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## Perception as Openness to Facts\*

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### *§1 The image of openness, and two identity theories*

The identity theory of truth is the claim that the truth of a thought consists, not in the correspondence between that thought and anything distinct from it, but in its *identity* with a fact.<sup>1</sup> (Since judgements, and other modes of thinking, are also true or false in a derivative sense, one might say that the truth of a judgement consists in the identity of its content with a fact.) When I think that *p*, and my thought is true, *what is thought* is identical with a fact, i.e. the fact that *p*. Jennifer Hornsby (1997) rightly observes that John McDowell's remarks about thought have a place in such a theory. He writes indeed:

There is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or more generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case (as [Wittgenstein] once wrote), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world (1994: 26).<sup>2</sup>

Reality, i.e. everything that is the case, is thus “all embraceable in thought” (1994: 32). However, thinking makes sense only in a normative context, which means, according to McDowell, that it must be answerable to the world itself, as a collection of mind-independent

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<sup>1</sup> As Baldwin (1991) says, the identity theory of truth can be seen as a limiting-case of a correspondence theory, even though this way of seeing things obscures the important differences between these accounts. See his paper for an history of the identity theory of truth beginning with the origins of analytic philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> It is not clear how McDowell's claim can account for contradictions, which do not correspond to something that “can be the case”, but I shall ignore this point here. Another point I won't discuss here is the fine-grained account of facts which derives from the identity theory of truth. If thoughts are made up of Fregean senses, the fact that Phosphorus is a planet cannot be the same as the fact the Hesperus is a planet. Both facts are supposed to exist independently of our thinking of the planet Venus. I don't know if this is an unhappy result. See Dodd (1995) for a criticism of McDowell focusing on this point.

facts. A “minimal empiricism” must be recognised, for it is our experience which mediates the way our thinking is answerable to how things are (1996: xii). In order for the mediation to be intelligible, though, our experience must have the same kind of content as thought itself, i.e. conceptual content. So parallel to the identity theory of truth, McDowell puts forward what I shall call an *identity theory of (veridical) perception*. The identity theory of perception is the claim that the “veridicality” of our perceptual experience (i.e. the fact that the experience is veridical) consists in the identity of its content with a fact. Perception is a dyadic relation between a perceiver and a perceived fact, rather than a triadic relation between a perceiver, a content and a fact which merely happens to correspond to that content. What we perceive when our experience isn’t illusory is a sensible aspect of external reality itself:

*That things are thus and so* is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world (1994: 26).

Obviously, we do not perceive facts only; we also perceive things, events and properties (like stones, explosions and shades of colours), but if perception is supposed to be a source of (propositional) knowledge, what can be perceived must include more than just stones, explosions and colours; it must be possible to perceive the fact that this stone is grey, or the fact that this explosion is over there. Perceptual experience can justify substantial judgements (i.e. not only existential judgements like “There is a stone”), in part because it makes facts, rather than merely things, available to us.

Now of course perceiving is not mere thinking, otherwise it couldn’t function as a “tribunal, delivering verdicts on our thinking” (1996: xii). What is the difference, then, between perceiving and thinking, if they have the same kind of content? Not (or not only) the fact that there are thoughts whose contents can’t be that of perceptual experience (1994: 32). At this point, McDowell introduces the image of openness, which is supposed to differentiate perceiving from thinking:

[I]n enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts, facts that obtain anyway and impress themselves on one’s sensibility (1994: 29).

The image of openness is supposed to capture something special about experience as opposed to mere thinking. When I perceive that  $p$ , I am open to the fact that  $p$ . In contrast, if I merely assume that  $p$ , and it happens to be true that  $p$ , I am not open to the fact that  $p$ . So it's not the identity theory of perception itself which underwrites the image of openness, for a parallel theory (the identity theory of truth) holds for thought.<sup>3</sup> In McDowell's conception, both identity theories constitute the background against which the image of openness is available (1994: 29). The other central component of the image is the *passivity* of experience; in experience, conceptual capacities are passively drawn into operation, whereas in thinking, they are exercised in a free and responsible way. Passivity is supposed to give us the external constraint necessary for our thought to be about an objective, independent world.

In what follows, I shall try to give expression to my feeling that McDowell has spoiled an important insight about the nature of perception. The insight is that the identity theory of perception underwrites alone the image of openness. The claim that perception is openness to the world *means* that in enjoying a perceptual experience, we are directly "en rapport" with an external fact. Perception is an intentional dyadic relation between perceivers and facts. Passivity might be seen as a consequence of openness rather than as an ingredient of it, whose contribution is supposed to be additional to that which is described by the identity theory.

Obviously, this is an insight only if it does not lead to the view, rightly set aside by McDowell, that true thought is openness to the world. So we have to reject some element in his conception of thought, or of the relationship between thought and perception, if we want to argue that the image of openness is best explained by an identity theory of perception. It will be convenient to label some of the claims which have been ascribed to him:

- M1. What is (truly) thought is a fact (*Identity theory of truth*).
- M2. Perceptual content is of the same kind as thought content. It is conceptual, propositional content.
- M3. What is (veridically) perceived is a fact (*Identity theory of perception*).

I shall add one more claim to the previous set, which I think corresponds to the requirements of what McDowell calls "minimal empiricism":

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<sup>3</sup> A crucial difference between these identity theories is that in the perceptual case, there is no implication that the truth of perceptual content is just what it takes for our experience to be veridical. On this point, cf. McDowell

M4. Perception should be able, in a suitable context, to convert a judgement to knowledge.

I shall argue that claims M1-M4 are inconsistent. They cannot be all true, so that at least one of them must be rejected.<sup>4</sup>

## §2 *The disjunctive theory of thought*

To begin with, I would like to distinguish, in this and the following two sections, three interpretations of the identity theory of truth.

On the first, most radical interpretation, the identity theory of truth is supported by a *disjunctive* account of thought: when I think that *p*, the content of my thought is *either* that fact that *p* (if I think truly) *or* (as one might say) a mere representation that *p* (if I think falsely), and the disjunction is exclusive. Is disjunctivism a plausible account of thought?<sup>5</sup>

A similar account might seem to be implicit in Frege's mature writings. Frege put forward the principle that sense determines reference. This principle says that if two expressions do not have the same reference, they cannot have the same sense. Frege also held that the sense of a (declarative and complete) sentence is a thought, and that the reference of such a sentence is a truth-value. But the same sentence can have different truth-values; it might be true in one possible world and false in another. Does it not follow that a true sentence can't express exactly the same thought as a false sentence? A thought, like any other sense, has to determine its reference, which means that a difference of truth-value implies a difference in the thought's content.

In fact, of course, such an account can't be ascribed to Frege, if only because the notion of a sentence being true or false in a possible world has no point in his logical system. Independently of Frege's exegesis, however, let's suppose that we have such a notion in our semantics, perhaps for describing (not necessarily *explaining*) the sense of modal operators like "It's possible/necessary that...". Consider then two readings of the claim that sense determines reference:

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(1998: 474), in which "veridical" means just that the content of the experience is true.

<sup>4</sup> For further criticism of McDowell's theory, cf. Engel (forthcoming), who opposes to the identity theory a "minimalist" theory of truth, and the discussion in Candlish (1999) and Dodd (1999), with Hornsby's own reply (1999).

<sup>5</sup> The disjunctive theory of thought is modelled on the disjunctive theory of experience, introduced in the philosophical community by Hintikka (1973).

(DR) For each sense  $s$ , there is one and only one reference  $r$  such that necessarily,  $s$  determines  $r$ .

(DD) Necessarily, for each sense  $s$ , there is one and only one reference  $r$  such that  $s$  determines  $r$ .

The view that a true sentence must express a different thought from a false sentence requires the first, *de re* reading, and not the second, *de dicto* reading, which does not entail it. On the first reading (and still assuming that the reference of a thought is a truth-value), my thought when I truly think that  $p$  cannot be exactly the one I would have grasped if I falsely thought that  $p$ .

The disjunctive account is worth comparing with an insight about thought expressed in the following way by the young Wittgenstein:

Every proposition is essentially true-false. Thus, a proposition has two poles (which correspond to the case of its truth and to the case of its falsity). It is what we call the *sense* of the proposition ([1913]: 196).

When we understand the sense of a sentence, we may not know whether it is true or false; we only learn the conditions under which it is true. Wittgenstein's explanation of this is that each (genuine) proposition can be true *and* can be false in virtue of having a constant, bipolar sense. This seems to be directly opposed to disjunctivism.

However, we must be more careful here. We have to distinguish between (what I shall call) *weak* and *strong* bipolarity. Weak bipolarity can be formally expressed as follows (as far as thought is concerned):

The thought that  $p$  is weakly bipolar =<sub>df</sub>

$$\Diamond(\text{It is true that } p) \wedge \Diamond(\text{It is false that } p)^6$$

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<sup>6</sup> Once again, I assume that " $\Diamond(\text{It is true that } p)$ " can be read as " $p$  is true in some possible world", even though the possible-world talk offers no explanation of the sense of modal operators.

Under an appropriate interpretation of the modal operators, it is arguable that weak bipolarity is a non-negotiable feature of (factual) thought.<sup>7</sup> For the negation of weak bipolarity, together with independently plausible principles, leads to the intolerable view that all true thoughts are necessary:

$$\begin{aligned} &\neg[\diamond(\text{It is true that } p) \wedge \diamond(\text{It is false that } p)] \quad (\text{Negation of weak bipolarity}) \\ &\neg\diamond(\text{It is true that } p) \vee \neg\diamond(\text{It is false that } p) \quad (\text{Definition of } \wedge \text{ and elimination of } \neg) \\ &\neg(\text{It is true that } p) \vee \neg(\text{It is false that } p) \quad (\text{Definition of } \diamond \text{ and elimination of } \neg) \\ &(\text{It is true that } p) \vee (\text{It is false that } p) \quad (\text{Inter-definition of "true" and "false"})^8 \end{aligned}$$

However, what Wittgenstein had in mind was a stronger notion of bipolarity, which was supposed to *explain* weak bipolarity. This stronger notion may be informally defined as follows (once again, as far as thought is concerned):

The thought that  $p$  is strongly bipolar  $\stackrel{\text{df}}{=}$

Corresponding to “the thought that  $p$ ” is a *single* entity capable of being true and capable of being false.

Although strong bipolarity entails weak bipolarity, it is not obvious that the converse is true. In particular, it may be possible, from a disjunctivist point of view, to allow for the falsity of “ $p$ ” (for some “ $p$ ”) without claiming that the *same* entity is true in some possible worlds and false in others. It is the existence, in some possible worlds, of the false thought that  $p$  which is responsible for the falsity of “ $p$ ”, even though that thought is not strictly identical with the true thought that  $p$ .

Disjunctivism about thought, although incompatible with strong bipolarity, can in principle account for weak bipolarity. Does it mean that this position should be endorsed? One objection to it is that there is no *use* in our semantics for the principle DR as it is applied to thoughts (considered as the senses of complete sentences). As Gareth Evans (1985) has shown, the fundamental aim of semantics is to account for the connection between truth and the correctness of our utterances, and this requires only a notion of a “world-neutral

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<sup>7</sup> In what follows, when I talk of thought, I talk of factual, contingent thought. (Of course, this is trivial if we hold the Wittgensteinian thesis that all genuine thought is contingent – that there are no necessary *thoughts*.)

proposition”, true in some worlds and not in others. The weaker principle, on the other hand, is compatible with such a notion. The matter is different with most ordinary proper names, for which we seem to have intuitions in line with the principle DR. If these names have senses, they should determine their references across, and not merely within worlds. Of course, this only shows how unfortunate it is to assimilate sentences to complex names.<sup>9</sup>

### §3 *Facts as bipolar entities*

Whereas the disjunctive account rejects a natural explanation of weak bipolarity in terms of strong bipolarity, there are two other interpretations of the identity theory of truth which are *prima facie* compatible with the latter notion of bipolarity. These interpretations rest on different conceptions of facts.

On the second interpretation, a fact is defined as *a state of affairs which obtains*. A state of affairs, in its turn, is defined as something capable of obtaining, but also capable of not obtaining. Taking the liberty of extending Wittgenstein’s notion once more, I shall say that that states of affairs are bipolar – the *poles* being here <obtaining; not obtaining>. It follows that the content of true thought is *essentially* the same thing as the content of the corresponding false thought (i.e. the negation of the true thought). That which is identical with a true thought is also identical with a false thought: a state of affairs. The difference between a true thought and a false thought is just that the former, but not the latter, *obtains*.

This interpretation is of course perfectly compatible with strong bipolarity: a thought is an entity which is capable of being true and capable of being false because it is capable of obtaining and capable of not obtaining. If it obtains, it is a fact; if it does not obtain, it is a mere state of affairs.

Some of McDowell’s remarks certainly encourage such an interpretation. Consider again his claim that “there is no ontological gap between [...] the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case” (1994: 26). First, he does not speak specifically about *true* thoughts here; rather, he refers to the sort of thing one can think in general –

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<sup>8</sup> This last step involves the equivalence between “¬(It is true that *p*)” and “It is false that *p*”, which means that we assume that bivalence holds for at least some thoughts.

<sup>9</sup> There is another objection which might be extracted from Evans’ paper, which is that the disjunctive account of thought commits us to modal realism, “the doctrine that other possible worlds exist in exactly the same sense in which the actual world exists, and differ from it merely in not being the ones we happen to inhabit” (1985: 363). His argument seems to be that if the thought itself is sensitive to the world in which it is grasped, its content must contain a reference to that world. This raises difficult issues I can’t take up in this paper.



whether our thought is true or false. Second, he speaks of the sort of thing that “can be the case”, which may surely be interpreted without violence as meaning the sort of thing that is also capable of *not* being the case. What can be the case is precisely what can obtain: a state of affairs.

What about perception? According to claim M2, the content of a true thought may be the same as the content of a veridical perception. What is thought, at least when one’s thought is true, can sometimes be veridically perceived. So what we perceive, when one’s perception is veridical, is a fact. A fact, though, is just a state of affairs that obtains, and is also capable of not obtaining (though if it were the case, we would not call it a “fact”). It follows that the content of a veridical perception is essentially the same sort of thing as the content of some illusory perception – the important difference being of course that it is only in the former case that such a content obtains [**that such a content obtains only in the former case**]. Perceptual content is bipolar in just the same (strong) sense in which thought is bipolar.

How does the second interpretation fare with respect to the claims ascribed earlier to McDowell? Clearly, it vindicates at least claims M1-M3. The content of perception is the same sort of thing as the content of thought, i.e. a bipolar state of affairs. It is much less clear, though, that claim M4 (the claim that perception can convert a judgement to knowledge) can be sustained. The problem is this. A state of affairs has been defined as something which indifferently obtains or does not obtain, depending on which possible world is considered. But this means that the thought has a truthmaker which is, strictly speaking, distinct from its content. Following Armstrong, I assume here the plausible principle that “the truthmaker for a truth must necessitate that truth” (1997: 115). As he says, “if a certain truthmaker makes a certain truth true, then there is no alternative world where that truthmaker exists but the truth is a false proposition” (*ibidem*). If we apply this principle to the present situation, states of affairs are insufficient *by themselves* to make thoughts true, even if they happen to be facts. The thought that *p* is not made true by the perceptual content that *p*; it is made true by *this content being the fact that p* (and not a mere state of affairs).

Needless to say, this consequence is intolerable for anyone, like McDowell, who wants to do justice to the insight that perception is a source of knowledge. If the previous objection is accepted, perception cannot *by itself* convert a judgement to knowledge, even if it is veridical. After all, what is presented in experience is a mere state of affairs capable of obtaining but also capable of not obtaining. It follows that the epistemic value of perception is at most *conditional*: the subject who takes his experience at face-value only knows that *if* his

experience is veridical, his perceptual judgement that  $p$  is true. The experience is unable to give a judgement the absolute status of knowledge (even in a suitable context of other thoughts).

At this point, the relevant question is, of course, what makes a thought true? In Armstrong's terminology, what is the thought's "full" truthmaker? It is tempting to answer: What makes a thought true is the obtaining of its content, i.e. *the fact that it obtains*. Strictly speaking, thus, it would not be the fact that  $p$  which makes true the thought that  $p$ , but the fact that the state of affairs that  $p$  obtains. Let us call the latter, second-order fact the fact that  $q$ . Now we face two alternatives. Either the fact that  $q$  is bipolar, or it is not. Suppose it is bipolar. The fact that  $q$  is thus a mere state of affairs in an alternative world. Then we can always ask why the state of affairs that  $q$  obtains in some possible worlds but not in others. Obtaining is an abstract, albeit contingent property of states of affairs, so it makes sense to ask in virtue of what does the state of affairs that  $q$  possess the property of obtaining. If we answer that it possesses such a property because it is a fact that the state of affairs that  $q$  obtains, a regress is threatening. It is a vicious regress, because it shows that we yet lack the theoretical resources to understand what *could* be the full truthmaker for the original thought that  $p$  – a thought which we might otherwise know to be true.<sup>10</sup>

Suppose that we take the other alternative. The second-order fact that  $q$  is not bipolar. If it is a fact, it is a fact in every possible world in which it exists. It is *not* capable of not obtaining. This shows, though, that there is nothing *in virtue of which* it obtains. There is no need for a philosophical explanation of why a fact exists in this sense.<sup>11</sup> This stops the regress, but at the price of introducing a very different notion of fact. Moreover, if we introduce it at the second level, why not use it at the first level? The fact that the state of affairs that  $p$  obtains, like all the higher-level corresponding facts, are not further facts, distinct from the first-level fact that  $p$ . The full truthmaker for the thought that  $p$  is simply the fact that  $p$ , but if it is a fact, it is *essentially* a fact; it is not capable of being a mere state of affairs.

Let's sum up the argument so far. First, the second interpretation of the identity theory of truth, which involves the notion of bipolar facts, cannot reconcile claims M1-M4. Second,

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this regress is similar to the regress of truths presented by Frege at the beginning of "The Thought". The context in which Frege introduces his regress, though, is rather different. Armstrong (1997: 118-9) presents yet another regress involving facts, but which is not vicious, given his notion of (non-bipolar) fact.

<sup>11</sup> There may be the philosophical issue of whether the fact that  $Fa$  is to be explained in terms of  $a$ 's instantiation of  $F$ , or the other way round. See Fine (1982: 72-3), Forbes (1989: 50, note 4) and Armstrong (1997: 118-9) for discussion. I am tempted by a no-priority view (the fact that  $Fa$  and  $a$ 's instantiation of  $F$  are on the same level of explanation), but nothing in the present paper hangs on this particular point.

we seem to be forced anyway to introduce a quite different notion of fact, i.e. the notion of a *non-bipolar* fact. So why not say that the contents of thought and perception are facts in the second, stronger sense?

#### §4 Facts as non-bipolar entities

This is what is involved in the third interpretation of the identity theory of truth. This interpretation is based on a notion of facts as being *essentially* facts. It does not follow that what is a fact in the actual world is a fact in every possible world; rather, what is a fact in some world cannot be a mere state of affairs in another world. Necessarily, if something is a fact, it obtains. So facts are not bipolar entities, as far as the property of obtaining is concerned; this property is not a contingent property of a fact. If the expression “the fact that *p*” were a name, it would be a kind of “rigid designator”.

Can this notion of fact make the claims M1-M4 true? Obviously, the present interpretation does not face the problem that was raised for the first interpretation; in this case, the content of a veridical experience is identical with a fact, so there’s no obstacle to perception converting, in a suitable context, a judgement to knowledge. So I’ll assume that M4 is vindicated. What about the other claims?

Let’s start our discussion with a well-known argument against the claim that true thoughts are identical with facts. This argument has been put forward, in different guises and with various terminology, by such philosophers as Moore (1953: 308), Cartwright (1987: 77-8), Kit Fine (1982: 46-7) and Jon Barwise (1989: 227-8). The core of the argument is fairly simple: true thoughts and facts have different modal properties.

Consider the fact that Paris has subways. If this fact has the essential property of obtaining, it would not exist if Paris did not have subways. Now contrast the *thought* that Paris has subways. Surely, if Paris did not have subways, the thought would still exist, even though it would be false. More generally, the thought that *p*, even if true, cannot be the same as the fact that *p*. As Fine (1982: 47) puts it, “the existence-sets of a proposition and its corresponding fact [i.e., the classes of possible worlds in which they exist] will not, in general, be the same”.

Of course, this argument will be resisted by anyone who favours the alternative notion of fact, as a state of affairs which happens to obtain. If facts are entities that exist regardless of whether they obtain, the argument obviously fails. However, as we saw earlier, this alternative

notion cannot do justice to claim M4, and a stronger notion of fact must be introduced anyway.

Is there another way of resisting the argument, which does not force us to abandon the definition of facts as being non-bipolar? At this point, we enter a minefield, because it is very easy to lapse into the intolerable conclusion that *thought is not even weakly bipolar*. Suppose that we say that a true thought, being a fact, is essentially true. As a fact cannot fail to be a fact, a true thought cannot fail to be true. As disjunctivism has been independently set aside, this seems dangerously close to admitting that every truth is necessary.

However, there is a possible way out of this conclusion. While maintaining that a true thought is identical with a fact, one might say that it can be evaluated as false with respect to a possible world even though it does not exist in that world (since the relevant fact fails to obtain). Technically speaking, the idea of a thought which is evaluated as true or false with respect to a world in which it does not exist is not absurd; indeed, it has been independently invoked to deal with problems about *de re* thoughts evaluated with respect to worlds in which the relevant *res* do not exist (cf. Forbes, 1989: 63).

Although there is a sense in which a true thought is essentially true, it need not be a necessary thought. A necessary thought is such that there is no possible world with respect to which it can be evaluated as false. An essentially true thought is such that it exists only in possible worlds in which it is true, while it can be evaluated as false with respect to some **(other)** possible worlds.

An advantage of this proposal is that it is compatible with weak bipolarity; indeed, it even entails strong bipolarity. True thoughts are identical with actual facts, and false thoughts are identical with possible facts. At bottom, true and false thoughts are the very same kinds of entities. We do not have to lapse back into a disjunctive account of thought.

As far as I can see, the point is technically well taken, but I am not sure how it fares with respect to psychological reality. The proposed account of thoughts leads to an asymmetry between grasping a true thought and grasping a false thought. This means that although disjunctivism about thoughts is rejected, a kind of disjunctivism about *acts of thinking* (acts of grasping a thought) has to be admitted. And I think that the latter disjunctivism is potentially problematic.

Suppose that I grasp the true thought that *p*. That thought is identical with an (actual) fact. This thought is capable of being false, not in the sense in which it exists in possible worlds in which it is false, but because it can be evaluated as false with respect to these

worlds. I understand the possibility that the thought is false, because I can use the thought which I actually grasp to evaluate it with respect to a counterfactual situation. So far, so good.

Now suppose that I grasp the *false* thought that *q*. According to the proposal under consideration, this thought is identical with a possible fact. Being identical with a possible fact is not the same as being identical with an actual state of affairs (which does not obtain). Indeed, the thought that *q* simply does not exist in the actual world. At this point, a natural question is: How can I grasp it? How can I grasp something which does not exist? It seems that a minimal requirement on grasping a thought is that it co-exists with my act of thinking it; after all, it is precisely the thought which gives a *content* to my act.<sup>12</sup>

A related point is that it is difficult to understand how I can use a false thought, which does not exist, to evaluate it as true with respect to some possible world. In other words, it is not clear, on that account, how the subject *understands* the possibility that an actually false thought is true.

#### §5 Hybrid accounts

In the last three sections, I have discussed several interpretations of McDowell's thesis that there is no ontological gap between our thought and the world. Throughout the discussion, I assumed claim M2, i.e. the claim that the content of a true thought is (sometimes) the same as the content of a veridical perception. Still ignoring the disjunctive account of thought, one might think that the problems raised for the second and third interpretations are not insuperable, but to my mind, they are serious enough to justify exploring alternative positions.<sup>13</sup> In particular, it is worth trying to reject M2. If we do so, two further possibilities emerge, as is shown by the following diagram:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, if we reject the actualist thesis that only actual entities exist, this requirement is satisfied. But anyone not identical with David Lewis would not be happy with this concession to possibilism.

<sup>13</sup> I haven't discussed the view according to which a false thought is identical with an actual, negative fact, which seems to me to entail disjunctivism. See Engel (forthcoming) for further discussion.

<sup>14</sup> In this diagram, as in the discussion which follows, "fact" means "non-bipolar fact".

WHAT IS THOUGHT

		STATES OF AFFAIRS	(NON-BIPOLAR) FACTS
WHAT IS PERCEIVED	STATES OF AFFAIRS	I. As discussed in §3	II. Exp. not a source of knowledge
	(NON-BIPOLAR) FACTS	III. Proposed position	IV. As discussed in §4

We have already examined the positions which are compatible with M2, i.e. I and IV. Two positions, II and III, remain open. Position II is not very promising, since it eschews the insight that perception is a source of knowledge while dragging along the difficulties inherent in the claim that true thoughts are identical with non-bipolar facts. So we are left with position III, which rejects the identity theory of truth (since as we saw, the truth of a thought cannot *consist* in its identity with a mere state of affairs).<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, I cannot provide here a substantial defence of that position, but let me briefly sketch its essentials. The rejection of the identity theory of truth is linked with a correspondence theory of truth: a true thought has a distinct truth-maker. Contrary to other strands of the correspondence theory, what makes our thoughts true is not always cognitively inaccessible. On the contrary, it can be a non-bipolar fact immediately presented in perception. Perception is openness to facts because it is sensitive to the obtaining (i.e. the existence) of facts involving particular things. The passivity of perception (as opposed to the spontaneity of thought) does not *itself* capture what is special to experience; at best, it follows from the definition of perception as openness to facts. Perception is a direct, intentional relation to facts; there is no distinction between the content of perception and the fact perceived. The identity theory of perception captures what is special to experience as opposed to thought. In

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<sup>15</sup> There is in principle another option, which maintains both identity theories (for perception and for thought), but rejects the claim that the content of perception is the same as the content of some thought. A true thought would be identical with a fact, but a fact of a kind which cannot be, strictly speaking, perceived. Here I operate under the assumption, shared by McDowell, that what is perceived is, at the extensional level, of the same kind as what is thought about.

contrast, there is a relevant distinction between the contents of our thoughts, and the facts represented by them. We can, if we wish, say that the phrase “what is thought” manifests the familiar sense/reference ambiguity, thus making facts the *objects* of our (bipolar) thoughts. However, we need not do so. We can claim, alternatively, that in *mere* thinking, we are not intentionally related to facts at all; we are *representing* facts in the form of states of affairs (i.e., in propositional terms), but we are not *acquainted* with them.<sup>16</sup> Only perception (along with the other sources of knowledge, such as memory) acquaints us with facts. In a Kantian fashion, knowledge comes out as a collaboration between thought and one of the sources of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

### §6 *An intermediate position between McDowell’s and the Myth of the Given*

The position we have arrived at is the following. There is a sense of “what is thought” according to which what is thought cannot be, strictly speaking, what is perceived. When our experience is veridical, what is perceived is a fact whose existence involves its obtaining. In contrast, when we think the truth, what is thought, which is what we grasp in our thinking, is not a fact: it is a bipolar thought which is also capable of being false.<sup>18</sup>

This non-McDowellian version of the identity theory of perception vindicates the view that there is an important nonconceptual dimension in perception, since the content of perception cannot be *fully identified* with a conceptual content. Is this just a version of the Myth of the Given, thoroughly (and rightly) rejected by McDowell? The Myth of the Given is the claim that there is a nonconceptual basis of experience which is in principle independent from the subject’s conceptual resources. What is given in that sense is not sensitive to background theories or other conceptual capacities. McDowell reacts to the Myth by claiming that perception is in the space of concepts. However, there is an intermediate position: although perception is not in the space of concepts, it depends intrinsically on the subject’s conceptual resources.

To clarify what is involved in this intermediate position, let us consider Dretske’s (1993) famous distinction between consciousness of things and consciousness of facts. By

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<sup>16</sup> According to the present suggestion, the notions of propositional content and state of affairs are on a par; indeed, they are extensionally equivalent.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this is quite close to a position once held by Russell (1910: ch. 7) – minus the sense-data theory of perception, replaced by a more realist view.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps one might say that what is thought *about* is a fact, i.e. distinguish the thought-content (“what is thought”) from the fact which makes it true (“what is thought about”).

“consciousness of things”, Dretske means consciousness not only of material substances with spatial parts but also of entities which are temporally located : events, processes or conditions. Whereas a thing is typically described with a singular term, a fact is properly described with a proposition. Dretske develops his distinction especially in the case of perception. He claims that perceptual consciousness of things is *simple*, or purely sensory; it doesn’t depend on any deployment of concepts. In contrast, perceptual consciousness of facts is *epistemic*, or cognitive; it essentially involves the perceiver’s concepts.

Dretske’s taxonomy suggests that he wouldn’t accept the possibility of a simple perception of facts, i.e. a perception of facts which would be independent from the subject’s conceptual resources. Dretske also claims that it is always possible to perceive a particular thing without perceiving, in the epistemic sense, any fact concerning that thing. Now suppose that we reject the latter claim. We insist that we cannot perceive any thing without mobilising a (typically indexical) concept of that thing. If perceiving a fact entails perceiving each of its constituents, we can perceive a fact only if we have a concept available for each of its constituents. In this sense, perception is theory- or concept-laden; it depends intrinsically on background conceptual capacities. It is the only sense in which perception has a conceptual content. But the crucial point is that this is compatible with the view, sketched here, that at a more fundamental level, perception is a nonconceptual, direct relation to facts. In other words, the following claims are perfectly compatible with each other:

1. Perceiving a fact involves mobilising a concept for each of the fact’s constituents.
2. The content of perception is not, strictly speaking, identical with a conceptual content.

To my mind, this is a viable intermediate position between the stance of philosophers who, like McDowell, claim that perceptual content is conceptual, and the alternative conception of philosophers who, like Chris Peacocke (1992), argue that perceptual content is nonconceptual but is nevertheless distinct from the perceived scene as it determines (bipolar) “conditions of correctness”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, this would still require our epistemology to be more externalist than McDowell would allow, since knowledge-conferring relations must be sensitive to something more than just conceptual content. See my 1998 for more details.



## §7 An objection from cognitive dynamics

Let us consider a final objection to our (sketchy) account of perceptual openness. This objection is based on real and important differences between the cognitive dynamics of perception and that of memory.

Dretske envisages *en passant* the application to memory of his general distinction between consciousness of things and consciousness of facts. Indeed, there is a familiar distinction between so-called episodic and factual memory. Episodic memory (“memory of *x*”) is intimately related to a particular experience in the subject’s past life, whereas factual memory (“memory that *p*”) need not be about the past. Dretske suggests that episodic memory is like simple perception in that it belongs to consciousness of things, whereas factual memory is like epistemic perception in that it belongs to consciousness of facts.

I have argued elsewhere (1997) that this interpretation of episodic and factual memory cannot be sustained. The (complete) object of episodic memory is not a particular thing, even if this “thing” is a past experience. Episodic memory is normally about an event which appears to us to be *dated*, more or less precisely of course, and relative to other known events. The content of episodic memory is that a particular event took place at a particular past time, or that I witnessed that event at that time. Even though ordinary language embodies a preference for describing episodic memory with the phrase “memory of *x*”, analysis shows that the ascription of an episodic memory has the same canonical form as the ascription of a factual memory, i.e. “memory that *p*”, where “*p*” expresses a Fregean thought whose truth-value is not relative to time.

Now let us consider the cognitive dynamics of memory, i.e. the way in which information carried by memory is retained through time. In a typical perceptual experience, I keep track of a perceived thing through various states in which it is given to me. For instance, if the thing is about to leave my visual field, I am able to compensate for its relative movement and bring it back to the centre of the field. I see that it is changing colours, but my eyes are fixed on it. In contrast, when I remember something, I keep track of *facts* about things; I don’t have to compensate for changing states of the remembered things. All I have to compensate for is the passage of time, like when I express the same memory today with “It was raining this morning” and tomorrow with “Yesterday morning, it was raining”. The cognitive dynamics is thus quite different from the cognitive dynamics of perception: if a

perception involves a conscious sensitivity to particular things through series of (actual and possible) transformations, it is only (episodic or factual) memory which is, strictly speaking, consciousness of facts.

This objection may be supplemented by the observation that a fact is an abstract entity, since it is located neither in time nor in space. As Strawson (1950) famously put it, one can't spill coffee on facts. Perception, the objection goes on, is always of concrete entities. Therefore, there can't be perception of facts, only of things.

The way out of this objection is to distinguish carefully between what perception allows us to keep track of, and what it makes accessible to our thought. At the most fundamental level, perception essentially involves the capacity to keep track of concrete things, not abstract facts.<sup>20</sup> Only memory allows us to retain factual information over time. However, we perceivers are also capable of remembering facts about what we saw. This is possible only if perception makes accessible to us an indefinite series of facts at any time. I am perceptually keeping track of a bird which just flew from a tree, and I have access to original facts each time, which I can express with "This bird is now flying". For us, perception and memory are inter-dependent: my perception alone does not allow me to keep track of facts, but it has the essential property of making them accessible to my thought, thanks to memory.

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<sup>20</sup> "Things" here includes events. Contrary to what is sometimes supposed, it is possible to keep track of an event while it is unfolding (for instance, against a pattern of other events that might happen [**happening**] at the same time).

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