



**Sense and sensibility educated: A note on experience and (minimal) empiricism**

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## Sense and Sensibility Educated A note on experience and (minimal) empiricism

*McDowell's minimal empiricism holds that experience, understood as providing conceptually articulated contents, plays a role in the justification of our beliefs. We question this idea by contrasting the role of perceptual experience in moral and non-moral judgments and conclude that experience per se is irrelevant in the former cases and should also be so in the latter one: only with the help of adequate beliefs experience can provide a connection with the world. We conclude with some remarks concerning the importance of experience.*

### 1. Experience and justification

Different varieties of empiricism have espoused versions of the idea that experience plays a role in the justification of our beliefs, for instance, by providing contents that are somehow different from those of beliefs. McDowell's variety of empiricism is no exception: experience's content is conceptually articulated and yet acquired in a passive manner. In this paper we offer doubts as to whether experience effectively plays a role in the justification of our beliefs.

We can appreciate the difficulties with justification through experience by exploring a contrast between two doctrines of perceptual judgment that McDowell has himself embraced. The general idea behind his conception of moral judgment is that a virtuous person has the capacity to perceive the salient moral demands of a particular situation<sup>1</sup> and bases her judgment on this perception. Such a moral perception is not a seeming or anything less than a full-blooded belief about the moral circumstance – and it is fully affected by all the other beliefs the virtuous person entertains. Let's consider two virtuous persons, A and B. A mistrusts her initial moral perception of the situation and makes moral judgments only after long deliberation considering her other relevant beliefs. B is quicker: her moral perceptual judgment comes fast once she encounters the situation demanding a moral judgment. Except in cases where a quick decision makes a moral difference A and B will be equally virtuous – and can even systematically agree on their moral judgments.

Now consider McDowell's minimal empiricism: experience constitutes a tribunal that offers verdicts as to how things are that externally constrain the rest of our beliefs. To be sure, what is acquired in experience can also be rejected by better judgment; however experience, demanding the passive employment of conceptual capacities, exerts an external (and yet rational and conceptual) pressure on one's beliefs. Here is the contrast: for moral judgments we need no more than appropriate (virtuous) judgment to distinguish the salient features of a situation while in the broader case we take experience as capable of carrying authority whenever it provides verdicts about our beliefs. It seems like in the second case, but not in the first, B is more virtuous than A. This is implausible in the moral cases because sensitivity to moral features of the world depends on what else we think. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, McDowell 1979, pp. 50-1.

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acquiring such sensitivity is an endeavour that requires shaping most of one's beliefs. Surely, a virtuous person is one that normally judges and acts correctly – no matter if perception was correct in the first place – in a wide variety of situations; this is why A and B seem equally virtuous. The correction of the first impression is, as far as ethics is concerned, arguably irrelevant. In the broader, non-moral case, however, experience itself is said to play an epistemological role – verdicts from experience are taken to make *per se* a justificatory difference. We argue that the model of moral judgment could be expanded to the non-moral case.

## 15 **2. When experience doesn't matter**

16 McDowell holds what can be called a transcendental empiricism: perceptual experience –  
17 passive and yet conceptually articulated – plays not only a justificatory role but also the  
18 transcendental role of connecting our body of beliefs with the world; without it thought  
19 would be left rationally unconstrained from outside. The way we are impressed by our  
20 senses triggers the process where beliefs receive verdicts from the world.

21 Now, take the Müller-Lyer illusion often explored by McDowell (see for instance  
22 1994: 11). One can be convinced that the lines are equally long – even if the first  
23 impression is to the contrary. If truth-seeking is a goal, one has an obligation towards how  
24 things are and therefore should come to believe that the lines are equally long if they are.  
25 There is a *normative* force in play here. By contrast, we argue that there is scarcely any  
26 normative force (any obligation) in play regarding how the lines appear. To most people  
27 they look such that one is longer than the other. \*If someone does not perceive it that way,  
28 there is no (rational) point in trying to convince her that she should find a way to have the  
29 impression that one is longer than the other: seemings are as irrelevant for normative  
30 enterprises such as seeking truth as any alleged private sensation, impression or feeling.  
31 One may feel the obligation to accommodate, within a theory of perception, the fact that  
32 most people have the impression that one line is longer than the other. This, however, is  
33 irrelevant to the task of establishing how things are concerning the length of the lines. One  
34 can have a lot of third-person access to how things (normally) look but this makes no  
35 difference as to how things look from a first-person perspective. Both in moral and non-  
36 moral cases, one's final judgment about the issue is what reveals one's take on how things  
37 are, and it matters little whether one's first impression is in contrast with it.

38 When I say that 'it seems to me (or I have the impression) that one line is longer  
39 than the other', I could be mistaken both about what seems to me (about my mental state)  
40 and about how the world is. If I withdraw any commitment to the content of my  
41 impression, I could only be wrong about my mental state. Of course, I could be right about  
42 what seems to me and yet be wrong about the lines being of different length. I can say 'it  
43 seems to me that one line is longer than the other but they are of the same length' and this  
44 would not sound as puzzling as any instance of Moore's paradox. This suggests that  
45 impressions, even conceptually articulated ones, carry no commitments.<sup>2</sup> Surely, I can  
46 commit to what I experience. Such option, however, would be epistemologically

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<sup>2</sup> Something similar can be said about instincts (or impulses) and desires: I can acknowledge my instinct (or impulse) to do something while not being committed to do so. I can recognize an instinct (an impulse) without wanting to follow it.

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recommendable only if my experience is articulated by correct beliefs, if it prompts us to form correct beliefs. It provides justification when it is equipped with conceptual capacities *but also* with correct beliefs. We are back to the case of the virtuous persons: what matters is the final judgment on the issue – the dynamics of how one acquires it (and the eventual conceptual intermediaries invoked) is irrelevant for *justification*. Further, without any normative force, it is hard to see how experience can play a *transcendental* role of connecting mind and world; on the face of it, experience connects us to the world in the same way our skin connects our internal organs and the surrounding atmosphere.

Moral and non-moral perceptual judgments depend on a great measure of the mental makeup of the thinker. The content of such judgments can acquire the form of any conceptual articulation available to the thinker. Once equipped with true beliefs, our senses can provide perceptual content to our experience that can take several complex forms. A thorough rejection of the idea that there is a highest common factor between true perception and error (see McDowell, 1982) invites the thought that in the Müller-Lyer illusion, for example, one could be trained to *perceive* something with the following (complex) content: ‘There are two lines so that one seems longer than the other but both are the same length’. Such content can be achieved through educated senses that previously would experience something like: ‘There are two lines so that one is longer than the other’.<sup>3</sup> There is no common factor between the two contents: in one of them the lines appear as being different while in the other they appear as seeming different and as being the same. This could be provocatively called a conjunctive conception of perceptual content:<sup>4</sup> I can *perceive* a difference between appearances (to me) and how things are. That difference is available to me in my senses (to my first-person access) as long as they are integrated in the dynamics that connects our thinking and the world. Our senses could be loaded with any content that could be the content of a thought. Experience, and its contents, has no special role and yet it can play any role in the economy of our beliefs and their contact with the world. Anything thinkable can be the content of an experience while no thinkable content *must* be attained through experience.

McDowell seems to think that the content of my (non-moral) perceptual experience is somehow to a lesser degree up to me than the content of my beliefs. So, no matter how familiar with the illusion one is, one line goes on looking longer, given the impenetrable and resilient character of our sensory apparatus. There is an element of something that is beyond my control, something akin to natural necessity. Possible obligations grounded on natural necessity, we argue, have in themselves little to do with our rational process of having our thoughts constrained by the world: it does not matter how natural necessity goes, we must just get things right. Furthermore, the natural obligation expressed in the content of ‘they look so that one is longer’ can be encompassed by the perceptual content of experience in something along the lines of what we called the conjunctive conception of perceptual content.

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<sup>3</sup> Compare McDowell insistence (1979) that a person with a fully developed virtuous character can perceive, literally, the normative demands of a given situation.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell calls his alternative to the higher common factor conception – according to which there is something in common between veridical and mistaken perceptions, a form of mental representation or immediate object – a *disjunctive* account of perceptual content (see McDowell 1982, 2006).

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We conclude that perceptual content provided by experience, given that it carries no normative force on its own, cannot be more than a strategy available to us to acquire and maintain beliefs. This is a reason to discard the idea that contents of perceptual experience could, in isolation, provide verdicts in anything that could be called a tribunal. Experience without beliefs plays no justificatory, or transcendental, role: it justifies no belief (not even when loaded with the operations of our conceptual capacities) and provides no contact with the world. If we are to find justification and contact with the world for our systems of beliefs we ought to be looking for them somewhere else.

### 3. But does experience matter?

The rejection of any epistemological relevance for experience can suggest that thought could dispense with perceptual experience altogether. The suggestion, however, is not substantiated. Sense experience could still be taken to be an enabling condition for thought if it were required for the acquisition of some beliefs. It could be that a capacity for experience is among the conditions of possibility for a thinker. Experience could be conceptually articulated, as McDowell claims, and yet no more than an (epistemologically irrelevant) enabling condition for our empirical thinking. In this case, it would be clear that ascribing conceptuality to experience is not enough to make it indispensable for justification or for contact with the world – it implies in itself nothing in terms of its normative and epistemological relevance.

It could therefore be that McDowell is right to the extent that experience can only be meaningful within our thinking in a way that could affect *de facto* our thought about the world if its contents are conceptual. Surely, if experience plays a role in the maintenance of our network of beliefs this is due to its capacity to interact with concepts used in our empirical judgments. If our conceptual capacities are operative in experience in a passive way, concepts are used there in a fixed manner that simply reflects the current state of one's thinking. Concepts do not get revised or challenged by experience alone and yet they are present in experience. Conceptuality, however, itself entails no epistemological or normative significance. Yet, of course, it implies nothing about the *de facto* dispensability of experience – it could be a *sine qua non* condition for thought while being both epistemologically and normatively irrelevant.

We have argued that there is no epistemological role for any realm of separate experiential contents: each belief can find its way into our thinking without crossing any special realm of experiential contents. There is, therefore, no epistemological role for a separate realm of experiential verdicts. How things may look to me, independently of what I believe to be the case, has no relevance for the contact between thought and world. None of this precludes the possibility that experience counts as a global enabling condition for judgments about the world. Jackson's (1986) famous Mary thought experiment offers a useful tool to think about a situation where no experience of some qualities is required for someone to have the capacity to adequately use predicates for those qualities. One could claim that some kind of experience is required in order for Mary to be able to perform any discrimination – even if she can discriminate red objects without any appeal to experience (what she could arguably do). It is reasonable to contend, as McDowell would like to do, that Mary is to appeal to some experience in order to end up being capable to judge what objects are red. It is therefore possible to claim that some kind of *global normative*

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*constraint* from the world comes from some experience that she ought to have. We have no objection to this reformulated way to find a role for experience.

Finally, experience is part of the outlook of the world. Experience – quite apart from leaving marks in our beliefs or being a global enabling condition for thinking – is part of ontology and makes a difference within it. We do have perceptual experience and this has consequences for the way the world is – ours is a world where experiences are possible. Even disconnected from justification and not playing a special role in providing constraints from the world to our thought, experience is part of what there is to be known. So, for example, in a world with experience, objects are such that they can be experienced and therefore have (arguably dispositional) properties like visibility, taste or smell. These properties would not be present if the world were not subject to experience. Experience is part of the world. It may prove to have no transcendental or epistemological significance while having some *metaphysical* relevance.

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