# Brandom on Thought and Reality:
# Showing Receptivity the Way out of the Bottleneck*

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RESUMEN

Un presupuesto común entre McDowell y Brandom se ignora en su debate sobre la objetividad del pensamiento: si éste está en contacto con el mundo empírico debemos postular un puente que proporcione contenido a nuestro sistema de creencias. Este puente está hecho de contenidos adquiridos no inferencialmente. La experiencia de McDowell y el confiabilismo de Brandom lo presuponen. Lo criticamos por ser un cuello de botella entre pensamiento y mundo, por estar comprometido con los dogmas quineanos y por motivar ataques escépticos. Después mostramos en qué sentido está presente en el inferencialismo/confiabilismo de Brandom. Cerramos sugiriendo otra forma, plenamente holista, de inferencialismo.

ABSTRACT

A common feature in McDowell's and Brandom's conceptions of the objectivity of thought has been ignored: for thought to be in contact with the empirical world we must postulate a bridge that provides content to systems of beliefs. This bridge is constituted by noninferentially acquired contents. McDowell's experience and Brandom's reliabilism display this feature. The bridge is a bottleneck between thinking and the world, committed to the dogmas of empiricism denounced by Quine and prone to sceptical attacks. We show how it appears in Brandom's inferentialism-cum-reliabilism. We close suggesting an alternative, fully holistic, form of inferentialism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

When we conceive of our thinking as rationally responding to how things are we often find ourselves appealing to a picture according to which contact with the world takes place through a channel —for example, through experience giving wordly content to our thoughts—. This channel links the world to items of our mental life through specific messages. Receptivity —understood as contact between thought and the world— is then seen as an external link through which the world influences thought. The idea is that contact with the world has to be achieved by means of a specific area of our mental life responding to how things are. We will refer to this image, powerful and popular, as the bottleneck picture. Empiricism had it that the bottle-

neck is made of sensations (or sense-data, or nonconceptual content, or pure *qualia*) that were readily available to us independently of any conceptual exercise or inferential capacity —they were given. McDowell (1994) has attempted to purge what he took as the basic tenet of empiricism— that in experience we are put in contact with the world, that is, the idea that experience works as a bottleneck —of anything that could be given, i.e., alien to concepts and inferences—. Experience, he endeavours to establish, could be taken as thoroughly conceptual and, as such, it could be both normative and tell us how things seem to be. McDowell's point of departure is that we cannot tolerate the idea that our thought receives friction only from within. He is persuaded that we need rational constraints from outside, from the world, and in order to make sense of thinking as being about the world we should find a way to satisfy this rational constraint constraint, as Brandom (1998a) calls it. McDowell seems to hold that his minimal empiricism —the doctrine of the world constraining our thinking through conceptual experience— is our only chance to satisfy it. His minimal empiricism makes contact with the world intelligible by taking experience to be a bottleneck between our mental life and how things are. He certainly believes that contact could not be understood if we did not present anything bridging thought and world — the bottleneck picture —and further that the bridge, the bottleneck, would have to be made of experience.

Brandom, however, suspects that «there is a slide in the move from McDowell's diagnosis to his recommended therapy. […] The sort of rational constraint that really matters is constraint by the *facts* […] But in his positive suggestions, McDowell looks to rational constraint not by *facts*, but by *experience* of the facts» [Brandom (1998a), p. 372]. Brandom suggests that there are other ways to fill the bill and, in particular, he claims that his inferentialism-cum-reliabilism could do better than McDowell's empiricism for it would need no appeal to passive exercises of concepts in experience no appeal to conceptually structured and yet prejudgmental experiences. In this paper we consider Brandom's way of understanding and responding to McDowell's challenge. We argue that Brandom accepts too much of McDowell's way of framing the problem —in particular, he accepts the bottleneck picture—. We shall nevertheless begin by examining the picture and what often makes it seem compulsory.

## II. THE BOTTLENECK PICTURE

The image according to which contact between thought and world has to be made by specific items of our mental life (sense detectors or basic beliefs or passive experiences), postulates that thought is infused with empirical content through an external link without which it could be entirely removed

from the world. According to this image, it is through specific contents that the world influences our thinking. However, the picture neither entails nor is entailed by a distinction between conceptual scheme and empirical content. On the one hand, one could take empirical content as ultimately intertwined with conceptual capacities and insist that we are informed about how the world is through conceptually-laden items of our mental life —for example, experiences as passive exercises of conceptual capacities—. This is, in a nut-shell, the option McDowell recommends. On the other hand, one could ac-cept that empirical content can be disentangled from conceptual schemes and reject that there is a bottleneck through which specific messages about how the world is are carried —sensorial stimuli could be informing the whole of our mental life—. This is a position close to the one advocated by Quine. The bottleneck picture holds that the world instils specific contents into our men-tal life. It seems compulsory when we find ourselves in a position where we can see no alternative that would quench our craving for rational contact with the world, that would satisfy the rational constraint constraint. It may seem mandatory to either postulate a bottleneck through which messages from the world are received or to accept that thought is disconnected from how things are and is spinning in a void without external friction. The picture seems to depend on a sphere of thinking that would be devoid of any constraint from how things are if a channel with the world is not available. We are left with the option of a bottleneck or no contact whatsoever.

   The bottleneck picture has two salient problems. First, it seems to make us vulnerable to sceptical attacks of different sorts. We may feel that if only the bottleneck is put into question —and the sceptic typically holds that we have resources to do so— we would be left disconnected from the world al-together. There is also the temptation to feel that we could make sense of (at least large parts of) our thinking without any appeal to world constraints; that is, we may feel that our thinking, only by chance or by a contingent matter of fact, is responding to the world.[1] The bottleneck picture could lead us to con-ceive of our thinking as being capable of complete indifference towards how things are; that our world-views would be fully uninformed by how the world is if only the bottleneck were severed. The bottleneck picture, and its familiar sceptical consequences, is partly hostage to the idea that our mental life could be oblivious to the world: that our minds function as independent variables. Within the image, it is reasonable to think that (at least a sizeable amount of) our beliefs are formed and justified independently of any truth about the world: our belief dynamics, and the space of reasons in which these dynamics are often assumed to take place, can be (greatly) unrelated to any truth. So, if we place the bottleneck in our perceptual judgments, we can conceive of our nonperceptual beliefs to be confinable in themselves if only we replace the perception channel by a suitably crafted ersatz (for instance, a hallucination channel). The bottleneck picture encourages us to distinguish between the

content of our thoughts and the influence of the world; content and empirical (or world) content are taken to be detachable: it is intelligible to have the former without the latter. The picture seems to spring from the same source that fuels the idea that a separable part of our knowledge could be labelled *a priori* and is intelligible with no reference to the world and independently from what is true. If we reject the idea that (part of) our conceptual exercises could be played without any constraint from the world, the craving for a bottleneck could begin to subside. The bottleneck picture seems to rest on the idea (familiar to sceptical challenges) that at least wide areas of thought could happen in a worldless environment. It is therefore an effective answer to our cravings for contact with the world only if we take thought as possibly insufficiently linked to how things are.

The second salient problem with the picture is that it seems to require the acceptance of some version of the two dogmas denounced by Quine. A bottleneck assumes that the world will give us specific verdicts concerning our beliefs, acting like an atomist tribunal. In order to do so, it should assume that some contents are fixed and determine the meaning of the messages that cross the bottleneck; it should assume that merit and blame can be apportioned in a fixed way so that the world alone can tell us where we have gone wrong. This fixed structure of beliefs and meanings depends on some connections between concepts being immune to the influence of the world —something like analytical judgments are supposed to be—. If, on the other hand, the distinction between beliefs and meanings is dissolved, there is no message from the world that can influence a specific element within our thinking for the meaning of any message depends on the beliefs that make it possible. Without such a distinction, we cannot be told anything specific without the help of further beliefs. An important lesson from Quine's criticism of the dogmas is that any contrast between the statements that we hold about the world and the world itself makes sense only against the background of other statements that we hold about the world. If this lesson is accepted, there is little room for bottlenecks carrying specific messages from the world to our thought. In fact, it seems like the bottleneck picture depends more on the dualism of belief and meaning than on that of empirical content and conceptual scheme. The dismissal of the former dualism leads us to a fairly holistic picture of our thinking that makes judgments of blame and merit relative to sovereign decisions within our mental life. We are left with an image where no influence from the world can be made sense of in terms of a specific message as to what we should believe or make use of to assess our beliefs. It follows that either we are confined within the reach of our beliefs and conceptual practices which by themselves establish meaning, or that we find a way to understand contact with the world without any appeal to the bottleneck picture. A suitable rejection of a principled dualism of belief and meaning seems to make the bottleneck metaphor unavailable.

McDowell is explicitly committed to this picture both in his papers on *de re* senses and in the first appendix to *Mind and World*. His distinction between theories of truth that can work as theories of meaning and those that are themselves appropriate theories of meaning [McDowell (1977)] seems to be committed from the start with a separation between meaning and belief. His rehabilitation of the first two dogmas [McDowell (1994), pp. 156-61] also points to a similar direction. Empirical content is separable from other types of content by making it compulsory for the possession of the former that the subject possesses recognitional capacities, capacities to passively apply concepts of that type. This does not go against the requirement that any concept, whether empirical or not, should be available for active exercises in the faculty of understanding. McDowell's commitment to the bottleneck picture is, in a sense, more obvious than Brandom's, despite his explicit rejection of different forms of internalism. The picture is operative in the intelligibility of perceptual concepts in isolation from the role they play in judgements and also in the rehabilitation of a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Even if thought cannot occur in the absence of empirical concepts and empirical concepts would not be concepts at all if they did not enter into inferences, two areas of our mental life are distinguished, one broadly holistic but containing judgements that are true in virtue of their meaning, the other quite atomistic, with contents directly triggered by our experiential interaction with the world.[2]

Now, we think it is worth noting that the bottleneck picture can also be operative when we take the world itself to be constituted by conceptual states of affairs. In such a scenario, access to those states of affairs could be thought of as being a channel to get a specific message as to how things are. Therefore, a move like McDowell's partial re-enchantment of nature [McDowell (1994)] in itself seems to postulate that the world is made of passive conceptual items that, if received by us, impose on our sovereignty specific beliefs (about how things are). Re-enchantment is itself committed to something like the dogmas denounced by Quine as it takes the world to be capable of telling us something specific through a tribunal with a different constitution than that of our network of beliefs. McDowell, of course, would not accept that content could be present if there are no exercises of receptivity whatsoever; content without intuition is empty. But this is not enough, as exercises of receptivity constitute an isolated part of our mental life and the whole is in contact with the world solely in virtue of a bottleneck of passive contents. No mental judgment can be immune to corrections coming from exercises of receptivity —spontaneity clearly finds its material vulnerable to experience—. Our judgments, and the concepts that we use to build them, are all corrigible, but at any given moment they are intelligible by themselves and make contact with the world only through a bottleneck of experience. Without a bottleneck feeding thought with empirical content, it would arguably lose all contact

with the world. McDowell often suggests that the intelligibility of any exercise of spontaneity relies on a background of empirically contentful thoughts —much in the same way as the background of true beliefs is what allows for correction in the image recommended by Davidson—. If this is so, there is no need for passive exercises of conceptual capabilities in experience: thought, in order to be intelligible, has to be (mostly) empirically contentful. A separate domain of experience is either unnecessary or requires the adoption of something akin to the image of a bottleneck.

The adoption of this image seems to be a road towards parcelling out the contribution of the world within the whole of our thinking; our complaint is that feeling forced to answer to restricted external constraints motivates further puzzles regarding the relationship between thought and reality. The bottleneck picture seems indeed to be present more often than it appears at first sight as it informs a common way of understanding what is a satisfying contact between thought and the world. We shall now proceed to consider to what extent Brandom's account of the relation between thought and world is also hostage to the bottleneck picture.

### III. Receptivity, Reliabilism and Holism

Brandom's approach to thought and its relation to the world is intended to be fully informed by our practices of giving and asking for reasons. His starting point is to consider the role of inferential norms and to understand representation in terms of inference. He presents a worked out account of what he calls an inferentialist semantics, i.e., the thesis according to which to have content, to have meaning, is to be available for inferences, to be a premise or a conclusion of an argument. It follows that a necessary and sufficient condition for something to be contentful is to relate to other contentful items. Something has content inasmuch as it can serve as a reason —for instance, as a premise for an argument— or stand in need of reasons — for instance by being the conclusion of an argument—. If inferences can take place with no appeal to the world whatsoever and there is no receptivity involved in this account of content, then concepts without any input from receptivity are not empty.[3]

It is, however, one thing to have content and quite another to possess a specific content. Here, it may be tempting to answer that the specification of content also depends on the inferential relations that contentful items have with other contentful items. Content would be infused, so to speak, from the inside. A specific content would be determinable through the particular inferential connections it enables.

This, however, is not Brandom's approach. Even though it is both sufficient and necessary to have content, for it to be inferentially articulated, content is frequently obtained through mechanisms that are not themselves inferential.

The inferential constraint on content has as a consequence that inference can be understood independently of the noninferential mechanisms —such as perception and action— determining the specific content of specific claims or judgments, while those mechanisms cannot be understood apart from inference. Moreover, even though we cannot make sense of those mechanisms in isolation from their contribution to inferential processes «[t]he empirical and practical involvements of claims [...] make a fundamental contribution to their content» [Brandom (1994), p. 234]. Furthermore, this contribution is not merely that of a nonconstitutive enabling condition:

> The concepts least easily assimilated to an inferential model are the empirical concepts whose core employment is in perception and the formulation of empirical reports. [...] Their content accordingly derives (at least in large part) from the *reliable differential responsive dispositions* that those who have mastered the concepts exhibit with respect to their application. [Brandom (1994), p. 119]

Brandom emphasises the insufficient character of this contribution. The contents they elicit would not be such without a certain rational attitude towards them, namely that of acknowledging the doxastic commitments that they involve [Brandom (1994), p. 261]: «[...] our differential response to sensory stimulation includes noninferential acknowledgment of propositionally contentful doxastic commitments. Through perception, when properly trained and situated, we find ourselves passively occupying particular positions in the space of reasons» [Brandom (1994), p. 276].[4]

Brandom maintains that inferential dynamics could be untouched by the world if left unaided by perception: content is instilled through inferential interplay while empirical content requires another, specific source. This is where his reliabilism enters the scene. He holds that a reliable reporter within a reference class [see Brandom (1994), pp. 206-12; (1998b), pp. 115-7] is not required to know that she is reliable —it is enough for the report to be a reliable symptom or sign for someone within the community. Reliability is considered by Brandom to be part of a community's game of giving and asking for reasons— a reporter is reliable if she is recognized as such by the community which, in doing so, commits to the report as a reason and therefore takes it to be capable of standing among the premises of an acceptable inference. Reliable detection —the hallmark of perception— infuses the inferential structure with empirical content coming from the world through reporters. Reliable reporting converts causal connections into reasons bringing wordly elements to our system of thinking through inferences. The world interferes in our dynamics of giving and asking for reasons by providing messages through reliable reporters. These messages can only be understood within our inferential practices, within our set of commitments and entitlements, as Brandom calls them. Still, it is a specific message about which the world is at

least half responsible —whereas where there is no empirical content it seems like judgments are such that the world carries no responsibility—. Without messages that get across through reliable detection we may have inferences that would be understood within our practices of giving and asking for reasons without any appeal to the world. Inferences without reliable observations could constitute some sort of *a priori* knowledge that is both contentful and instrumental for our observational judgments. A division of responsibility is somehow at stake here: inferential capacities, sufficient for content, are not sufficient to establish contact with the world and could therefore leave thought oblivious to how things are. A reliable reporter —fully trained and capable of doing a sufficient amount of inferences that would enable her to understand the message that is getting through— transmits the content of a perceptual judgment and this is how the rational constraint constraint is met.

Brandom's inferentialism is taken by him to be holistic. He embraces a doctrine that he calls inferential holism [Brandom (1994) pp. 80-91, 426, 477-82] according to which a judgment's (or a concept's) content is tied to all the inferential roles it plays; there is no set of inferences that are more constitutive of content than others. Holism is fully present as far as inferential dynamics without perception is concerned —there seems to be a (conceptual) content holism—. It is a different matter when we move to empirical content. The information instilled by the reliable reporter into the inferential game of giving and asking for reasons is received as a normative message from the world. It looks like reliable reports are the world's input into our thinking and these reports are specific messages about what should be taken to be the case. Brandom seems to clearly embrace and make use of distinctions that are dangerously close to the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Consider the following quotes:

> Practices that do not involve according any knowledge claims the significance of observation reports can nonetheless be understood as instituting specifically assertional significances, and so as conferring specifically propositional contents. What is missing from such practices is claims with empirical content. Discourses recognizable as mathematical can be like this […]. Our discourse is not in general like this, however, and the sorts of contents our claims have cannot be conferred by assertional practices that do not acknowledge some claims as having empirical authority stemming from their status as reports of observations [Brandom (1994), pp. 221-2].

> In this way the possession of noninferential circumstances of appropriate application of some concepts imbues them with empirical content —recognizable as conceptual content in virtue of its inferential articulation and as empirical in virtue of its dependence on the noninferential acquisition of commitments to those contents (and of entitlements to those commitments). [...] In virtue of their inferential connections to concepts that can be used to make reports, even theo-

retical concepts (those whose *only* circumstances of appropriate application are inferential) inherit empirical content [...] [Brandom (1994), p. 225].

[...] language entry moves have been analyzed [...] in terms of two components in their content: their inferential articulation and their noninferential elicitation. In virtue of the former they are *conceptually* contentful, and in virtue of the latter they are *empirically* contentful [Brandom (1994), p. 235].

Something close to a distinction between our contribution and that which has the world imprint on it is at work here. This distinction is drawn and it plays an important role in Brandom's explanation of how we respond normatively to the world. Reliabilism is a strategy to instil empirical content into the inferential system from outside by means of messages that are received from the world. We need conceptual capacities to acquire these messages —as in McDowell's notion of conceptual experience—[5] but there are also specific contributions from the world that reach us through a bottleneck.

Brandom's willingness to recognize the existence of two kinds of terms, those with noninferential conditions of application and those with purely inferential conditions of application, already invites the thought that his overall system is committed to a dual picture of thought. An inferential structure possesses content both in virtue of inferential relations and of the attribution of reliability to members of the linguistic community. This second source of meaning could be akin to a sort of triangulation: the ascriber, capable of integrating reliable deliverances within an inferential network; the ascribee, considered by the community as a reliable reporter; reality, reliably responded to by the ascribee according to the ascriber. It is not, however, sufficient to take any possessor of a reliable mechanism to respond differentially to features of reality as a reporter. What is needed to distinguish a nonconcept using device that responds differentially to the environment from a reliable reporter (i.e., a concept user who is also capable of such responsiveness)? We feel that Brandom's response is not fully satisfactory: of course, a concept user is a creature capable of performing inferences, of acting on them and of using reliable deliverances as premises. However, inasmuch as the possession of passive mechanisms to respond to the world is concerned, this difference seems irrelevant. The ascriber of reliability could be as justified in using reports from a member of the space of reasons as premises for her own inferences as noises produced by a mere thermostat, given that such reports and noises are equally independent of the capacity of the producer to offer reasons to support them. If we are right, the emerging picture of triangulation could work equally well with an inference maker and a thermostat occupying two corners of the triangle as with two inference makers taking these positions. The fact that ascription of reliability already depends on some sort of social conceptual negotiation does not explain the difference between a mere

detecting mechanism and a genuine reliable reporter. That negotiation only explains that one of the corners of the triangle must be occupied by a concept user, a concept user that engages in rational exchanges with others, but not necessarily with the reliable reporter/mechanism. Observational judgments and our inferential contents seem to be bolted together with no intrinsic connection and, to a great extent, empirical content reaches the system through a specific bottleneck.

How deeply, then, is Brandom committed to the bottleneck picture? We have argued that reliabilism provides specific messages from the world and perception instils empirical (yet not conceptual) content into our dynamics of giving and asking for reasons. Furthermore, we have suggested that he is dangerously close to accepting versions of the dogmas denounced by Quine. We can add that reliabilism, understood as an empirical appendix to an inferentialist semantics, is a possible target for sceptical attacks: reliability itself depends on the world not trapping us —and this can bypass any causal contact— and depends on the reliability of particular reporters being projected from past to future cases. Once (nonempirical) content is established irrespective of reliable judgments, we can understand what we are being told by reliable reporters and yet claim that they all mislead us. As understanding is not part of perception, our game of giving and asking for reasons can easily fall short of the mark as far as the world is concerned and, still, produce intelligible inferences. This is a scenario where the sceptic can act at will: it is enough to sever the bottleneck that connects us to the world to make our thinking intelligible and yet capable of being oblivious to the world. Overall, it seems like Brandom's inferentialism lies in a territory that is close to that of the bottleneck picture. There is a sense in which his way of meeting the rational constraint is not entirely alien to McDowell's: in both cases, a specific message from the world which is to be somehow passively received is postulated.[6] A reliable reporter's reasons to reject her report could be utterly irrelevant as the world would be speaking through her voice. Thinking is externally informed by the message. Passivity, of course, is conceived in very different ways as Brandom rejects that experience plays a role that is distinguishable from that of reliable detection. Brandom (2005) maintains that there should be a presumption of reliability —and therefore of empirical correction— to each of our observational judgments in order for those judgments to have a background over which they are intelligible. If this is so, it could be argued that contact with the world is already there and our capacity to judge is all we need to assure us that we are satisfying the rational constraint constraint. Brandom, however, seems committed to the idea that empirical content has to come from a separate domain of reliability judgments. Could there be an inferentialism that avoids the bottleneck picture of receptivity?

## IV. INFERENTIALISM WITHOUT BOTTLENECKS?

We close this paper by sketching a possibly viable alternative form of inferentialism that tries to avoid falling into the bottleneck picture. A fully holistic conception of receptivity —of responding to the world— seems to be a possible alternative to the bottleneck image. The idea would be for the space of reasons —the space where we give and ask for reasons— to be somehow thoroughly responding to the world. One possible model of a holistic conception of receptivity can be found in Davidson's doctrine of the presumption of truth for every belief. His doctrine is supported by arguments that have to do with charity in interpretation, the nature of truth and with strategies to undermine sceptical challenges [Davidson (1983), (1991), (2000)]. Davidson has to assume that the two dogmas denounced by Quine —along with the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content— are fully rejected. He grounds his arguments on an analysis of truth —which postulates no room for truth-makers— and interpretation. He also has a doctrine of content that ties it closely to truth: his semantic assumptions are different from those that Brandom is ready to embrace at least in that they take truth to be a crucial yet indefinable dimension of thought. Still, we draw our inspiration from Davidson's conception that our contact with the world is assured by beliefs having a presumption of truth in their favour to propose an inferentialism without bottlenecks. We maintain that the kernel of Davidson's argument is to a great extent neutral with respect to choices between conceptions of truth and to inferentialism.

We take this kernel to be the idea that global error is not intelligible.[7] The intelligibility, and therefore the content, of our judgments depends on them not being thoroughly mistaken for, if they were, we would fail to understand those very judgments and, furthermore, they would have no content whatsoever. The idea is to link intelligibility and empirical content —so that we cannot understand a judgment without grasping the worldly content involved in it—. Davidson's semantic strategy is to connect content and truth. As such, the argument shows that we cannot understand the total body of someone's beliefs and, at the same time, hold that they are all false. In a more general manner, the argument shows that some correction has to be present whenever there is intelligibility —otherwise there is no background on the basis of which any judgment of correction could be made—. Thought, we can say, cannot be contemplated from outside: we need to have a foot in a system of thought in order to understand it and therefore recognize it as thought —and to be able to confront it with the world—. Some measure of correction is needed for us to place this foot in the system of thought for otherwise we cannot determine what the system is about (or whether it is about anything).

We shall now try to propose an inferentialist account of content that may avoid any separation between conceptual and empirical content. We can

start out with inferentialist semantics and inferential holism —the content of a judgment is determined by all the inferences that it can support—. We can then add a presumption of validity in favour of any inference —without the background of shared inferences that we use to understand each other no interpretation could be possible—. Inference validity, on the other hand, is what assures contact with the world as we cannot possibly make sense of a confrontation between our thinking and the world that would not take for granted the validity of (a great part of) the inferences of which we make use. It begins to become clear that, on the one hand, we cannot provide more than inference validity and, on the other hand, there is no need for more than inference validity judged from the standards of our inferential practices —that is, sufficiently informed by the world—. There is, therefore, no need for a bottleneck to provide contact with the world —the world, in any sense in which we can make contact with it, is available as a driving force of our inferential capacities as it provides the standards of validity—. Surely, as a consequence of the world being in touch with the totality of our thoughts, we cannot pinpoint which of the standards we use to guide our inferences is provided by the world alone but still the world would have to be behind our judgments of inference validity. Our contact with the world through inference validity is not causal nor dependent on a specific contact point between thought and world — it is no more than an assurance that the world has to be present in our inferential practices.

This alternative conception of inferences and their relation to the world is perhaps akin to what Brandom labels hyper-inferentialism [Brandom (2000), pp. 28, 219-20 n. 4] and to the form of inferentialism that Peirce has put forward[8]. Here responsiveness to the world is spread throughout the network of inferential capacities and perceptual content is assimilated in the network of inferential justification, such that my commitments to perceptual contents depend on my judgment, understood in an inferential manner. An inferentialism like this can work if sufficient attention is paid to the role of the community in the development of a thinker's rationality. Brandom's appeal to reliable mechanisms to instil content into the inferential system underplays such a role, deeming it necessary but not sufficient. An exploration of the way the thinker, in being introduced into her linguistic community, acquires the capacity to distinguish between what seems correct and what is correct (a capacity that has a strong social character, as it implies the possibility of comparing points of view), could defuse any temptation to search for a means of being in contact with particular facts to make sense of the contentfulness of our thought. Brandom, despite his explicit commitment to holism, allows for a degree of atomism as he demands that some content is infused into the system via reliability. Reliability, at most, could be integrated into the whole of the system as the thinker has been trained to inhabit her environment competently and rationally.

The role that the introduction into community practices of asking and giving reasons could play for the thinker and her objective standing could be clarified by means of Richard Moran's (2001) distinction of two modes of access to our beliefs. A thinker does not need anything more (or less) than the ability both to take responsibility for some of her beliefs by avowing them (accessing them in a first-person way) and to ascribe some beliefs to herself much in the same way as others would do, deducing them from her own behaviour, for instance (accessing them in a first-personal way). The interplay between both modes of access allows for there to be a subject and for her thought to be objectively constrained by the comparison of points of views allowed by the possession of both modes of access.[9] There is no need therefore to appeal to mechanisms or mental faculties that introduce contentful atoms into the picture. All that is needed is a fully holistic network of inferential capacities, some of which are entirely composed by the subject's own reasons, some of which are a reflection of the subject's recognition of the role of her community in assessing her rationality and her standing in the world.[10] If a position like this can be fully worked out, we hope to show the inferentialist fly the way out of the bottleneck.

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NOTES

[1] In the debate between McDowell and Brandom starting with McDowell's «Knowledge and the internal» [McDowell (1995), Brandom (1995)] the problem with internalist conceptions of the space of reasons as only contingently connected to the world is made clear. It seems, here, that McDowell is further from the bottleneck picture than he is in *Mind and World* (1994).
[2] The criticism that we are putting forward highlights an intimate connection between an atomistic conception of content acquisition and an unwanted commitment to a form of residual internalism. If certain contents must be obtained by means of mechanisms or spheres of our mental life directly connected to the world and with a different constitution to that of the faculty of judgment or understanding, then a space is opened for other areas of our mental life (or to the whole of our mental life if detached from the linking mechanisms) to be conceivable independent of how the world is. This is how atomistic contact with the world implies internalism. A manifestation of this implication can be found both in McDowell's rehabilitation of the first two dogmas of empiricism (and in the belief/meaning dualism that follows from it) and in

the distinction between content and empirical content that follows from Brandom's re-
liabilism. In contrast, the radical form of holism represented by our proposal of an in-
ferentialism without bottlenecks precludes the isolation of contents directly acquired
from the world from contents that are understandable independent of contact with the
world, for instance, in purely inferential terms. Of course, holism is not sufficient to
grant complete externalism: examples of internalist holism can be found both in the
history of philosophy (Leibniz) and in some versions of conceptual role semantics.
However, our aim in this paper is not so much to establish externalism as to close the
path to a form of internalism.

  [3] Brandom, clearly, distances himself from the empiricist part of Kant's famous
slogan: concepts seem not to be empty when devoid of intuitions.

  [4] When properly trained, in our dealings with the world we find ourselves ap-
plying and grasping concepts that appear to be more and more detached from our non-
reflective interaction with it. But nonreflective does not mean noninferential: as
Brandom emphasizes, inference is crucially a material, not a formal, matter. The ca-
pacity to apply a concept while directly interacting with the world is sustained on the
deep inferential links between concepts. This is an (nonreflective) inferential capacity
no less than the one used to calculate mathematical equations or to compare paintings
by Blake and Goya (one could even *see* Blake in Goya). The constraint does not come
from passivity but from inhabiting the space of reasons and from the never ending re-
sponsibility to grasp and apply more and more concepts and, as far as it is possible, to
do so without *needing* to reflect.

  [5] See Pinedo and Bensusan (2006) for a critique of McDowell's notion of con-
ceptual experience as not being able to play an epistemological or normative role.

  [6] In this paper we stress some similarities between the positions held by
McDowell and Brandom that we find insufficiently discussed in the growing literature
about their respective philosophies and the debate between them. Of course, their
conceptions of receptivity differ in various important aspects, some of them intimately
connected to their way of understanding the nature of thought contents. Our purpose
here, however, is to explore the similarity between the two positions that is entailed
from both being to some degree hostage to the bottleneck image.

  [7] See Bensusan and Pinedo (2007) for details on how we understand Davidson's
argument. One of the consequences that we extract from the sufficiency of the pre-
sumption of knowledge for the intelligibility of thought is that anything can be the
content of an experience but no content is such that it must be obtained through ex-
perience. Putting things on these terms implies that receptivity must be conceived as
fully holistic: the possibility of the noninferential application of concepts depends
fully on a highly active process of self-training, something that McDowell is happy to
accept for the case of moral concepts (when he claims a virtuous person can, literally,
perceive the moral demands of a situation) but not for the case of perceptual concepts.
According to the image that we recommend, no principled separation is possible be-
tween active and passive concept use. The world, the subject and the community play
a role in the understanding of any and all contents whatsoever.

  [8] Hyper-inferentialism has no room for contents of concepts that depend on
noninferential circumstances of application. Any content is to be explained in terms of
inferential capacities. Legg (2006) takes Peirce to have put forward a viable form of
inferentialism of this sort. She claims that Peirce took perceptual content to be infer-

ential; some sort of infinite inference that perhaps resembles those studied by contemporary infinitists such as Peter Klein (2003). Peirce (1868) held that any appeal to «objects out of consciousness» in a justification process is, in fact, an appeal to an infinite chain of «previous cognitions». We can read him as thereby rejecting any appeal to a bottleneck.

⁹ See Bensusan and Pinedo (2006) for some indications of how this could be done.

¹⁰ Maybe this form of inferentialism ends up boiling down to Davidson's position. We are not sure how much difference there is; however it is worth noting that here there is no explicit use of the notion of truth. By making inference and knowledge (by means of Davidson's minimal error argument) intimately related, truth and other semantic concerns are easily incorporated into the picture. Perhaps in this case one would need not appeal to nomological causal connections between thinkers and the world to make sense of external objective constraint on our thought. These considerations, however, cannot be addressed within the limits of our paper.

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