of states can justify a belief) which make it clear that his coherentist conception of justification rests on two unattainable principles. I have argued that Davidson's conception of perceptual experience a) makes the world inaccessible, cognitively speaking; which b) makes skepticism inevitable. Furthermore, c) I have presented three reasons to think that perceptual experience and belief are two different kinds of epistemic states that have their own content. Because of that, those two kinds of states are able to enter into logical relations between them. Now, even if my objec-

27. We perceive that the Müller-Lyer lines are different in length, that the stick in water is broken, etc.

28. In this sense, I think that the two aspects attributed to perceptual experience at the beginning of this paper—as a source and as a justification of empirical knowledge—should not be separated.

tions expressed in a) and c) were correct, it can be argued that Davidson can avoid the fatal consequence expressed in b) because he has an explanation (at least that is his aspiration) about how beliefs are linked to the world in a constitutive way that does not appeal to the epistemic character of experience. Thus, in the next section I will examine Davidson's account of the empirical content of beliefs in order to show how my objections also affect his externalism.

3. *Externalism and empirical content*

Davidson's argument in favor of externalism starts from the observation that we think, and then from there it aims to explain two closely related questions: 1) what explains the fact that thoughts are *objective*, that is, that their truth is independent of their being believed; and 2) what accounts for the *contents* of these thoughts (Davidson 2001a, 2001d, 2001e, 2004a, 1999a, 1999c, 1999d).

In his externalist account, Davidson pays attention to two kinds of situations: the language learning situation, and the radical interpretation one.²⁹ Consider the first one. In Davidson's story, the adult ostensibly teaches the child very simple sentences such as "mama", "water" and "red". The reward or the absence of it, from the adult is the indication for the child of the correctness or incorrectness of her answers. The adult and the child find objects in the environment similar, and they find their responses to those objects similar as well. Because of that fact, they can classify together the objects which cause their reactions, on the one hand, and their own responses to those objects, on the other. Without that shared classification they could not note that they respond to the same object and we would not have any ground for saying that the adult and the child are doing that. By conditioning, the child learns the extensions of the words and picks up the notion of truth. The child cannot doubt the meaning of the words or the content of beliefs from the beginning because the ostensive learning is what it gives content to the words and beliefs that she learns. For the child, whatever thing that is pointed out constitutes the content which she should learn. There is no room for skeptical doubts. Only after thoughts and words have been anchored to reality, that is, only after beliefs have

29. Davidson's externalism involves what he calls "triangulation". In order to be brief, I have omitted any reference to it. The omission does not affect my argument.

gained content, is it possible to doubt their truth. In this way, according to Davidson, the causal history of our interactions with the environment and other people determines the content of our beliefs. Before that process, skepticism is not possible because there is no propositional content to doubt; but afterwards, global skepticism about the external world is not possible either, because doubting already presupposes that beliefs and words, which have content, have been anchored to the world.

Something similar happens in the case of radical interpretation. In her intent to understand the sentences uttered by the speaker, and on making the speaker's behavior intelligible, the interpreter should correlate the speaker's utterances with the world and with her own utterances. The objects that cause the speaker to assent to given perceptual sentences constitute the contents, for the interpreter, of the speaker's beliefs which are expressed by the uttered sentences (Davidson 1999a, 107). In the simplest cases, thus, the object and event which cause a belief also determine the content of that belief. In this way, Davidson's externalism aims to account for the objectivity and the content of thoughts without appealing to the epistemic role of perceptual experience.

Now, since "we can't in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them" (Davidson 2001a, 150), the appeal for the causal link between beliefs and reality not only accounts for—in Davidson's view—the objectivity and the empirical content of thought, but also offers an argument against skepticism:

What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is (...) the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects. (Davidson 2001a, 151)

In spite of the merits of Davidson's externalism,³⁰ I think that—as it has been remarked by McDowell—it becomes a mystery how thought acquires its empirical content. From McDowell's point of view, Davidson does not succeed in explaining how beliefs can have empirical content because he disallows the idea of a rational constraint from the experience. For Davidson, the constraints which come from outside of thought are only

30. I consider that Davidson's thesis according to which the nature and individuation of mental events depend on the causal relations between those events and the objects to which they are about is, *in part*, correct.

causal. But that is not enough—McDowell argues—because, if thought is to be a world-view adopted correctly or incorrectly in virtue of how the world is, beliefs and perceptual experiences are to be related in a *rational* way (McDowell 1994, 14, 17 and 35).³¹ Now, I think that this objection is correct, but it rests on a premise unshared by Davidson, which is that the justificatory relation between beliefs and the world (or experience) is constitutive of the content of the former. Thus, I would like to add a more direct objection to Davidson’s account of the contents of beliefs which does not presuppose McDowell’s controversial premise.

My objection picks up what I have said in the previous section and it is very simple. It has been established that, according to Davidson, the contents of beliefs are constituted by their causes. Davidson affirms also that “we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware” (Davidson 2001a, 144). We do not directly perceive the causes of our beliefs; perceptual experience is, in Davidson’s view, a mere causal intermediary between our beliefs and the world. But then, if those premises are true, we can conclude that we cannot know what objects cause our beliefs.³² This is a very important problem for Davidson’s externalism because it means that we have beliefs whose causes are unknown and unknowable for us. However, as it has been exposed, Davidsonian externalism aims to individuate beliefs in virtue of their causes (to which beliefs supposedly refer). In consequence, if the causes of our beliefs cannot be known by perceptual experience, it becomes impossible to identify the contents of beliefs and to say to what objects our beliefs refer. The Davidsonian slogan “correspondence without confrontation” (Davidson 2001a, 137) falls down. Once again, an inadequate conception of perceptual experience leads to the problem of cognitive accessibility.

This problem can be observed in the language learning situation as well as in the case of radical interpretation. Without cognitive access to the conditions of application of the first linguistic expressions that only perceptual experience can provide, there is no way of giving content to those

31. In (1994, 134) McDowell expresses his main objection to the idea that exercises of ‘conceptual sovereignty’ are only causally affected by the course of experience, and not rationally answerable to it. Davidson’s answer is in 1999a and 2001b.

32. This conclusion assumes that perceptual experience is the only source of empirical knowledge. If it were proved that human beings have a faculty different from the senses by means of which they can know the empirical world, that conclusion of course would not be followed. Davidson has not argued, however, in that direction and it is not easy to do so.

expressions because it is by connecting rightly words and sentences to the appropriate objects and events that the linguistic expressions can have a reference for the child. To do that, the referents of the linguistic expressions have to be accessible to the child herself; and perception as openness to the world makes possible the required access. In a more detailed way: Words and sentences are certain kind of representations.³³ We understand those representations when we understand—at least in part—what those representations represent. Then, to understand and learn simple sentences such as “mama”, “table” and “red” the child has to be able to have perceptual access to the items represented by those sentences. That kind of access is intelligible only if we think of the notion of experience as openness to the world.³⁴ What is represented by the simplest words and sentences should be given in perception if the child is to be able to connect rightly those words and sentences to the empirical world. I do not want to say that to know the referents of the linguistic expressions is to learn a language. Rather, what I am pointing out is that to learn what linguistic expressions represent is an essential element in the learning process of a language, and that perceptual experience as openness to the world has an unavoidable role in it. Thus, the crucial point here is that without a perceptual apprehension of the world the child cannot learn to correlate linguistic expressions to things, and to give the usual meaning to those expressions.³⁵

Likewise, from the radical interpreter’s point of view, the objects which cause the speaker’s beliefs are to be perceived by the interpreter. If the interpreter has to correlate the speaker’s conduct of assent or dissent to a sentence uttered with the objects and the events of the environment, it seems obvious that the interpreter needs to be able to perceive and perceptually identify those objects and events which cause the speaker’s conduct. Only in that way can the interpreter also contrast her interpretative hypothesis with the speaker’s behavior. This applies for the speaker’s situation too. The speaker has to be able to perceive the environment meaningfully (and not only react to stimuli) in order to adjust the behavior and beliefs to the world in a rational way. Without recognizing the cognitive feature of

33. I am using the term “representation” in the general sense pointed out in footnote 19.

34. This point can be put in relation to Campbell’s thesis according to which experience of objects explains our ability to demonstratively think about perceived objects. Cf. Campbell, 2002.

35. Mere conditioning (as something that does not involve perception) is not enough here because the child has to note under which circumstances her answers are correct and incorrect, and which the consequences of her actions are. It is difficult to imagine how those things could be realized without perception.

perceptual experience, it would be difficult to explain in what sense the speaker is an agent at all.

Holding that the linkage between beliefs and the world is only causal, Davidson forgets the normative (or rational) relation that exists between beliefs and things. For instance, in order to make the speaker's behavior intelligible, the radical interpreter needs to be able to say, not only that the fact that a rabbit appeared *caused* the speaker's assent to the utterance "There is a rabbit over there", but also that the speaker assents to that utterance *because* she perceives that there is a rabbit over there. The mere fact that the speaker responds discriminatively to stimuli from the environment does not make the speaker's behavior rational. That is why I have emphasized in the previous paragraph that perceiving the world meaningfully is essential for the interpreter as well as for the speaker.

From the point of view that I am suggesting, the correct application of a concept (or term) to an object, property or event, and the truth of beliefs about them do not depend only on what our peers say or think, but also on how we perceive what the world is. In Davidson's account, the possibility of error arises from the interaction between (at least) two subjects interacting with each other in a shared environment. The possibility of error emerges when subjects' responses to a common stimulus do not correlate. It seems that, in Davidson's explanation, the normative character of thought comes exclusively from the intersubjective relations between the subjects. Since, for Davidson, perceptual experience is only a causal intermediary between beliefs and reality, how the world is—what is revealed, in the simplest cases, in perception—cannot be a reason for holding any belief. In Davidson's view, experience provides causes, not reasons for believing. That is why, following McDowell, I think that in Davidson's account there is no place for a normative relation between thought and reality.

Once we adopt a different notion of perceptual experience, a notion according to which perception put us in direct and cognitive contact with the world, it can be said that, besides our peers, what obliges us to correct, in a rational way, our beliefs and uses of concepts (or terms) is the perception of how the world is and how it "resists" to our actions and desires. To know that one has a belief is to know that the belief can be true or false in virtue of how the world is (whatever our peers think). If beliefs are to refer to the world, their empirical content has to depend on how the world is and on our perception of how the world is. That normative

dimension between thought and reality is constitutive of the contents of the most basic beliefs because contents are determined by noting—through perceptual experience—in what circumstances the world verifies or falsifies our thoughts.

Consider, for example, the learning of a term such as “tomato”. There is no doubt that the role of our peers in the acquisition of that term is very important. But the world—the tomato in this case—is very important too. The child has to be able to perceive some characteristics of the tomato: its weight, its color, its taste. The child has to be able to perceptually recognize the circumstances in which the word “tomato” can be applied correctly to the thing in question. That ability involves the perception of some characteristics of the tomato. It is in virtue of perceiving those characteristics that the child can correctly associate the word “tomato” to the tomato itself. If the child is wrong on one occasion, not only the adults could correct her, but also the world could do so by presenting obstacles to her actions and beliefs. For example, imagine that the child says “tomato” in the direction of a rock, and that she believes that the rock is a tomato. The error can rise when she compares different perceptions of tomatoes with the perceptions of the rock; or when she tries to savor the rock. In these cases, the child should correct her belief and the application of the word “tomato” because of how the world is. It is by perceiving the consequences of her actions and thoughts in the environment that the child can note when she is right or wrong in her use of words and beliefs; and it is in virtue of this noting that the child can apprehend the content of words and beliefs she is learning. There is no doubt that, if the child applied the word “tomato” to whatever there is in the environment, it would mean that she has not learned the meaning of that word (even though the responses were caused by the environment). We learn the meaning of words and the most basic beliefs by connecting—in an *appropriate* way—the words and beliefs which we have to learn with their objects. My suggestion is simply that we would not be able to do so unless we could perceive (in a cognitive way) the objects and events referred to by the linguistic expressions which we have to learn. It is *perceived* objects and events which we have to learn to associate with words and beliefs.

In short, neither Davidson’s coherentism nor his externalism manages to explain how beliefs acquire their contents. Against coherentism it can be said that mere logical relations between beliefs (without a cognitive relation with the world) do not warrant an objective reference. Against externalism it can be said that the mere causal link between beliefs and things does

not provide the necessary content. In Kantian jargon: coherentism empties beliefs of contents; externalism posits a blind link between beliefs and reality. The source of the problem is the same one: the lack of recognition that we can establish a cognitive contact with the world by means of perceptual experience. Coherentism encapsulates justification into the sphere of beliefs; externalism posits a direct linkage between thought and reality, but it does not recognize the epistemic nature of that linkage. Plausibly, only by recognizing the fact that perceptual experience is a way through which we can apprehend how the world is, and by accepting that (in virtue of that fact) perceptual experience can justify beliefs, we can hope to avoid the problems of coherentism.³⁶

4. *Final remarks: Towards rehabilitating empiricism*

I have tried to show several problems in Davidson's coherentism which derive from his conception of experience and justification. I have implicitly conceded that Davidson's objections to the theory of sense data (or usually called "representationalism") are correct. However, from those correct objections, Davidson draws a wrong conclusion: that perceptual experience does not have cognitive content. That is why he rejects the idea according to which experience can justify beliefs. My objections to Davidson's coherentism suggest a different—although certainly not new—conception of perceptual experience. According to this conception, perceptual experience puts us in cognitive contact with the world: when we have a veridical perceptual experience, we directly perceive how the world is. As I suggested in section 2, there is a plausible notion of experience which explains how we can have cognitive access to the world by perception. According to that notion, perceptual experience opens the world to us, we perceive without epistemic intermediaries how the world is. In that view, the perceived objects not only appear in different ways and reveal its characteristic properties depending on our location into space, but also they constitute thereby part of the perceptual content. We perceive objects by perceiving how they appear in virtue of our perspective. Accordingly,

36. It could be objected that to appeal to perceptual experience—as I recommend it—only post-pones the skeptical problem. If this objection were correct, I would not be in a better position than Davidson. But it is not so. My objection to Davidson's coherentism is that it makes skepticism inevitable, that it makes the world unknowable even in a non skeptical scenario. My position does not have that problem, even though I still owe an answer to skepticism.

to perceive is not to judge or to believe. In perception things themselves are presented as being thus and so.

By adopting this conception of perceptual experience, it is possible to explain how experience can justify beliefs. What Davidson sees as impossible becomes possible: to get outside “our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware”. We can make a confrontation between beliefs and reality because we have cognitive and direct access, by means of perception, to how the world is. That conception of perceptual experience makes it possible to hold a different notion of justification as well: not only are beliefs able to enter into logical relations with other beliefs, but perceptual experiences can also do that. It can be seen, then, that we have rehabilitated the epistemic dimension of empiricism. Although I have not given any details about exactly how perceptual experience can justify beliefs, the objections to Davidson’s coherentism I offered constitute indirect reasons for thinking—I hope—that perceptual experience can have the epistemic role that empiricism used to attribute to it.

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