

Is Perception a Source of Reasons?

by

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Abstract: It is widely assumed that perception is a source of reasons (SR). There is a weak sense in which this claim is trivially true: even if one characterizes perception in purely causal terms, perceptual beliefs *originate* from the mind's interaction with the world. When philosophers *argue for* (SR), however, they have a stronger view in mind: they claim that perception provides *pre-* or *non-*doxastic reasons for belief. In this article I examine some ways of developing this view and criticize them. I exploit these results to formulate a series of constraints that a satisfactory account of the epistemic role of perception should fulfil. I also make a positive suggestion: coherentists are right when they claim that only beliefs can be reasons for other beliefs. Nevertheless, I depart from traditional coherentism, for I do not buy its conception of perception as bare sensation, nor explicate the justificatory status of beliefs in terms of coherence. My point is rather that, when one invokes experience to justify a belief, the justifying state must have structural features of beliefs.

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SUPPOSE YOU ACCEPT A WIDESPREAD analysis according to which mental acts or states like *believing*, *desiring*, *thinking*, or *intending* have a three-place structure: a subject *S* is related via a psychological act or state ψ to a propositional content *p*: *S* ψ 's that *p*. Suppose further that you think, as most contemporary philosophers do, that perception grounds some mental acts or states. These two assumptions should lead you to ask how perception is related to the attitudes listed above.

An influential response says that perception is a *source of reasons* (hereafter "SR"). This suggestion should satisfy two demands. First, one has to provide an account of *reasons*. Second, it is necessary to show that, given one's preferred ontology of reasons, perceptual states adequately ground some beliefs.

Concerning the first point, there are two conceptions of reasons in the literature: they are seen either as structured contents, like facts or propositions, or as mental states, like beliefs. One's answer to the second question is a bit tricky. Suppose someone conceives of perception in *purely causal* terms. In that case, perceptual beliefs are grounded in perception because the latter "triggers" them. Some philosophers have complained, however, that bare causal relations are too weak. As a result, they have argued for a picture in which perception also plays a normative role.

In this article I will criticize normative versions of (SR): the strong propositional view (sections 2–4), the weak propositional view (section 5), and the

quasi-doxastic view (sections 6–7). My main purpose is to show that none of these accounts provides a satisfactory picture of the way beliefs are *grounded* in perception. I shall use these results to formulate a series of constraints that a satisfactory account of the epistemic role of perception should fulfil. I will also suggest that, strictly speaking, only beliefs can normatively ground other beliefs. This might be seen as a defence of coherentism. Nevertheless, this labelling is misleading for two reasons: first, recent versions of coherentism introduce non-doxastic justifiers (Kvanvig, 2011; Gupta, 2006a) and, second, coherentism is associated with the controversial claim that justification supervenes on the internal coherence of a belief system. My purpose is rather to motivate a new epistemological model of perception in which the latter is not conceived as a reason for belief.

1. Structural vs. Normative Adequacy

(SR) is the claim that experience delivers pre- or non-doxastic reasons for belief. The main motivation for this view is to show that experience can play a rational role. If this picture is right, most coherentists are wrong to claim that only beliefs can be invoked as reasons for other beliefs. Thus, despite its pre- or non-doxastic character, perceptual experience provides an *adequate rational* basis for perceptual beliefs. What does rational adequacy mean? We can distinguish two different notions: *structural* and *normative*.

An entity *E* is *structurally adequate* to justify a belief if *E* satisfies two conditions: (1) it has features allowing it to participate in rational relations, and (2) it can be exploited to provide an account of the way perceptual beliefs are based or grounded. In this context, I define “basing” (or “grounding”) in explanatory terms. A subject’s belief *B* is based on *E* just in case she holds *B* because of *E*. Intuitively, chairs or hurricanes are structurally inadequate because they lack the features enabling them to participate in rational relations. Moreover, it is difficult to understand how the bare existence of any of those entities could fully explain one’s perceptual belief that there is a chair or that a hurricane is coming.

The question of structural adequacy is to be distinguished from that of *normative adequacy*. The latter is related to the factors that positively or negatively affect the normative standing of propositions or beliefs (Goldman, 2009; Pryor, 2005). In this sense, a normative account of the epistemic role of perception purports to explain which factors make perceptual beliefs *justified*, *reasonable* or *instances of knowledge*. As a result, providing a structural account of the epistemic role of perception is orthogonal to the project of delivering a normative account. After all, factors that are external to the perception-belief relation may affect the normative standing of

a perceptual belief. That the visual system be in good order or that the illumination conditions be normal are factors that affect the normative standing of visual beliefs. Nevertheless, they are not directly relevant to the structural account of the way visual beliefs are grounded in perception.

A consequence of the distinction between structural and normative adequacy is that one can investigate the connection between perception and belief without taking a definitive stance on the debate between internalism and externalism. This debate is related to the question whether (most of) the factors that positively or negatively affect the normative standing of propositions or beliefs are internal or external. Although important, this question is different from the structural issue. The latter is a problem for *any* theorist who agrees that some beliefs are grounded in perception, or accepts that perceptual experience can be cited in justificatory practices. Thus, it is possible to combine various structural accounts of the perception-belief relation with externalist accounts in terms of factive evidence, reliable processes or teleological functions.¹

Coherentism is typically cited as a rejection of (SR). Given the above distinction, however, this example is misleading, for it combines normative and structural considerations. According to a common characterization, coherentism argues that the factors that positively or negatively affect the normative standing of beliefs are (mostly) internal to belief systems. Interestingly, this normative claim has been motivated on the structural assumption that a direct confrontation of beliefs with the world makes little sense. This gives rise to Davidson's (1986) famous contention that perception plays no *evidential* role in the justification of beliefs, for only a belief may count as a reason for holding another belief. The claim has an ontological scope: perceptual states are not the sorts of things that may stand in rational relations to beliefs.

Davidson's view follows from an assimilation of perceptual states to sensations, which only bear a causal relation to propositional attitudes. The claim can be put as follows: although reasons may be causes, not all causal relations are rational. According to Davidson, given that perceptual states only bear a causal relation to beliefs, they do not provide reasons for belief. But this view might be justified on different considerations. If one's ontology prohibits the postulation of structured entities like facts, states of affairs or propositions, one may be led to endorse Davidson's view (see Turri, 200, pp. 491–292 and n. 5). A different approach would be to look at perceptual experience in order to see whether it bears a rational relation to beliefs. This is the path I will explore here.

In this article, I will argue for what Lyons (2009) terms the Belief Principle (BP): only beliefs can evidentially justify other beliefs. Hence, my agreement with

1 I develop a functional-teleological account of the normative issue in Echeverri (submitted).

Davidson is partial. Whereas Davidson defined the coherentist view as a defence of this structural claim, I will try to develop it independently of his more controversial views on the factors that make a belief justified. Furthermore, I will show that one can share Davidson's reliance on (BP) without buying his conception of perception as bare sensation. Providing new arguments for (BP) is important because (SR) has become the orthodoxy in many circles.²

Since defenders of (SR) have tried to provide an alternative to (BP), they are committed to showing that other entities can participate in rational relations, and explain how perceptual beliefs are grounded in perceptual states. In other words, they have to demonstrate that some pre- or non-doxastic states are structurally adequate. By looking at things in this light, the question is whether pre- or non-doxastic propositional states are structurally adequate, not whether they are normatively adequate. The latter issue would lead us to include an analysis of non-evidential normative factors as well. These issues are not my main concern in this article.³

My overall strategy will be as follows. I will examine three versions of (SR), and show that none of them provides an adequate account of the basing relation. My objections will be of two sorts: psychological and phenomenological. I will exploit the results to formulate a series of constraints that should be satisfied in order to get the basing relation right. Since the motivation of these constraints will follow from the discussion, I will not try to back them up by independent arguments. If the reader thinks she could resist them, she ought to find a flaw in the discussion that motivates them.

2 An important exception is Jack Lyons. I got to know Lyons' work thanks to a referee of this journal. Although my picture is congenial to his view in some respects, our motivations are different. Whereas Lyons thinks that qualia are epistemologically irrelevant, I motivate my rejection of (SR) on the examination of three propositional accounts of experience. Contrary to Lyons, I do not understand phenomenology as an endorsement of qualia but as a descriptive discipline that investigates the way things appear. Thus, one can use phenomenology to draw some philosophical conclusions without positing qualia, which is more controversial. Whereas Lyons puts his view in the service of reliabilism, I emphasize a teleological analysis. For further details, see Echeverri (submitted).

3 My distinction between structural and normative adequacy differs from Ginsborg's (2006) suggestion that Davidson's claim concerns one sense of the notion of a reason, what she calls "third-person reasons," as opposed to "first-person reasons." She thinks Davidson's view is restricted to the use of beliefs to rationalize someone's behaviour from the third-person point of view (Ginsborg, 2006, p. 302). Although I cannot examine this picture here, I think Ginsborg is wrong to smuggle *facts* into the characterization of first-person reasons. This has an unfortunate consequence. If one invokes facts as part of the definition of reasons in the first-person sense, the question arises as to what entity might work as a reason for belief when there are no available facts. Ginsborg (2006, pp. 290–1, n. 10) acknowledges this case, and introduces "supposed facts" (p. 303) to accommodate perceptual error. Nonetheless, it is unobvious what it means to be presented with a supposed fact. For further discussion, see Turri (2009, p. 502) and Echeverri (2011). I am sympathetic, however, to Ginsborg's (2006, pp. 296–301) critical remarks on non-doxastic conceptions of experience, as the rest of the article shows.

2. The Strong Propositional View

A number of philosophers think that perceptual states have propositional content. An example of this view is conceptualism, i.e., the claim that the content of perceptual experience is identical to the content expressed by an embedded “that”-clause preceded by a cognitive verb (McDowell, 1994a, 1998a; Brewer 1999). Conceptualists think this claim entails that experiences are *conceptually articulated*. This follows from their assumption that the building blocks of propositions are concepts. This conclusion is not mandatory, though. One could hold that the building blocks of propositions are individuals and properties (see Kaplan, 1977). If that is right, it should be possible to develop the propositional view in a non-conceptualist guise. For reasons of space, I will bracket the debate about the nature of propositions, and focus on the general assumption that they are *structured entities*. For a content to count as propositional in this minimal sense it must have a compositional structure that can be assigned a Boolean value: True or False. Although there are accounts of propositions as sets of possible worlds (e.g., Stalnaker, 1984), the view of propositions as structured entities has been more influential within studies of perception.⁴

Does this account of the content of perception provide an adequate model of (SR)? If one holds that reasons are structured entities, like facts or propositions, one might be inclined to answer “yes.” If one grants that perception has structured content, one has solved the main problem of (SR). As I will explain later, however, this move is too hasty, for it fails to address the basing problem. To reach this conclusion, I will make use of the writings of conceptualists because they provide a detailed version of the propositional view. Nevertheless, the arguments do not depend on the conceptual or non-conceptual character of experience. Thus, we can extend them to propositional views that are either hostile to conceptualism (e.g., Peacocke, 1992, 2001) or neutral on the nature of perceptual content (e.g., Chudnoff, 2010; Huemer, 2001, 2007).

In their earlier writings, John McDowell and Bill Brewer grant that experience has propositional content, and analyse it as having constituent structure. At the same time, they declare that perceiving is structured *before* the subject forms a judgement or fixes a belief.⁵ McDowell declares:

4 Some of the points I make in this article can be translated into the framework of possible-worlds semantics.

5 For the purposes of this article, I take beliefs as mental dispositions and judgements as mental acts. From this perspective, a belief B_p may be manifested by different judgements $J_1p, J_2p, \dots, J_n p$. I remain neutral on whether judgements are conceptually prior to beliefs or vice versa.

That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment. It becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. (McDowell, 1994a, p. 26; see also p. 62 and his 1998a, pp. 438–439)

Brewer is equally explicit on this point:

[T]he move from unendorsed understanding of these perceptual demonstrative contents [delivered by perceptions] to endorsement of them in belief will normally be almost instantaneous, and only rarely involve anything like a considered decision on the subject's part. *They are importantly distinct stages of the story, though.* The first is something for which the subject need have no epistemically relevant reasons, which in turn provides her with reasons of a genuinely epistemic kind for the second. (Brewer, 1999, p. 223 n. 5; emphasis added)⁶

A distinctive feature of this approach is the claim that perceptual experience *itself* is structured. One's experience is structured as *p* before one *endorses p* or *takes it to be p*. This contrast is made vivid by the use of different verbs, which are supposed to denote different psychological stages: first, there is a *grasping* or *understanding* of *p* in perceptual experience; later on, one *accepts* or *endorses* that content in a judgement or belief.⁷ From a classical viewpoint, having a perceptual experience is like *entertaining* a proposition, whereas judging or believing would introduce a propositional attitude in its own right.⁸

What are the motivations for this propositional view? We can indicate two:

Implausibility of Doxastic Accounts: At the time McDowell and Brewer developed this picture, it was widely assumed that structured contents were only available to characterize cognitive states like beliefs. Yet McDowell and Brewer also assumed, as most contemporary theorists do, that experiences are independent of belief. Given that doxastic accounts of experience were thought to be implausible, the claim that experience has propositional content led to the view that it is a non-doxastic state. In the early formulation, perceptual experience is a *pre*-doxastic state, i.e., a state that *precedes* perceptual judgement or belief. Experience is a pre-doxastic propositional state that provides reasons for belief. A cursory examination of recent proposals shows that this view remains influential (see Huemer, 2007, pp. 30–32; Chudnoff, 2010).

Normativity: The conceptualist view is driven by an additional concern: to show that the mind's perceptual relation to the world is *intrinsically normative* even

6 For a more recent defence of conceptualism, see Brewer (2005). Nevertheless, Brewer (2006) criticizes the claim that experience has "correctness conditions" and argues for a non-representational theory.

7 I shall ignore the contrast between acceptance and belief. Although important, it is orthogonal to the arguments in this article, and it does not play any role in the theories of experience considered here.

8 According to Smith (2001), the view of perceptual experience as the entertaining of a proposition was already developed by Runzo (1977, pp. 214–215): "To perceive an object or state of affairs, X, is, and is no more than, to be episodically aware of a set of *propositions* about X [. . .] This awareness of (sets of) propositions during perceiving is akin to entertaining."

though it is not to be conceived in the model of belief. Normativity is one of the main tenets of McDowell's conceptualism: he is convinced that only a normative account of perception would avoid what Sellars termed the "Myth of the Given," and provide an alternative account to Davidson's coherentism. Since the interpretation of the colourful expression "Myth of the Given" is not easy, I will leave it for another occasion. For the time being, it is important to bear in mind that the propositional view is driven by the aim of conceiving the mind's relation to the world in *normative* terms. One of the driving forces of the view is to make room for a conception of experience that can work as a tribunal, i.e., as a test for beliefs (for discussion, see Gupta, 2006b).

The prior considerations suggest that propositional accounts are committed to the bold claim that *pre-doxastic* propositional states are sufficient to ground perceptual beliefs. For this reason, I will call it the "strong propositional view." Let us take a look at the conceptualist version of this picture.

Conceptualists identify the content of perceptual judgements with the content of experiences. They locate perception within the space of reasons but preserve the distinction between "inferential" and "non-inferential" sources of knowledge. They introduce a non-inferential but still rational perception-judgement transition. The link proceeds by *sameness of content*. This idea can be clarified by comparing this move with instances of the repetition rule: " $p \rightarrow p$." This rule *asserts* the antecedent and *asserts* the consequent. If we use Frege's assertion sign "|" to mark the assertive force, we could symbolize the repetition rule thus: " $|p \rightarrow |p$." By contrast, according to our reconstruction, conceptualism introduces a transition from an unendorsed to an endorsed content, something like this: " $\neg p \rightarrow | \neg p$." In this view, although the same content appears both in the antecedent and the consequent, it does not instantiate the repetition rule. This reconstruction enables the strong propositionalist to accommodate the *defeasible* character of perception-judgement transitions. If they merely happened to instantiate the repetition rule, it would be hard to understand how perception may lead to false belief. But if judgement leads to endorsement, one can try to make room for error as arising in the act of endorsement (see McDowell, 1998b, p. 405).⁹

Additionally, this picture promises to capture an essential aspect of reasons, since it conceives of them as structured. Most contemporary theorists assume that being structured is a *necessary condition* for being part of our epistemic practices of deduction, probabilistic reasoning, induction, etc.¹⁰ Besides, one might acknowledge with Sellars (1956), Brandom (1997), Williamson (2000), Steup (2001) and Pryor (2007), among others, that entities devoid of syntactic structure could not play the role of reasons:

9 For further discussion, see Glüer (2009) and Echeverri (2011).

10 Brewer (1999, pp. 150–3) introduces this argument. See also McDowell (1994a, p. 7).

[O]nly things with sentential structure can be premises of inference [. . .]. For this reason sensings, understood in terms of nonepistemic relations between sense contents and perceivers, are not well suited to serve as the ultimate ground to which inferentially inherited justification traces back. (Brandom, 1997, p. 128; see also Brewer, 1999, p. 151)

I shall call it the “argument from structural specificity.” It shows that only entities with syntactic complexity are apt to participate in justification relations. Let us illustrate its merits with an example taken from Williamson (2000, p. 195). Someone in court accused of murder could hardly be declared guilty just by *presentation* of a bloody knife to the judge. Doing *this* would be too *unspecific* to convict her. In order to decide whether she is guilty, it would be necessary to *formulate propositions about* the bloody knife, such as “the knife was found in her house” or, pointing to the accused, “the knife has her fingerprints.” Merely presenting the knife could hardly provide *a reason* to condemn her. As Williamson (2000, p. 195) points out, it “is a source of indefinitely many such propositions.”

The argument stresses that rational relations are *specific* in a way in which entities lacking syntactic complexity are not. In some accounts, propositions have that complexity. Hence, in those accounts, if a state has propositional content, it can participate in rational relations. Since the strong propositional view is based on the conception of propositions as structured entities, it can explain how perception participates in rational relations.

3. The Strong Propositional View is False

In the last section, I presented the strong propositional version of (SR). According to this view, perceptual experiences are pre-doxastic propositional states that are adequate to ground beliefs. Thus, the strong propositional view provides a genuine alternative to (BP). It conceives of perception-judgement transitions as moves from *unendorsed* to *endorsed* contents. In this section, I shall criticize this view on the basis of two arguments. As we shall see, these objections are neutral on the nature of reasons and justification, and they do not appeal to Davidson’s conception of perception as bare sensation.

First of all, the argument from structural complexity does not show that the content of perceptual experiences *itself* is propositional. What it establishes is the weaker claim that the evidence invoked in justificatory *practices* is propositional, not that experiences are propositionally structured. One might therefore argue that a non-propositional theory can accommodate the requirement of propositionality. Take “transformation models” of perception, where the transition from perception to belief involves a constructive process or a change in representational format. One can argue that propositions intervening in empirical justifications are built at the

level of judgement, not at the level of pre-doxastic perceptual content (see, e.g., Burge, 2010). This proposal gains plausibility when one considers some experiences one would not intuitively classify as having propositional content, like the state of pain. Intuitively, I can explain to you that I am moaning because I am feeling pain. Here my state of pain is a source of justification. But it does not seem to have propositional structure.

Similar remarks could be made against pictures that are neutral on the conceptual character of experience. Huemer (2001, 2007) and Chudnoff (2010) assume that grounding states must be propositional. The former defines his principle of phenomenal conservatism as follows: “If it seems to *S* that *p*, then, in the absence of defeaters, *S* thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that *p*” (Huemer, 2007, p. 30). This family of views is caught on the horns of a dilemma: either they try to extend their account to pain or they restrict it to propositional states. In the former case, they face a serious problem: to give independent arguments for an intentionalist analysis of pain. Unfortunately, these arguments have not been provided by defenders of the strong propositional model. Thus, in the best possible scenario, strong propositional accounts have limited application. If they have limited application, however, one may wonder why one could not generalize from the example of pain to the perceptual case, and treat all cases as involving non-propositional grounds.

The prior remarks show that it is not necessary to conceive of experiences as propositionally structured in order to satisfy the argument from structural specificity. What is needed is a model where propositions become *available* for justification, i.e., an account wherein subjects *smoothly* move from perceptual states to the formation of propositional states in their justificatory practices. We can exploit this remark to formulate the first constraint:

Constraint 1: Any epistemological theory of perception must explain how *specific* states become available in experience. If the account posits non-propositional states, it should bridge the gap between the non-propositional character of experience, and the propositional character of reasons.

Second, although there are good reasons to think that propositionality is a necessary condition for reasons, having a propositional structure is not sufficient for a *state* to *ground* a perceptual belief. Let me explain. A number of propositional attitudes are said to have structured contents, although they do not play the role of epistemic reasons. Imagine that an opinionated subject is presented with the Müller-Lyer figure for the first time in her life. After being informed that it is an illusion, she does not believe it. The experimenter, somewhat surprised, insists: “The two lines are of the same length. Line B [with the external hashes] *merely looks* longer than line A [with the internal hashes]. Why do you think B is longer

than A?” One can imagine a series of answers expressing structured states but which would yield *inappropriate* justifications:

- Wants: *Because I *want* line B to be longer than line A.
 Assumptions: *Because I *assume* that line B is longer than line A.
 Wonderings: *Because I *wonder* whether line B is longer than line A.

These examples suggest a critique of the strong propositional view. In the attempt to provide a *pre-doxastic* picture of experience, it has severed an ingredient of justifying states: what Sellars (1956) aptly termed their *endorsement* dimension. The intuition behind this objection is that having a propositional structure is not sufficient to ground a belief. Grounding states are not just made out of propositions but also from what Frege called *assertive force*. Assertive force is constitutive of judgements and beliefs but, since the propositionalist wants to provide an *alternative* to doxastic theories of perception and resist (BP), she has lost this dimension from the picture. As indicated above, this argument can be applied to non-conceptualist views like the one favoured by Peacocke (1992, 2001). If one takes it that experiences deliver unendorsed non-conceptual propositional contents, and assumes that they ground some beliefs, one could be criticized on the same count. Propositionality is not (structurally) sufficient for a state to ground another state. And it can also be applied against any picture that assumes that perceptual reasons are pre-doxastic propositional states (Huemer, 2001, 2007; Chudnoff, 2010).

This line of argument becomes more perspicuous when one considers the metaphor of the tribunal of experience, which conceptualists take as a test for any theory of perception. Contrary to Davidson, McDowell thinks this image is crucial to an understanding of human rationality because it allows for a characterization of belief systems as *rationally sensitive* to the “impact” of the world. According to McDowell, only a theory capable of making sense of perceptual experience as a source of reasons could make sense of that revealing metaphor.

In the light of the previous remarks, it is clear that the strong propositionalist is not entitled to conceive of experience as a tribunal either. Just take the following example. My father and I plan to go and play tennis in the afternoon. In the meantime, I hear on the radio that it has been raining all day long and, as a result, I change my mind: “Since it’s raining, we won’t play tennis.” When my father comes, I greet him with the following comment: “It’s raining! It’s impossible to play tennis!” My father, who just came in from outdoors, replies: “No, it isn’t raining anymore. Are you ready to take revenge?” How should we conceive of my process of belief revision? If I were a bit sceptic, I would probably walk to the nearest window in order to check if it is raining. If I were to see that the sun is shining, I ought to update my previous belief in order to match it to the present weather. It seems crucial, however, that I *accept that the sun is shining*. The fact *that the sun is shining* could hardly eventuate in a belief revision process if I were not

to *take it* (at least tacitly) that the sun is shining. Only accepted contents can be considered in belief revision. Non-accepted contents would be ignored; after all, they do not “tell me” *that the sun is shining*.¹¹

One can make the same point by reflecting on the nature of Frege’s (1879) “assertion sign.” In the concept-script, unendorsed contents *never* occur in isolation but only as constituents of more complex judged contents. This is what happens in conditionals. In a conditional of the form “ $p \rightarrow q$,” the antecedent figures as an “entertained” content. Yet, it is also a constituent of an asserted conditional. The motivation for this view is that only asserted contents can yield immediate justification. If an unendorsed content is invoked as a reason, it must be paired with an endorsed content before it leads to a conclusion. If one concludes q from $(p \rightarrow q)$ and p , one combines the assertion of $(p \rightarrow q)$ with the assertion of p . The same occurs when one appeals to the disjunctive syllogism: one combines the assertion of $(p \vee q)$ with the assertion of $\neg q$ in order to conclude the assertion of p . Although p and q are “entertained,” they are not entertained in isolation but in the context of a disjunctive assertion. The strong propositional view of perception leads us to do violence to these facts: it assumes that “entertained” contents occur in isolation, and are sufficient to immediately ground perceptual beliefs. This contradicts our justificatory practices.¹²

Before I draw the moral from this argument, let me clarify three points:

First, the analogy with Frege’s assertion sign shows that we are not advocating any form of Cartesianism. The point is not that a *conscious appraisal* of perceptual content is structurally necessary for belief revision. The claim is rather that “merely entertained” contents are psychologically idle. If one is interested in avoiding any Cartesian commitments, one can construe the notion of doxastic force in functional terms: in order to generate a belief revision process, the content must be *appropriately* linked to other beliefs. The intuition here is that “merely entertained” contents are not appropriately linked to other beliefs, so they cannot generate rational moves.¹³

11 I am echoing Frege: “How does a thought act? By being grasped and taken to be true” (Frege, 1918–1919, p. 61; 1997, p. 344).

12 It might be objected that, when one reasons by *reductio ad absurdum*, one entertains an isolated proposition *for the sake of the argument*. Two replies are available here. First, this technique does not provide “immediate” justification in the sense intended by (SR). One proceeds by *reductio* when immediate justification is not available. Second, it is unclear that these cases involve “entertaining” a proposition, instead of some positive attitudes, like *supposing* or *assuming* it to be true.

13 The tribunal scenario is philosophically interesting because it casts doubt on the strong separation between action and belief. It recreates a situation in which one’s epistemic reasons must generate an adequate *epistemic action* on the subject’s side: to update her belief system. Thus, it shows that even epistemic grounds must be endowed with motivational force. Since facts or propositions lack motivational force, their obtaining is not sufficient to generate belief-revision processes.

Second, some philosophers have compared the phenomenal character of experience with the force of assertions (see Matthen, 2005, ch. 13; Siegel, 2010, ch. 2). Does this mean that our requirement of assertive force precludes the possibility of a zombie having perceptually justified beliefs?¹⁴ Although I find the notion of a zombie suspect, my previous remarks can be accepted even by someone who finds it intelligible. After all, the notion of assertive force is so defined that it is possessed by beliefs. As Lyons (2009, p. 73) defines it, a zombie is a counterpart of a normal human that is doxastically identical to her. Thus, the idea of a zombie is compatible with (BP), i.e., the claim that only beliefs can evidentially justify other beliefs. If the zombie lacked assertive states, it would lack perceptual beliefs altogether and, as a result, would lack perceptual reasons. We may probably conceive a being which lacks qualia but not one whose epistemically relevant states lack assertive force.¹⁵

Third, by saying that assertive states are necessary we are not holding any internalist picture of justification. Recall that the internalism/externalism debate is related to the factors that determine the normative standing of propositions or beliefs, and whether they are (mostly) internal or external. By claiming that rational moves require an assertive dimension we are just making a point concerning the conditions under which a belief is rationally formed or revised in the light of perception. What the tribunal scenario shows is precisely that these moves do not occur *because* the subject entertains a content. They occur *because* she takes it at face value. And this is compatible with an externalist analysis according to which these moves are deemed justified only if belief revision routines are *reliable* or exemplify some rational principles that are not accessible to the subject.

Having clarified the main point of the argument let me state a second constraint:

Constraint 2: Any epistemological theory of perception must introduce assertive states as justifying states. It can do it in two ways: either it identifies justifying states with beliefs, or it conceives of experiences as assertive states.

I shall examine these two options in the next sections. For the time being, let us reply to some potential objections.

14 I am indebted here to a referee of this journal.

15 I think that phenomenal features like the feeling of presence also play an epistemic role in the epistemology of perception. Nevertheless, I do not need to argue for this specific claim in order to criticize the strong propositional view. If the reader finds that phenomenology is irrelevant, she may read assertive force in functional terms, i.e., as a disposition to take *p* for granted when one uses it as a starting point for reasoning.

4. Propositional Justification and the Nature of Reasons

In the last section, I suggested that my two arguments were neutral on the nature of reasons and justification. One might be inclined, however, to resist this idea. In this section, I will respond to some potential objections.

1. It might be objected that the previous objections overlook the orthodox distinction between *propositional* and *doxastic* justification. Intuitively, if *p* is justified for Pierre, Pierre is in a position to justifiably believe that *p*, even if he fails to form the relevant belief (Kvanvig, 2003; Pollock and Cruz, 1999, pp. 35–36; see Turri, 2010, for criticism). If perceptual states must have doxastic force, there is no room for perceptual propositional justification. But, since the notion of propositional justification is fairly intuitive, something has gone wrong in the previous arguments.

My reply is that propositions (or facts) *themselves* cannot *ground* beliefs. To be sure, there is a sense in which the fact that it is raining might be necessary for me to be justified in believing that it is raining. Nevertheless, this is not the sense intended by (SR), which is a claim about the way perceptual states are to be conceived in order to appropriately *ground* perceptual beliefs. (SR) qualifies a perception-belief relation, while the propositional notion of justification may hold even if no such relation obtains. When theorists like McDowell (1994a) and Brewer (1999) introduced (SR), they wanted to avoid Davidson's conception of mind as "severed" from the external world. The point of the previous argument was that it is not sufficient for perceptual states to have structured contents in order to appropriately link perceptual beliefs to the world. They must have assertive force. If they lack such force, they are inadequate to motivate rational moves like those involved in belief revision in the light of experience.

2. One might be inclined to resist the previous response by drawing a distinction between propositional and factive accounts of the contents of perception. According to some forms of disjunctivism, genuine perception is a relation to a fact. If the content of perception is a fact, one does not need to conceive of perception as having assertive force. After all, the content of a factive state is: *it is the case that p*. Thus, if one is perceptually related to a fact, one is "given" a 100% guarantee that it obtains. Hence, the factive view does more than just "telling" me that *p*, for it presents me with the fact that *p*.¹⁶

The analogy between saying and experiencing can be understood in two ways. It may hold between the *act* of saying and the *mode* of experiencing or between the *content* of the speech act and the *content* of experience. The protest exploits the content side of the analogy. If one equates experience to the content of an assertion,

16 I owe this point to a referee of this journal.

it will leave open the possibility that it is not satisfied, for propositions can be true and can be false. This is certainly less than the factive account promises, which purports to relate the subject to a fact. Nevertheless, what the tribunal scenario exploits is the other side of the analogy, the relation between the act of asserting and the mode of experiencing. From this perspective, if a perceptual state lacks assertive force, it does less than a state that “tells” me that *p*. After all, one does not rationally form a belief that it is raining *because* one is perceptually entertaining the fact that it is raining. Entertaining a content is always compatible with one’s suspending judgement or casting doubt on it.

Another way of putting this point is to realize that disjunctivism is an account of the *content* of genuine perceptual states, not of their *attitudinal* side. Disjunctivism is mainly an account of perception seeking to avoid epistemic intermediaries between mind and world. What the basing problem concerns, however, is the relation between perception and belief. Disjunctivism *per se* is silent on this score. The tribunal scenario shows that, even if our perceptual relation to the world lacks epistemic intermediaries, it is not sufficient to explain *why* one forms an appropriate belief when one is entertaining a fact. In order to prove the contrary, one has to show that, at least in the perceptual case, entertaining *p* is sufficient to be moved to judge that *p*. But, unless facts have motivational force, how is this claim to be established?¹⁷

3. It might be complained that some ontological pictures of facts make room for this option, as the following quotation from McDowell suggests: “The point of the idea of experience is that it is in experience that facts themselves come among the justifiers available to subjects” (McDowell, 1998a, p. 430; see also McDowell, 1995; Turri, 2009, pp. 501ff.).

This sort of picture seems to be supported on introspection. Thus, Ginsborg (2006, p. 288) writes: “What I consider when deciding what to do, or what it is rational to believe, is not my beliefs themselves but how things actually are.” This verdict fits Dennis Stampe’s (1987, p. 337) analysis: “When we reason from our beliefs it is from *what* we believe – the objects of our beliefs – that we reason: the facts as we believe them to be.”

As I understand it, the argument is based on a model of deliberation as taking place in inner speech. On this view, when I am deciding what to do, expressions of the form “I believe that” never occur in the stream of consciousness. One does not reason that the streets are wet because one *believes* that it has rained. Instead, one thinks that the streets are wet *because* it has rained, period. In other words, one is typically aware of tokens of mental sentences like “the streets are wet because it has rained,” where there is no explicit talk about beliefs.

17 For further details on the relation between disjunctivism and conceptualism, see Echeverri (2011, section 7).

This argument presupposes that, for a psychological state to be instantiated, there must be a mental word or concept that stands for it. But this assumption is preposterous. After all, a psychological state can be psychologically realized in an *implicit* way. In functionalist accounts of the mind, for example, the nature of belief states is defined by their *functional relation* to perception, other states, and behaviour. Similarly, an occurrent belief state can be instantiated when the mind performs the right actions, as when one *asserts* that it has rained or *behaves as if* it had rained. This shows that introspective data are misleading. They only work against pictures that equate belief states with occurrent (mental or public) utterances in which a mental term or concept stands for belief. But this picture is implausible.^{18,19}

4. Defenders of facts have to show that facts *themselves*, independently of any doxastic ingredient, can ground other beliefs. They might do it by exploiting the usual claim that facts can figure in causal explanations. In what follows, I shall respond to this line of argument. I will try to show that the causal efficacy of facts is not sufficient to *rationaly* ground perceptual beliefs. More importantly, one can rephrase the main line of argument even if one decides to equate reasons with facts. Before we reach this conclusion, however, we have to examine the causal efficacy of facts. Consider these two examples:

- (1) The fact that Napoleon recognized the danger to his left flank caused him to move his troops forward.
- (2) It was the fact that the train was diverted that made me late for the lecture.²⁰

These fact-involving constructions cannot be seen as competitors of the doxastic analysis. Although the word “fact” is used in the two cases to introduce causal relations, it does not show that *worldly* facts, *by themselves*, rationalize belief revision processes. Example (1) owes its plausibility to the cognitive act introduced within the scope of “the fact that”: Napoleon’s *recognizing* the danger to his left flank. If, however, one drops this ingredient, the explanation is defective. It could be that there was a danger to his left flank and Napoleon did not notice it. As a result, he would not have reacted in the appropriate way. Hence, it is not the worldly fact that there was a danger to his left flank that led him to react in the appropriate

18 The inadequacy of this picture should be obvious. It predicts that, in order to believe that *p* one has to possess the concept of belief. It would be like claiming that, in order to be hungry one has to possess the concept of hunger.

19 The introspective argument cannot be invoked to claim that reasons *are* facts. After all, belief-free or fact-involving utterances can be instantiated in one’s stream of consciousness in *false* mental sentences. I may reason that it rained because the mental sentence “the streets are wet” was tokened in my mental fore. But it might occur that I misperceived the streets and, as a result, it was not a fact that the streets were wet. Thus, the introspective argument would lend support to the factive view only if introspected fact-involving constructions were immune to error.

20 I borrow both examples from Dodd (2000, pp. 91, 110 n. 4). He furnishes a number of references on the causal relevance of facts.

way but his *recognizing* it. If we want to resist the Cartesian connotation of this remark, we can say that the fact should be “coupled” to his belief system in an adequate way. Napoleon should be “poised” to exploit that fact to motivate his behaviour. After all, there are many facts in the world that have no epistemic impact in one’s cognitive life. Example (2) provides a case where facts can be used to introduce causal explanations. The trouble here is that this causal relation is not of the kind one is interested in when one claims that experience is a source of reasons. (SR) is not merely the claim that reasons *arise* from causal transactions with the world but the bold idea that perception can rationally ground belief. To make sense of the tribunal of experience, one needs a notion of causation capable of *rationalizing* belief revision processes. This is not what example (2) provides. There is no rational relation between the fact that the train was diverted and the fact that the speaker arrived late. The fact that the train was diverted does not figure as a reason in the subject’s cognitive life. The justification is based on the *assertion* of the whole (2), and an assertion expresses a belief.²¹

This discussion clearly shows that the arguments above do not depend on overarching premises on the nature of reasons. Even if one endorses the ontology of reasons as facts, one should supplement this picture with an account of the way these entities are “present” in one’s cognitive life, eventuating in belief formation and revision. It is immaterial whether *speakers* introduce causal relations in fact-involving constructions. It is also irrelevant whether agents are unaware of forming sophisticated thoughts about their belief states. To decide whether a content can ground a belief, we have to consider the subject’s attitude to that content. Bearing an attitude towards a content may be just treating it as true or being prepared to act as if it were true. In ordinary life, whenever I give a reason and I am being *sincere*, I do not give an unendorsed content. By the same token, if I decide to go and play tennis on the ground that the sun is shining, my behaviour is not rationally based just because the sun is shining. It is necessary that I take the content of my experience at face value.²²

We can summarize the first argument in the terminology used above. As I read him, Davidson’s reliance on (BP) is based on the structural claim that sensations are not the sorts of things that can participate in justification relations. In my view, one can grant Davidson’s point even if one has an ontology of reasons as facts, and denies Davidson’s view of perception as bare sensation. In order to get the

21 There are knowledge accounts of assertion as well. Although I cannot discuss them here, let me make two points. First, if an assertion expresses a state of knowledge that *p* and knowledge entails belief, the argument presented here is vindicated. Second, knowledge accounts of assertion do not provide *constitutive* conditions of assertion, i.e., conditions *without which* assertions could not be made. After all, one can make *false* assertions. In those cases, one expresses a belief, not a state of knowledge. If the knowledge account were plausible, it would merely provide a “regulative norm” of the practice of assertion.

22 See Williams (2006, pp. 310–311) and Ernst (2001).

epistemology of perception right, it is not sufficient to conceive of perceptual states as relations to facts. If experiences are deprived of assertive force, they cannot ground them in the sense of explaining why one ends up forming the relevant belief. Thus, two options are open: either one identifies experiential reasons with doxastic states, or one shows how structured entities are “coupled” to belief systems.

5. The Weak Propositional View

The arguments presented so far show that the strong propositional version of (SR) is wrong. If propositional states are not structurally sufficient to ground other states, (BP) has not been proved wrong. As far as we know, only beliefs can be reasons for other beliefs. The initial plausibility of these views might be based on the confusion between structural and normative adequacy. Although relations to facts might be thought to be normatively adequate to ground knowledge (because it is factive), *they are not structurally sufficient*. In order to provide a full alternative to (BP), one has to show that experiences are assertive propositional states (this view will be examined in the next section).

In this section, I will show how a weaker form of the propositional view could be thought to avoid the objections presented so far. Further, I will argue that this version fails to provide an adequate picture of perception-judgement transitions.

An obvious solution is to weaken the propositional view by rejecting the claim that experiences *themselves* are reasons. Byrne reacts in this way: “The answer ‘Because it looks blue’ to the question ‘How do you know it is blue?’ is appropriate because it gives the *source* of one’s reasons rather than a statement of them” (Byrne, 2005, p. 249 n. 20). This view is also implicit in some texts from McDowell and Brewer. In his “Replies” to a volume dedicated to his work, McDowell (2002, p. 278) describes experience as “an invitation to accept a proposition.” Similarly, in a reply to Brandom, McDowell contrasts the claim that perceptual experience *has* reasons with (what he takes to be) the (weaker) claim that it *provides* reasons:

My point about perceptual experiences is that they must *provide* rational credentials, not that they must have them. Perceptual experiences do not purport to report facts [. . .] experience is simply the way in which observational thinking is directly rationally responsible to facts. (McDowell, 1998b, p. 407; see also his 1998a, p. 439, and Brewer, 1999, p. 223).

One could interpret the use of “provide” in the sense of “setting or making arrangements for some purpose.” This would lead to the claim that experience provides *necessary* but *not sufficient* conditions for reasons. Perceptual reasons would be *composite* or *hybrid* entities made out of a perceptual content endorsed in judgement. Although experiences do provide propositional contents in perceptual experiences, these contents are not reasons. Reasons are formed when the subject

“accepts” the content of experience in a judgement. This two-stage analysis would block the argument based on the tribunal scenario. Perception would provide structured contents but it would not rationalize belief revision in the light of experience.²³

This model is reminiscent of doxastic voluntarism. If experience “invites” us to accept a proposition, there is a sense in which belief fixation involves a choice. I find this view unattractive. In the present case, however, I want to focus on a different problem. Everybody agrees that taking the content of perception at face value is our *default* attitude. Besides, it seems uncontroversial that perception imposes some obligations on us. Upon seeing a red apple in front of me, if there are no salient undermining reasons, I am *obliged* to form the belief that there is a red apple in front of me. Thus, any adequate picture of perception-belief transitions should explain these facts, i.e., it should conceive of the link between perception and belief in such a way that the statistical and normative sides of perceptual belief formation are accommodated. The trouble here is that, on the composite view, the transition from unendorsed to endorsed contents looks *arbitrary*. If perceiving is simply entertaining contents, it is a mystery why our default attitude is to take perceptual content at face value. When I am offered an invitation, it is always right for me to reject it. This is much weaker than the intuition that perception is rationally compelling. More generally, if we grant the two-component model, it is a mystery why, other things being equal, judgement is the *default* and *mandatory* cognitive attitude toward perceived contents.

An analogy might be helpful here. Epistemic norms are interesting because they are *binding*. If my cognitive system is governed by *modus ponens* and I am faced with the contents ($p \rightarrow q$) and p , I am compelled to infer q . If there were room to ask whether *modus ponens* is appropriate, its application would not be binding, and I would be launched in a regress. This is one of the messages of Carroll’s (1895) paradox. A similar worry arises in the present case. We have the intuition that perceptual experience is binding. In the absence of salient undermining reasons, experience “compels” us to form appropriate beliefs. Still, if perceiving is an invitation to accept a proposition, there is nothing in perception that compels us to endorse it. A basic ingredient is missing.

Let us develop this point in a different way. If experiences are made out of pre-doxastic contents, they cannot stop the regress problem. BonJour (1985, p. 69) develops this idea in his analysis of the given:

23 Alternatively, one might identify reasons with facts or propositions, and claim that reasons do not rationalize belief revision. Rationalization might be accommodated when reasons are embedded in judgement or belief. For the purposes of this article, I will treat this view as a notational variant of the two-component picture described in the text.

[T]he proponent of the given is caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma: if his intuitions or direct awarenesses or immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, at least quasi-judgmental (as seems clearly the more natural interpretation), then they will be both capable of providing justification for other cognitive states and in need of it themselves; but if they are construed as noncognitive, nonjudgmental, then while they will not themselves need justification, they will also be incapable of giving it. In either case, such states will be incapable of serving as an adequate foundation for knowledge. This, at bottom, is why empirical givenness is a myth.

BonJour should not be understood as claiming that taking perceptual experience as belief-like is sufficient to stop the regress problem. After all, the regress problem is partly generated by normative considerations. Intuitively, a belief cannot yield knowledge because it may lack justification. But there is also a psychological component in BonJour's claim that is directly relevant to our structural project: if one presupposes a dualism of a content "given" and a "cognitive grasp" of that content, one is led to a regress. If the act of judgement is severed from experience, what does justify one's *taking* its content at face value? To avoid this problem, the connection between both ingredients should be *internal*. That is why the objection applies to weak propositional views of perceptual justification. Since they are forced to conceive perception-judgement transitions in an additive, external way, their account of the rational role of experience is unsatisfactory. To paraphrase McDowell's (1994a, p. 42) pregnant phrase, endorsing a given content becomes "a frictionless spinning in the void." These arguments yield a third constraint:

Constraint 3: Any epistemological theory of perception must conceive of the connection between perceptual states and beliefs as *internal*. This connection is necessary to make sense of perception as epistemically binding, avoid regress problems, and eschew some forms of doxastic voluntarism.

For reasons of space, I cannot elaborate on this constraint. Let me indicate, however, why it might be difficult to fulfil. It is tempting to hold that logical norms are binding because they are "constitutive" of our deductive practices. Yet there are reasons to think that perceptual judgements bear a more flexible relation to perception. On the one hand, one can "refrain" from taking experience at face value, as it happens when one is presented with a known illusion. This ability would be jeopardized if the links between perception and belief were too tight. On the other hand, there is some flexibility in the relation between perceptual processes and concepts exercised in judgements. This flexibility is obvious in phenomena like perceptual learning and cross-cultural variations in colour categories (Matthen, 2005, pp. 82ff.). Thus, in order to accommodate constraint 3, we shall need a framework that introduces "internal" but "flexible" relations between perception and belief. But it is unclear how these two seemingly opposite properties can be reconciled.

6. A General Argument against the Rational Model

I have presented objections against two versions of (SR). Although these views have been *highly* influential, one might think that the arguments are not definitive. One could avoid the problems presented so far by conceiving of experiences, not as *pre-doxastic non-assertive* states, but as *non-doxastic assertive* states. Call it the quasi-doxastic view. After all, it has become fashionable to construe perceptual experiences as propositional attitudes, not as pre-doxastic states lacking assertive force (see Siegel, 2010, forthcoming). Thus, one might claim that perceptual experience is a *sui generis* “assertive” or “committal” attitude that stands as a reason for perceptual belief. This would provide a genuine alternative to (BP).

In this section, I will reject this view. For that purpose, I shall provide a more general argument to the effect that perception does not bear a justificatory relation to doxastic states. This argument can be seen as a critique of the atomistic conception of experience that implicitly motivates (SR). Before I present the argument, it is crucial to introduce a distinction between two senses of “perception” or “experience.” A theory of perception may be seen as an account of the *unconscious* antecedents of belief formation, or as an account of *conscious* experience, i.e., of the way things appear from the first-person point of view. Thus, we can formulate (SR) in two different ways: either *conscious* experience provides reasons for belief, or *unconscious* antecedent states provide reasons for belief. Let us call the first version (CSR) and the second (USR). For reasons of space, I am only concerned with (CSR).²⁴

Intuitively, if there is a reason-giving relation, there must be a *sharp distinction* between justifier and justified, between premise and conclusion. If one cannot have an independent grasp of *each* term of the relation, there is no ground to think that a justificatory relation links them. This requirement is implicit in the way we understand the rational character of proofs. Premises and conclusions are distinguished by their shape. One can infer q from $(p \rightarrow q)$ and p because there is a clear-cut distinction between premises and conclusion, and one grasps that distinction.

My argument shows that we have no good reasons to project this justificatory structure into perception-judgement transitions. (CSR) is parasitic on an atomistic conception of experience with no obvious relation to the way things appear from the first-person point of view.

How can one establish by argument a claim related to the way things appear from the first-person point of view? Suppose someone says: “My experience reveals the

²⁴ I did not introduce this distinction earlier because it was immaterial to the objections against strong and weak propositional views.

justifiers of my beliefs.” If this were meant as an *introspective* report, one could hardly *refute* it. Thus, the project of disproving a phenomenological claim seems misconceived.

Nevertheless, when two competing accounts of phenomenology come to the fore, one may try to see to what extent one of them is informed by prior theoretical commitments. In the last century, people found it obvious, on “phenomenological” grounds, that there were sense data. Nowadays, it is more fashionable to find it obvious, on “phenomenological” grounds, that perception has non-conceptual content, or that it is assessable as true or false. Although theories of sense data were never properly refuted *qua* phenomenological claims, they were *abandoned*. A plausible explanation is that philosophers are prone to describe experience in the light of their favourite theories. Sense data were abandoned for their theoretical inadequacy, not for their phenomenological inaccuracy. My purpose here is to show that the attempt to draw a sharp line between justifier and justified *within* first-person experience is based on controversial theoretical commitments. By uncovering these commitments, I will not *refute* the view. Nevertheless, I will show that it is not grounded on phenomenology alone.

What are these commitments? The first commitment is a prior reliance on the view that experience is a justifier. Yet, appealing to this commitment on the ground that it is “obvious” would beg the question against the defender of (BP). The second commitment is the widespread idea that there must be a sharp line between what is “given” in perception and what is “inferred” by cognition. This view is usually supported by reflection on *conscious* experience and, thus, it might be used to favour (CSR). If there were a justificatory relation between conscious experience and perceptual belief, it should be possible to distinguish what is “consciously perceived” from what is “consciously inferred,” what does the justificatory part and what is justified.

My point is that any attempt to draw that line *within* experience is misconceived. The argument goes as follows: when one tries to draw a line between perception and belief *within* experience, one is at a loss. If one is at a loss, the line is phenomenologically vague. If the line is vague, perceptual experience does not stand as a reason for belief. After all, justificatory relations must be clear-cut.

For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the question of whether we can determine the constituents of experience. Solving this question is crucial to (CSR). If experience were a reason for belief, it should be possible to identify the constituents of experiential reasons. In the conceptualist picture, these constituents are concepts. Thus, the question is whether one can determine which concepts are actualized in experience. As will be clear later, nothing in the argument hinges on this particular assumption because the same worries arise in relation to properties. I will address the conceptualist version of the claim, however, to keep continuity with the previous sections.

Things seem pretty obvious when we consider perceptual concepts of colours, such as *blue*, *yellow* or *green*, or geometrical concepts, such as *diamond*, *square* or *circle*. They are the sorts of concepts one would easily classify as actualized in experience. Nevertheless, when we start to consider more sophisticated concepts, we are at a loss. Are concepts like *Pierre*, *absence* or *sadness* actualized in experience? The problem emerges with particular force in the conceptualist proposal. By taking the content of perception to be identical to that of perceptual judgements, the picture predicts that such detached concepts would figure in the content of experiences.²⁵ This might sound too liberal, though. That is why, in a recent paper, McDowell (2008) retracts the claim that the content of experience includes “*everything* the experience enables its subject to know noninferentially.” Since he is a conceptualist, the rejection of this claim leads him to posit different levels of conceptualization. In perceptual experience, the subject actualizes “formal” concepts, like concepts of proper and common sensibles, while, in perceptual judgements, she applies more specific concepts. McDowell introduces this picture by commenting on the visual experience of a cardinal. According to him, the experience might include the concept *bird* but not the concept *cardinal*. The concept *bird* could be part of her experience, while the concept *cardinal* could be applied only at the level of judgement. He supports this view on the following considerations:

Consider an experience had, in matching circumstances, by someone who cannot immediately identify what she sees as a cardinal. Perhaps she does not even have the concept of a cardinal. Her experience might be just like mine in how it makes the bird visually present to her. It is true that in an obvious sense things look different to me and to her. To me what I see looks like (looks to be) a cardinal, and to her it does not. But that is just to say that my experience inclines me, and her similar experience does not incline her, to say it is a cardinal. There is no ground here for insisting that the concept of a cardinal must figure in the content of my experience itself. (McDowell, 2008, p. 3)

McDowell is very careful in his formulation: “there is no ground here for insisting that the concept of a cardinal must figure in the content of my experience itself.” Fair enough. But there is no ground for insisting that it cannot figure in the content of my experience either. This is due to the fact that there are no reasons for one choice over the other. We cannot tell, *from introspection*, which concepts belong to experience, and which to perceptual judgement. This has some consequences for (CSR): if one cannot tell which concepts are actualized in experience and which are exercised in perceptual judgement, the line between experience and judgement is *vague*. If the line is vague, one cannot assume that experience

25 The same problem arises for Huemer (2001, 2007) and Chudnoff (2010).

provides a reason for belief. *After all, reason-giving relations require an independent grasp of what is doing the justificatory part and what is being justified.*

Recall that we are examining (CSR): we are looking for a justifier–justified distinction *within* first-person experience. Assuming that experiences are constituted by concepts, our problem emerges when we ask which concepts belong to the experience side, and which to the judgement side. Careful reflection on McDowell’s view shows that this line cannot be legitimately drawn. He introduces a comparison between *his* experience and *someone else’s* experience involving a cardinal. Yet it is at best unclear why someone else’s experience could be relevant to determine how things look from *my* perspective (I will come back to this point in the next section).

The point of the argument is not to deny that there is a *conceptual* distinction between experience and judgement. Of course there is a conceptual distinction: it is an essential feature of perceptual experience that it is anchored, i.e., that it exploits the spatiotemporal situation of the agent. Judgements, by contrast, can be actualized in a detached way. This may occur when one forms the judgement that it is raining upon remembering the weather report for today. The point of the argument is rather that, although there is a conceptual distinction between experience and judgement, it does not follow that this distinction is *phenomenally salient*. We can draw the conceptual distinction because some tokens of judgements can be detached from perception. Yet this is compatible with the existence of *anchored* exercises of judgement, i.e., cases in which judgement directly exploits the spatiotemporal situation of the agent. If the rational model were to be vindicated by phenomenology, it should be shown that there is a justifier–justified distinction available *in* experience. But my previous considerations show that this distinction is not available.

As it turns out, McDowell’s move involves a conflation of conceptual analysis with phenomenology. It is a case of analysis because it exemplifies a pattern of conceptual analyses: one first takes a set of different subjects across similar situations. One then asks how things would look like to each of them. Next, one proceeds to isolate a *common factor* to their experiences. At the end, one concludes that this common factor delivers the content of their experiences. Nevertheless, the result can hardly be identified with the content of one’s first-person experience. I cannot infer, without further premises, that my conscious experience does not contain the concept *cardinal* just because Pierre, who finds himself in the same “matching circumstances,” does not have the concept *cardinal* but is visually “confronted” with the same bird. The missing premises have not been provided, though.

It might be objected that the line *can* be drawn. If asked why I believe that there is a cardinal, I can answer: “Because I see that there is a cardinal” or “Because I see that there is a bird with the properties a, b, c that are typical for cardinals.” Since

these responses are *available*, they allow one to draw the distinction between justifier and justified.²⁶

If I am an expert bird-watcher, it will be very difficult for me to tell you exactly which properties I visually exploited to form the judgement that there is a cardinal. More importantly, I would be at a loss if asked *which* of the two reports captures the experiential state that grounded my perceptual judgement. Although I can always provide an *ex post facto* perceptual reason in the context of a challenge, it does not follow that my belief that there is a cardinal was *originally* grounded in that *ex post facto* reason. The point of the phenomenological argument is to show that there is no justifier–justified distinction *in* experience, i.e., when the perception-belief transition takes place. Of course, after the judgement is formed, one can always confabulate an experiential state that grounds it. That *many* experiential reasons seem adequate, and that we typically lack principled reasons to identify one of them as *the* grounding state, are powerful reasons not to cite these rationalizations in support of (SR).

Consider an analogy. Patients with split-brains have been tested by being presented with different stimuli to the two hemispheres. In a typical experiment, different stimuli – e.g., two cards – are flashed up, one on the left (available to the right brain) and another on the right (available to the left brain). In a case described by Gazzaniga (1995), when the instruction “Walk!” was presented to the right hemisphere, a patient got up and started to walk out. When asked why he was leaving, he replied: “I’m going to get Coke from the house.” Given that the left hemisphere responsible for speech production had no access to the card, the “Walk!” instruction did not rationalize the action. Yet the patient confabulated a new reason, treating it with strong confidence. It would be wrong for him to insist that this reason *grounded* his behaviour just because it was “available” to him.

By parity of reasoning, one cannot support (SR) on the sole ground that one can always cite a seemingly perceptual reason that makes it rational to hold one’s belief. Instead, one has to show that one’s reason actually *grounded* one’s belief. What the phenomenological considerations show is that, when we pay attention to experience, we are not aware of any justifier–justified divide. What the split-brain scenario suggests is that the justifier-justified divide may be an *ex post facto* rationalization. If perception-judgement transitions had the structure of reason-giving relations, it should be discerned, *from within*, what is playing the role of a justifier. But we cannot do it. When we try to draw a line between what is “perceived” and what is “judged,” we are at a loss. That is why some philosophers proceed to contrast different scenarios or deliver *ex post facto* rationalizations,

26 I owe this objection to a referee of this journal.

projecting the results into the original experience. Unless we give some further reasons to trust these moves, however, the rational model lacks support.

As a matter of fact, the subject's inability to provide criteria to decide whether the concept *cardinal* is part of her experience *is a feature of her own first-person experience*. If one is unable to tell whether a concept belongs to judgement or belief, it is because there are no facts of the matter, *in one's experience*, that decide the issue. Phenomenology should not settle questions that are not settled from *within*. If it settles them, it becomes revisionist. But being revisionist goes against a natural conception of phenomenology as a discursive practice that tries to describe (not revise!) the way things appear. Still, the attempt to conceive of experience as a justifier requires that we settle unsettled questions. The structure of justification requires the existence of a definite answer to questions like: "Is concept *C* actualized in experience or exercised in judgement?" Since there is no definite answer, the epistemological prejudice should be given up. *First-person experience has no sharp boundaries*.

As indicated above, this argument can be extended to non-conceptualist versions of (SR). Whereas McDowell is worried about *which concepts* are actualized in experience, it has been usual to ask *what properties* are represented in experience. If the question looks puzzling to you, it is because there is no sharp line *in* your first-person experience. If you draw a sharp line, you will end up falsifying the phenomenal character of experience.²⁷ This argument yields a fourth constraint:

Constraint 4: Any epistemological theory of perception must respect the fact that experience and cognition seem to form a continuum with no sharp boundaries.

Our opponent could move from (CSR) to (USR). Maybe there is an unconscious level at which one can draw a sharp line between justifier and justified. On this view, although we cannot say whether the concepts *bird* and *cardinal* are part of perceptual experience, there might be a level at which this question has a definite answer. If there are no facts of the matter in first-person experience, there could be facts of the matter in its unconscious perceptual antecedents.

The trouble here is that we cannot solve this issue if we lack an *empirical model* of unconscious perceptual processes. One cannot tell, *by armchair argument*, whether someone, in "matching circumstances . . . who cannot immediately identify what she sees as a cardinal," actualizes the concept *bird* or not. And one cannot tell whether the state in which this content is actualized stands as a reason for the

27 This objection applies to Feldman (2003, pp. 70–75). Since his view presupposes that perceptual experiences differ in content from belief, it raises the same worries as McDowell's recent account: to identify which concepts (or properties) belong to the experience side, and which to the judgement side.

belief that there is a cardinal. One needs an empirical model of perceptual recognition to settle the issue.

The defender of (SR) is therefore caught on the horns of a dilemma: if she conceives of experience as a source of reasons available from the first-person point of view, she is projecting a theory-laden structure into conscious experience. She is led to introduce illusory boundaries *within* experience. If she assumes that the relevant justificatory structure can be found at an unconscious level, she is led to introduce an epistemologically laden structure without having an empirical model to support it. In the next section, I will discuss the underlying premise of the argument of this section.

7. Phenomenology and Discrimination

The general argument of the previous section hinges on the plausible principle that, if a feature P is part of S 's first-person experience, P is discriminated by S . This principle reveals a verificationist or response-dependent conception of first-person experience (Dennett, 1991, pp. 132ff.). Call it the phenomenology-discrimination entailment (PDE). By (PDE), if a justifier–justified contrast is part of S 's first-person experience, it is discriminated by S . Since this contrast is not discriminated by S , it is not part of S 's first-person experience.

I am inclined to think that (PDE) is a conceptual truth. If some phenomenal features could be instantiated without being subjectively discriminated, there would be cases in which something is “experientially apparent” without being “subjectively apparent,” which is a plain contradiction. Denying (PDE) would also have striking consequences. There would be room for a distinction between *the way things appear* and *the way things appear to appear*. In other words, it would make sense to claim that an appearance-reality distinction is available *within* the realm of appearances (Dennett, 1991, p. 133). Phenomenology would concern a realm of *real* phenomena that may fail to appear to the subject. The trouble is that our understanding of “phenomenon” and “appearance” seems to resist that contrast.²⁸

Some philosophers might find these claims unsatisfactory. So, I shall not use them as the main argument. Instead, I shall briefly show that the negation of (PDE) is implausible. Besides, I shall provide a weaker version of the argument of section 6 that is not based on the truth of (PDE).

A number of philosophers are *committed* to a sharp dissociation of phenomenal features and subjective discrimination. This commitment is clear in Siegel's (2007,

28 One might reply that some events can be “manifest” without being recognized. Fireflies may “appear” in the dark forest without anyone realizing their presence. But these cases are so construed that no experiential relation holds between the “manifest” event and the subject of experience.

2010) attempt to “discover” which properties are represented in perceptual experience. It only makes sense to undertake that project if a property can figure as part of one’s first-person experience E and yet one can fail to “detect” or “realize” its presence when enjoying E . Other theories also entail that (PDE) is false. If one holds that there are forms of non-epistemic seeing, and attempts to ground them on purely phenomenological considerations, one might be led to the conclusion that some phenomenal features are instantiated without being recognized as such (Dretske, 2000). Furthermore, if one thinks that phenomenal consciousness is totally different from access consciousness, one might be inclined to posit phenomenal features to which the subject has no first-person access (Block, 1995).²⁹

Now, suppose one claims that experience is a non-doxastic reason-giving state whose boundaries with belief are sharp but unobvious “from within.” In other words, one claims that there is a clear-cut distinction between justifier and justified within experience that ordinary subjects do not “detect” or “discriminate” when they are enjoying their experiences. One might try to support this view on a negation of (PDE). In what follows, I shall present three considerations that militate against (\neg PDE).

First of all, if phenomenal properties are severed from subjective discrimination, their instantiation cannot be used as a *sufficient basis* to explain *what it is like* to enjoy an experience. This is a heterodox claim. Paul Churchland (1988, p. 40), for example, characterizes qualia “as salient features that permit the quick introspective identification of sensations.” If (\neg PDE) were true, however, we would have to revise this practice. After all, (\neg PDE) entails that the fact that a phenomenal feature P be “present” or “instantiated” in one’s experience is not sufficient for a subject to discriminate P .

To be sure, contradicting orthodoxy is not necessarily a bad thing. Nevertheless, when one goes against orthodoxy, one ought to have a good heterodox proposal. If a phenomenal property can be instantiated without being discriminated, something must be added to explain (or clarify) what it is like to enjoy a given experience. But it is unclear *what* could be added.

When philosophers explain what it is like to enjoy an experience, they follow a deictic strategy. They *show* us red roses, and claim that *this* is what it is like to have an experience of redness. The deictic strategy enables them to fix the semantic value of “what-it-is-like”-constructions because it allows their audience to *discriminate* the experience of redness from those of other chromatic properties. If we divorce phenomenology from discrimination, however, the deictic strategy will be insufficient to fix the semantic value of “what-it-is-like”-constructions. The

29 This is not necessary, though. One might hold that, although all phenomenal features are accessible, not all forms of access consciousness have phenomenal features.

problem would parallel the case in which, while being in the middle of a crowd, we are asked: “Who is Pierre?” Our audience could not fix the semantic value of “Pierre” if it did not discriminate Pierre from the crowd.

Second, if the “presence” or “instantiation” of some phenomenal properties in one’s experience offers no guarantee that they be subjectively discriminated, one is led to the odd conclusion that, in order to know what it is like to enjoy an experience *E*, it is not sufficient to enjoy the relevant experience (assuming that enjoying an experience *E* requires to be presented with the phenomenal properties of *E*). This view makes room for a strong scepticism concerning the possibility of gaining knowledge of the phenomenal properties of experience. If experiencing a phenomenal property is not sufficient to know it, how can I gain knowledge of it? This point is implicit in McDowell’s appeal to someone else’s experience, “in matching circumstances.” In order to know what it is like for me to enjoy an experience *E*, I am required to know what it is like, *for someone else*, to enjoy an experience *E*’ of the same type. But it is unclear how this knowledge about someone else’s experience can be gained, *even in principle*. And, if it can be gained, it undermines the *intuitive* asymmetry between the first- and the third-person perspectives, which is at the heart of the very notion of experience.

Third, when theorists posit layers of non-discriminated phenomenal features within perceptual experience, they are led to introduce what looks like an insoluble problem, usually called the “unity of consciousnesses.” Suppose that perceptual experience has different cores of perceptual and cognitive phenomenology (see Brewer, 2006). Since it does not seem to us that there are different phenomenal cores, we want an explanation of *why* experience does not seem to be “compartmentalized.” As far as I can see, no serious proposal to integrate those cores has been provided yet.

These considerations lend support to the general argument against the rational model of experience. When we reject (PDE), we are led to a dubious picture of the mind’s ability to know what it is like to enjoy a given experience.

Now, it is possible to frame the argument of section 6 without relying on the truth of (PDE). Suppose one holds that there are some phenomenal features that are not discriminated from the first-person point of view. Thus, a justifier–justified contrast could be phenomenally instantiated without being subjectively discriminated. My reply is straightforward. Although (\neg PDE) *does make room* for (SR), *it does not justify it*. Our opponent has to show that the features of the rational model are “present” in ordinary experience even if they are not subjectively discriminated. But, given our worries above, it is difficult to see how this claim could be supported just by *a priori* argument. Our opponent could not rely on *her* experience because the phenomenal features are supposed to be subjectively non-discriminated. She could not rely on the experience of *others* because she could not experience things from someone else’s perspective. And the situation would be worse if the others are

like me, and sincerely assert that there is no justifier–justified divide within their experiences. Thus, even if (\neg PDE) is granted, it is not sufficient to justify the rational model of experience.³⁰

To be sure, one can assume that there is an “unconscious level” where unnoticed phenomenal properties could be grounded. This is probably what some authors have in mind when they equate phenomenal qualities with the psychological notion of a sensation, which corresponds, roughly, to the pre-conscious pre-intentional antecedents of perception (Coates, 2007; Lyons, 2009). The trouble here is that, in doing so, we are not *describing* our first-person experience but putting forward an *explanatory hypothesis*. We are not capturing the way things appear from the first-person point of view (where one cannot tell whether there is a justifier–justified divide) but its putative pre-conscious antecedents. And, given that introspection is not sufficient to discover non-discriminated phenomenal properties, we need an empirical model of perception-belief transitions capable of vindicating (SR).³¹

8. From the Belief Principle to a New Picture of Perception

Let us take stock. (SR) can be construed as the claim that perception has *pre*-doxastic propositional content. I criticized two versions of this claim: the strong version fails because being propositional is not sufficient for a state to rationally ground a perceptual belief. The weak version fails because it makes the transition from perception to belief arbitrary. (SR) can also be construed as the claim that perceptual experience is a *non*-doxastic assertive state that justifies belief. I provided a general argument against this model. Any account in terms of conscious reasons is led to project a theory-laden model into experience. And, even if some

30 These remarks raise questions on what shape a theory of conscious experience should take. If introducing phenomenal layers that are not apparent from the first-person point of view falsifies experience (because experience does not seem to have any layers), phenomenology is not to be addressed just by making conceptual distinctions *within* experience, in the way analytic philosophers are prone to do.

31 Defenders of (SR) have failed to provide an empirical model. Here is why. First, some of them have argued that perceptual processes studied in cognitive psychology lack content (McDowell, 1994b; Bermúdez, 2005, 3.1–3.2; for a different view, see Burge, 2005, 2010). Second, one of the motivations of (SR) was the claim that perceptual reasons are essentially accessible from the first-person point of view (McDowell, 1994a; Brewer, 1999, 2005; Huemer, 2001, 2007; Chudnoff, 2010). Hence, by moving toward an unconscious level, one is deprived of one of the driving forces of (SR).

Siegel (2007, 2010) has defended the strategy of “phenomenal contrast” to discover the contents of perceptual experience. This strategy proceeds to explain differences between experiences – such as spectrally inverted experiences – in terms of differences in phenomenal content. The verdict on whether a feature is represented is a conclusion of an inference to the best explanation. Although this method raises a number of important issues, I do not see how it might be used to vindicate the introduction of a sharp separation between justifier and justified in experience. Furthermore, I cannot see how Siegel’s proposal can respond to the objections formulated here.

features of experience can be instantiated without being discriminated, the burden of proof is on the defender of (SR).

Our rejection of the previous models suggests a deflationary account of (SR). This deflationary account does not lead to Davidson's claim that perception is a causal relation to the world. Actually, we can acknowledge a grain of truth in McDowell's (1994a, 1998a) and Brewer's (1999) motivation for conceptualism. They complained that, if we conceived of experience in purely causal terms, we would be unable to explain how beliefs may have "empirical content," i.e., be about entities in the world. Traditional epistemologists are wrong when they take the aboutness of beliefs for granted, without showing how it is anchored in perception. Nevertheless, we may grant this negative point without assuming that perception stands as a reason for belief (see also Ginsborg, 2006, p. 316).

I want to end up this paper by doing two things. First, I want to dispel a potential worry. Second, I will explore some consequences of the previous arguments on the nature of perceptual experience.

1. My critique of the reason-giving view does not lead to the claim, associated with coherentism, that minds are "severed" from the external world. By denying that belief stands in an evidential relation to perception, we are not led to compare belief systems to "stories" or "fictions" with no bearing on reality. Instead, the conclusion is supported on reflection on experience. The requirement of assertive force is based on the ability to revise our beliefs in the light of experience. The rejection of the two-component picture is based on the intuition that perception-judgement transitions are primitively compelling. And the idea that there is no justification relation is based on the intuitive observation that experience does not seem to come compartmentalized into perceptual and cognitive layers. This integrative picture is falsified by traditional versions of (SR), which conceive of conscious perceptual states as snapshots that stand in rational relations to further snapshots. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that rejecting the justificatory model of perception leads us to lose contact with outer reality.

Providing a positive account that vindicates (BP) is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, a brief comment might be sufficient to show that it can be provided. It is open for the doxastic theorist to argue that genuine perceptual beliefs are only available to embodied beings. If this claim is right, there should be no threat of losing contact with the world. After all, the temptation to think that (BP) "severs" our relation to the world arises from a cartoonized conception of beliefs as purely internal entities, as if it were not clear that there are *de re* beliefs whose possession requires the exercise of spatiotemporally situated abilities.³²

32 This cartoonized picture of beliefs as purely internal entities occurs in McDowell's (1994a, p. 144) discussion of Davidson's picture. My own view is that we do not need to conceive of perception as a

2. If psychological states have doxastic force, they are adequate to rationalize belief. Does this mean that perceptual experiences *are* judgements or beliefs? If one interprets the latter as mental assertions, the answer is “no.” Mental assertions seem to have clear boundaries; their contents are easily recognizable as such. The arguments presented here are subtler. Perceptual grounds must be specific and belong to the endorsement dimension. Thus, when experiences are invoked as reasons, they are pretty much like beliefs. Still, this does not provide evidence for a *reductive* analysis of perceptual experience to belief.

A fuller treatment of this issue would lead us to inquire whether a doxastic account of perceptual justification could respond to the argument from the persistence of illusion, which is usually interpreted as a reason to conceive of all experiences as belief-independent (Evans, 1982; Huemer, 2007). Here is a preliminary response. It is essential to our experience of persistent illusions that we are not disposed to invoke them *as* reasons. If a subject withholds judging – in the Müller-Lyer illusion – one line to be longer than the other, she is not disposed to tell you that one line is longer than the other. Hence, it would be inappropriate to use *epistemically defective* cases such as known illusions to assess the psychological structure of *epistemically relevant* experiences.

Disjunctivists have exploited similar considerations in favour of different conclusions (McDowell, 1986; Williamson, 2000). Although I am not a disjunctivist, I think their defenders are right when they make the following point: one cannot assume, without argument, that the psychological structure of experiences in the “good cases” is identical to the psychological structure of experiences in the “bad cases.” If known illusions are epistemically defective, there is no reason to assume that their putative belief-independence should be generalized to epistemically relevant cases. After all, known illusions are cases in which background beliefs block the formation of the relevant belief, preventing it from playing any grounding role (for discussion, see Pitcher, 1971; Smith, 2001). Epistemologically speaking, they are cases in which experience is defeated. Thus, the persistence of illusion does not undermine our claim that doxastic force is necessary for experiences to play an epistemic role.

Egan (2008) has urged that one could conceive of belief systems as “fragmented” or “compartmentalized.” Similarly, Byrne (2009) has suggested that there is no direct path from the persistence of illusion to the belief-independence of experience. In their view, it is possible to think that our experience of the Müller-Lyer illusion involves a belief that one line is longer than the other, and another, more reflective belief that they are of the same length. This suggests that one could extend

relation to facts in order to not lose “epistemic contact” with the world. I have tried to show in Echeverri (2011) that the identity conception of truth faces insuperable problems to account for perceptual error.

the notion of belief to describe encapsulated perceptual processes like the ones intervening in known illusions. From this perspective, known illusions would fail to show the putative belief-independence of experience. They would merely show the encapsulation of some beliefs.

Although the arguments presented here are compatible with these suggestions, they are neutral on this issue. My own view is that we should reserve the term “belief” to characterize cognitively demanding states. When experiences are invoked as reasons, they are conscious. As a result, we can characterize them as doxastic. But this does not reduce experiences to beliefs. First, perceptual reasons result from unconscious perceptual processes. Thus, they are not “mere” beliefs. Second, there is no reason to assume that *all* forms of experience have doxastic structure. As far as I can see, some uses of perception in action do not seem to rely on belief. The claim advocated here is that perceptual experience has a doxastic structure *when it plays a rational role*. This claim is based on the fairly intuitive conception of belief as an “assertive” or “committal” propositional state. In order to refute the Davidsonian side of the present approach, one would have to find a way of characterizing the attitude or content of perceptual justifiers in terms incompatible with this minimal concept of belief. If we are liberally minded, however, and assume that the features mentioned above – propositionality and assertive force – are sufficient for a state to count as a doxastic state, we would be led to the doxastic account provided here.

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