

New Issues in Epistemological Disjunctivism

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Imprint Routledge, 2019

ISBN 9781138094093, 9781315106243,
9781351603560, 9781351603553,
9781351603546

Permalink <https://books.scholarsportal.info/uri/ebooks/ebooks7/taylorandfrancis7/2022-06-24/1/9781315106243>

Pages 153 to 168

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8 Disjunctivism and Realism

Not Naïve but Conceptual

Sonia Sedivy

This chapter argues that John McDowell's account of perception as both contentful and relational tends to go unnoted when the options for disjunctive theories are laid out. McDowell's approach is important because it comes up the middle between 'intentional' and 'relational' views of perception. In doing so, it offers theoretical resources for explaining perceptual experience and its epistemic standing that purely relational views associated with naïve realism do not have. This challenge claims that naïve realist or purely relational views are a natural fit for disjunctive theories of perceptual experience.

Though McDowell's work has always emphasized that explaining perception's objectivity and warrant is a single task, his account of both perceptual experience and its epistemic standing are reconstructed as epistemically motivated. I will focus on detailed work in papers dating between 2006 and 2013 to show how they open a unified approach to perception and its epistemic potential that turns on the claim that perception is both contentful and relational: that contents, and the broader context of capacities in which such contents figure, secure the perceiver's relation to what she sees (cf. McDowell 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b). I will call views of this kind conceptual realism, though commonsense realism might be more apt.

It is part of commonsense that understanding informs seeing since our phenomenological and intuitive sense of our experience is that it is always something of a kind that one sees. As Peter Strawson noted, if one is asked to describe one's experience, one would say something like: "I see the red light of the setting sun filtering through the black and thickly clustered branches of the elms, I see the dappled deer grazing in groups on the vivid green grass" (Strawson 1988: 94). Ordinary intuitive descriptions convey that one sees individual members of kinds and instances of properties. Conceptual realism takes up this part of commonsense with a philosophically technical notion of conceptual capacities. Second, it is also "natural and intuitive" that perceptual experience "at its best makes aspects of objective reality present to us" (McDowell 2010: 245). Commonsense or conceptual realism explains this intuitive conviction—that

“some aspect of objective reality is *there* for a subject, perceptually *present* to her”—with the proposal that our conceptual capacities play a role in securing a subject’s relation to her surroundings (Ibid.: 245). Conceptual realism puts both commonsense commitments together, aiming to explain how understanding helps secure relatedness to objective reality.

Here is one way to think about the situation that this chapter addresses. As the topic of disjunctive theories has evolved, a distinction has been drawn between epistemic and metaphysical types of disjunctivism. Epistemological disjunctivism is concerned with the epistemic standing of perceptual experiences as opposed to illusions or hallucinations. Metaphysical disjunctivism is concerned with the essential nature of perception and disjoins perceptual experiences from illusions or hallucinations in terms of their content or phenomenal character or something that gets at the very nature of perception. Most discussions state clearly that epistemological disjunctivism does not entail (some version of) metaphysical disjunctivism—in other words, one may put forward an epistemological account that disjoins the epistemic standing or warrant of perceptual experiences from other visual experiences without being committed to a specific theory of perception. But as Duncan Pritchard, for example, notes, a theory of perception that is itself disjunctive “seems to offer the most natural way of explaining” the epistemological thesis that one’s “reflectively accessible rational support is different because the very nature of one’s experiences is different” (Pritchard 2012: 24). The problem is that if we turn our attention to metaphysical disjunctivism, what tends to be cited is naïve realism; it seems to be the main player in the field. Naïve realism claims that the good case of a genuine perception involves the individuals and properties in the world, disjoining perceptions as a type of mental state from illusory or hallucinatory states. While naïve realists such as Mike Martin and William Fish recognize that “disjunctivism does not entail naïve realism” though “naïve realism entails disjunctivism,” (Fish 2009: 37) they also discount other variants of disjunctivism and focus on clarifying what they take to be a natural alignment. As Mike Martin puts it, “disjunctivism seeks to defend Naïve Realism” (Martin 2006: 361). Or, as William Fish writes, “the major motivation for endorsing disjunctivism would be to sustain naïve realism” (Fish 2009: 38). Naïve realism is joined by other relational views that hold that perception is purely relational: objects figure in perceptual experience as constituents by virtue of a primitive or ‘acquaintance-like’ (or subpersonal) relation that does not draw on the perceiver’s understanding of her situation or of herself as a perceiver (Brewer 2011; Campbell 2002; Travis 2004, 2013).

This increasingly common alignment—between purely relational, naïve realist and disjunctive accounts of perception—distorts our understanding of the explanatory options insofar as we do not recognize the alternative provided by conceptual realism. It overlooks the following option:

“Perception makes knowledge about things available by placing them in view for us. But it is precisely by virtue of having content *as they do* that perceptual experiences put us in such relations to things” (McDowell 2013a: 144). McDowell’s point in part is to distinguish between content that is not itself relational but that figures in relational perceptual states of a subject—*de se* content—and content that is itself relational—*de re* content of singular thoughts made possible by a perceiver’s relational experiences.

The chapter will proceed in the following four steps. The first part offers a reconstruction of McDowell’s account of perceptual experience; the second part shows the explanatory resources this provides for understanding the epistemic standing of perceptual experiences.¹ The third section explores how conceptual and purely relational, naïve realism adjudicate a range of cases differently. I will explain how common-sense or conceptual realism offers theoretical resources for explaining the epistemic standing of perceptual experience in various situations that purely relational, naïve realist theories cannot. The fourth section offers an example of how conceptual realist theories might disagree or diverge from the detail of McDowell’s approach.

1. Perceptual Presence: Contentful and Relational

McDowell suggests that perception makes individuals and their properties *immediately present* or “*there* for a subject,” and this is possible through a triad of explanatory conditions: (i) *de se* content; (ii) a context of capacities; (iii) a world context of a specific configuration. The three conditions specify that seeing is a relation between a perceiving person and their surroundings, a relation that is secured through a specific kind of content in a context of capacities. The claim that seeing is relational is stronger than saying that it has content that is veridical. It is possible that truth conditions might obtain and yet a perceiver might not be perceptually related to her surroundings so that her surroundings would not be present to her. To understand just what *immediate presence* is, we need to examine the three conditions and how they work together.

First, the account explains the distinctively visual contribution to perceptual experience: *de se* content that places objects and their visible properties in relation to oneself. Such content is highly specific in locating an object and its properties. Nevertheless, it can be indicated through descriptions—that lose some detail—either in propositional or objectual form, ‘that there is something red and rectangular in front of me’ or ‘something red and rectangular in front of me.’ For such content to be part of a *seeing* that makes a particular object *immediately present*, the second and third conditions need to obtain.

McDowell argues that such visual content needs to be integrally connected to capacities of understanding that have the specific character

that they allow for self-determination. In other words, the second condition strives to capture what is distinctive of human mature perception in terms of the Kantian idea that we have the capacity for self-determination whereby we can choose to act or to refrain from acting, and that this capacity gives human perception its objectivity. In the case of perception, our capacity for self-determination does not enable us to choose what we see (except in the trivial sense that we can choose where we look). We cannot change what objects or properties we see. But we can recognize that our situation is *not* such that an object would be present to us. The potential to recognize that the circumstances may be inadequate is due not to a single capacity, but to a broader context of capacities that we might call a context of understanding, which makes it possible to question or examine our perceptual circumstances either on occasion or after the fact.

In view of the extensive debate over concepts and their role in perception over the past several decades, the point of departure for McDowell's approach is that there "is not . . . a universally shared idea of conceptual capacities, which determines a subject matter about whose properties people disagree. The notion of the conceptual can be used in a variety of ways, for a variety of purposes" (McDowell 2009: 32). The philosophical notion of concepts is often linked to generality and to a 'fine-ness of grain' that goes with attributing contents that have truth-value. This helps explain the character of thoughts or language uses. Alternatively, the notion of conceptual capacities might be reserved for capturing the way a wide range of animals respond to kinds that are their reasons for acting. If we wish to take the latter course, McDowell's approach would need to adopt a different term for identifying the capacities at issue. The point stands that such capacities need to be identified, however we wish to designate them.

McDowell uses the notion of the conceptual to highlight the Kantian connection between rationality and understanding, the capacity for generating and applying concepts. As noted earlier, the over-arching idea is that humans have the potential for rational self-determination, whether it be in action, thought or perception. One way that McDowell has tried to put this point is that capacities are conceptual in that when we think or act, what we reason about or act on are not simply reasons but *reasons as such*—which means reasons that we can consider as such so that they do not compel an action or thought, but allow for self-determination in whether we think or act on that reason.² To be sure, we do not need to explicitly entertain reasons as such to arrive at further beliefs or actions in most cases. But capacities to do so—which may or may not be exercised—must be available.

When it comes to perceptual experience, "one does not choose to accept that things are the way one's experience plainly reveals that they are" (Ibid.: 139). Rather, "recognizing reasons as compelling is itself an

exercise of one's capacities for rational self-determination" insofar as the potential is there to question one's experience or its circumstances. It is in this sense that perceptual experience is informed by capacities for self-determination that are internal to it. This is what gives perceptual experience its objectivity, its purport to be of objects in the world that do not induce response from us, but to which we stand in a relation that we understand and that we can examine should need arise.

This proposal emphasizes points of analogy between action and perception even as it recognizes disanalogies. First, both action and perception must be amenable to rational control, though *how* rational control figures in perception and action differs. As noted, we can assess experiential states but not choose them as we can choose our actions. Second, action and perception are analogous in their largely unreflective nature; we carry on perceiving and we carry on with our activities to a large measure unreflectively. Rational self-control requires that we can entertain an action or a perception by articulating what we have done or what we have perceived—or perhaps what we are doing or what we are seeing. In neither case does it mean that the action or perception is itself propositional or needs to involve a state with propositional content. This is not considered especially problematic in discussions of skillful know-how where the idea that knowledge can be manifest in action seems *au courant* (for example, see Wiggins 2009; Stanley 2011a, 2011b; Kremer 2016). The analogous view should also be unproblematic for perception. It counters the charge that conceptualism renders perceptual content language-like or hyper-intellectual. What is being proposed is that *de se* contents are such that they can be expressed in a form requisite for entertaining a possibility of error. This is what it means to say that conceptual capacities are internal or integral to experiential contents: a *de se* content that places an object in relation to me is such that it can be expressed in either objectual or propositional form, which means that it figures for me as *a reason as such*.

Last but not least, the third condition turns to the other relatum—not the subject and her contents and capacities, but the perceptible scene or configuration. The object must be *how* and *where de se* content places it for the perceiver to stand in perceptual relation to it. This third condition underscores the relational nature of perceptual experience: if one of the *relata*—an object and its properties—is missing, the relational state cannot obtain.

These three conditions show how the conceptual realist notion of relational perceptual presence is stronger than the claim that perceptual experiences have truth conditions. Consider seeing a bird flying. On the truth or veridicality condition view, one sees a bird flying if and only if the conditions are such that there is a flying bird. McDowell argues that this is not sufficient for a relation to the bird whereby the bird is objectively present to one, which also means that it can figure as a reason as such.

It is crucial that the relation is neither independent of content nor just a matter of content. Rather, the relation is secured by the capacities in the context of which the content obtains, and the content is such that a context of understanding can secure a relation because the content places the object in relation to oneself.

A slightly different way to make the point is that seeing or perceptual experience is multi-dimensional—it involves a *de se* content, which places objects and properties uniquely in relation to me, together with a context of capacities whereby I can understand that the circumstances are such that the object is there, is present to me or not.

This complex state is one whereby it appears to the subject that ‘things are a certain way.’ The analysis shows that how things appear to a subject in a case of seeing involves all three dimensions working together. If things appear to a subject to be a certain way without all three of the dimensions working together, such states of appearing would be defective cases of seeing or belong to a different kind altogether. McDowell writes:

It is part of the point of my disjunctive conception of experience that having an aspect of objective reality present to one entails having it appear to one that things are a certain way. But that is not to say that having an aspect of objective reality perceptually present to one can be factored into some non-mental conditions and an appearance conceived as being the mental state it is independently of the non-mental conditions. The factoring fails; the state is the appearance it is only because it is a state of having something perceptually present to one. (2010: 251)

Though this approach disjoins perceptual experiences from states where things appear the same to the subject, it is not a metaphysical disjunctivism: it does not deny that there is a *type* of state—an appearance—common to experiences that are perceptual, hallucinatory and illusory. McDowell argues that a description that characterizes how things appear to a subject captures a genuine commonality, so that the description identifies a type of state that may be common to both defective and non-defective perceptual experiences, as well as illusory states and hallucinatory states (Ibid.: 244). The disjunctive phrasing makes clear that when it appears to a subject that an object is in front of her, the state she is in is either one of “having an aspect of objective reality perceptually present to [her]” or one where it seems that an aspect of objective reality is perceptually present to her.

2. Perceptual Presence and Perceptual Warrant

Insofar as perception is a capacity whereby individual objects and their properties are *present* to a person in McDowell’s sense, it is a capacity

that provides self-consciously “indefeasible, and so knowledge constituting, warrant for belief about the environment” (Ibid.: 247).

The detailed explanation of perceptual presence offers the following account of the epistemic standing of experiences. First, “the epistemic significance of an experience consists in its having content *in the way that it does*” (McDowell 2013a: 147; emphasis in original). That is, the epistemic significance of perceptual experience needs to be understood in terms of the way in which its content together with the other conditions yield perceptual presence. This provides resources for explaining epistemic significance not only of cases where everything works, but of cases where something is amiss. I will return to a more detailed analysis in the next section.

Second, the epistemic significance of a particular experience is a matter of the capacity of which it is an exercise. From an epistemic point of view, perception is “a capacity to be in positions in which one knowingly has . . . environmental realities present to one” (Ibid.: 151). This follows from approaching mature human perception as integrated within capacities that allow for self-determination. Insofar as agents have capacities not just for acting on reasons but on reasons as such—which involves capacities to reflect on those reasons—then the objects and properties that are thereby perceptibly present provide warrant.

One’s knowledge that there is something red and rectangular in front of one includes knowledge of its own credentials as knowledge. And it is the knowledge it is because it is a non-defective act of a capacity to know such things through perception.

(McDowell 2013a, p. 151)

The account of perceptual experiences as exercises of a capacity whereby objects are immediately present sets up McDowell’s discussion of fallibility. He argues that most discussions treat particular perceptual experiences as fallible, but it is capacities that are fallible; exercises are either defective or non-defective.

In part, the point is that the fact that a capacity may be fallible does not change what the capacity is or what it is for. McDowell introduces the example of a basketball player’s capacity to shoot free throws, shots that yield one point in a specific context (McDowell 2010: 245–246). This capacity is fallible, with many defective or flawed exercises even by star players. But the fact that a particular free throw misses the basket does not make it something other than a free throw—it is a flawed free throw. Similarly, if the correct analysis of the capacity of perception is that it makes objects and their properties present to the perceiver, the capacity is such that *particular* perceptual experiences fail to have conclusive warrant when all does not go well. Defective perceptual experiences do

not provide conclusive warrant just as defective free throws do not yield points—but non-defective ones do.

This analogy may seem to run afoul of a significant disanalogy between free throws and perceptual experiences: experiences have subjective character and on many accounts, including McDowell's, their warrant must be part of their subjective character (McDowell 2013a: 150). "Someone who has knowledge of this [perceptual or experiential] sort must be in a position to know the warrant by virtue of which her state counts as knowledge" (Ibid.: 148). Since some experiences are defective in a way that one might not discern, it may seem that the requirement cannot be met. Given that "one can take an experience to make knowledge available when it does not" (Ibid.: 151), the analogy might seem to fail.

But according to McDowell, this line of reasoning makes a mistaken inference from the fallibility of a capacity: it is a mistake "to infer that when one is not being fooled, one's experience does not put one in a position to know that one is not being fooled" (McDowell 2010: 246).

The reply relies on his analysis of the perceptual capacity and on the relationship between a capacity and its exercises. If it is the nature of perceptual capacity to make objects present, then one is in a position to know that one is not being fooled when objects are perceptually present to one. If perceptual presence lies *in the way* that one has *de se* content—in a context of capacities that allow for assessment of oneself and one's conditions—then perceptual warrant is available in good cases. One may be mistaken. But if one is not mistaken, one is exercising a capacity whereby an object is present to one, and one has indefeasible warrant.

At this point, the argument that fallibility attaches to a capacity, while exercises either are flawed or do not kick in.

The capacity to get into such positions [where one knows that is in a position to have indefeasible warrant for believing that things are a certain way] is fallible. It does not follow that that cannot really be what it is a capacity to do.

(Ibid.: 246)

To return to the analogy with free throws, the mistaken inference from fallibility would have one hold that because one makes mistakes in shooting free throws, when one makes no mistakes, one nevertheless does not shoot a free throw. McDowell's counter is that the subjectivity of experience does not cancel out the basic point but is part of the point: when an exercise of a perceptual capacity is not defective, one is in a perceptual relation to objects with conclusive warrant for perceptually based belief.

My disjunctive approach to experience is a way of expressing this rejection of a faulty inference from fallibility. The disjunctive formulation states the point positively: of experiences that seem to reveal to

one some aspect of how things are in one's environment, some make that aspect of reality perceptually present to one, whereas the other only seem to do that.

(Ibid.: 246)

In sum, McDowell's account of our perceptual capacity gives the following epistemic picture:

On the content conception, the epistemic significance of an experience consists in its having content in the way that it does. An experience that is a seeing can be like an experience that merely appears to put its subject in touch with a corresponding environmental reality in respect of what content it has. But a seeing is unlike a mere appearing in how it has its content. Seeings . . . put the subject in a position that leaves open no possibility of things not being as they would be believed to be in suitably related beliefs.

(2013a: 147)

3. Explanatory Potential: Conceptual vs Naïve Realism

Consider the following scenarios from "Perceptual Experience: Contentful and Relational" (McDowell 2013a: 152–153).

First, consider an experimental situation where (i) the lighting is such that in many cases, objects do not look to have their colours, while in some they do; and (ii) this is not detectable.

In such a scenario, according to McDowell's approach, all of the subject's perceptual experiences are defective even though some are veridical and normally caused. The subject exercises her perceptual capacity, but the conditions are such that the subject is not "in a position to know the thing's colour by looking." The subject has experiential *de se* content, whereby it appears to her that an object has a specific colour. But the subject is in contexts where it is not possible to exercise her understanding of perceptual situations, so she is not perceptually related to the object's colour even in the specific cases where the object has the colour that it appears to her to have.

Second, consider the same experimental scenario—where some lighting conditions are undetectably unsuitable while others are suitable—but the subject has been told that she is in this situation. This means that even in cases where the lighting "is suitable for knowing colours by looking," the subject understands that she cannot tell when she is in such a case. Because of her knowledge of her situation, she cannot exercise her capacities to reflect on the conditions in which she finds herself. As a result, "she is not entitled to take its colours to be visually present to her in her experience" (McDowell 2013a: 153). As in the first case, she will have *de se* experiential content whereby it appears to her that objects have certain colours.

In some cases, these contents are veridical and normally caused; in other cases, they are not. But even where the contents are veridical and normally caused, the subject is not perceptually related to an object's colour because she knows that her capacity to reflect on her situation has been undercut.

Compare purely relational, naïve realist accounts of such cases. The following comparisons will be at a level of generality aimed at the claim that subjects stand in a perceptual relation to objects and properties that is not integrated with conceptual capacities and does not involve contents. The proposed perceptual relation might be a matter of 'bare acquaintance' or of a primitive personal level capacity or of subpersonal visual processes not subject to cognitive effects.

Across both scenarios, purely relational theories would hold that the subject is related to her surroundings in those cases where the lighting is suitable. This is because the relational state obtains when the conditions are suitable. The perceiver's understanding of her circumstances—her conceptual capacities—are not integral to but subsequent to the relational capacity. Given that the coloured object figures in her experience, it would be hard for purely relational theories to hold that the subject does not see the object. And insofar as such theories hold that the subject sees the colour of the object, it is hard to deny epistemic standing that would belong to seeing.

These scenarios show that purely relational theories push the epistemic account into an externalism according to which the subject sees the object's colour regardless of her reflective access to warrant. Though purely relational theories may argue that the subject's understanding of her situation may be such that she does not take her perceptual experience to constitute knowledge or provide warrant for further empirical belief, it is explanatorily complex to do so given that the theory holds that the experience is relational and factive independently of and antecedently to any exercise of the subject's understanding.

One might go further and argue that given that the first scenario is analogous to 'barn façade' cases, naïve realism does not deliver the epistemic result many believe to be needed: to distinguish cases where the subject has perceptual warrant from cases where she does not.

In the second scenario, the fact that the perceiver knows that she is in an experimental situation—in which she cannot detect suitable from unsuitable conditions—makes no difference to whether she is related to the objects and their colours which figure in her experiential states when conditions are suitable.

In sum, the two scenarios bring out the following points.

1. Purely relational and conceptual realist approaches yield different results in all these cases, and the two approaches pull in different epistemic directions.

2. Conceptual realism and naïve realism explain the good and bad cases differently. Naïve realism distinguishes good and bad cases in both scenarios: where the lighting is suitable, coloured objects figure in the subject's perceptual experience; where the lighting is not suitable, coloured objects do not figure in her perceptual experience. Conceptual realism holds that all of the cases across both scenarios are bad for perception—in none of the cases is the subject related to coloured objects. That is, conceptual realism denies that the colours are present to her.
3. Conceptual realism explains that the two scenarios impact differently on the perceiver's experience. Though both scenarios undermine a subject's capacities to understand her situation, they do so differently: in one case because she does not know that there are undetectable differences in lighting, in the other case because she does know this. Though naïve realism can countenance that a subject's understanding of her situation is different in the two scenarios, this does not make a difference as to whether coloured objects figure in her perceptual experience. Even though the subject knows that she is in circumstances where she cannot distinguish suitable conditions from unsuitable ones, objects and properties figure in her experiences nonetheless, so that the experiences are factive.
4. Conceptual realism explains that across both the first and second scenarios, the subject is in a type of state that is common to defective cases of seeing and non-defective cases of seeing—it appears to the subject that objects have certain colours. In all of these cases, though it appears to the subject that objects have certain colours, she cannot tell that they do.
5. Conceptual realism provides an explanation of how it is that things may *appear* the same to the perceiver across veridical and non-veridical cases. The subject is in a type of state where *de se* contents may be the same.
6. Purely relational accounts deny a commonality in the good and bad cases in both scenarios because objects figure in experiences in a way that does not draw on a subject's capacities and does not involve contents. Insofar as such accounts deny that contents are involved in a relational state, they deny a key resource for explaining commonality in a subject's experience in good and bad cases.
7. These differences in explanation—of whether a subject is exercising her perceptual capacity successfully and whether she has perceptual warrant—stem in part from the fact that the subject's understanding of her circumstances can make a difference on the naïve realist account only after the relation is secured. According to purely relational accounts, the subject's state is factive independently of her understanding of the situation.

4. Conceptual Realism: Contents and Relations

McDowell's explanation of perceptual experience as contentful and relational opens up the possibility of diverging accounts of both dimensions. Specific theories might diverge in their accounts of the content of perceptual experiences or of the conceptual capacities in the context of which such contents figure.

For example, I would disagree with McDowell's characterization of visual *de se* contents as obtaining independently of the subject's conceptual capacities with respect to the kind to which an object belongs. McDowell suggests that what an experience has in view is something red and rectangular, for example, but not a book or a book cover or a copy of the *Tractatus*. So even though cognitive capacities are involved in having something red and rectangular in view, these other things that I know by virtue of having the experience are "acts of cognitive capacities that would *not need to be* in operation for me to have the thing in view at all" (McDowell 2013a: 156, my italics). This makes a distinction between the cognitive capacities drawn into having something in view at all, and knowing the sort of thing it is. I suggest that taking the aesthetic dimension of perceptual experience into account indicates that this concession to arguments against the 'pervasiveness of the conceptual' is mistaken. Having an object in view at all may involve aesthetic impact, and such impact draws on our understanding of what we are looking at.

To telescope extensive discussion in aesthetics for the purposes of this chapter, let's focus the issue in terms of two key claims.³ First, aesthetic response depends at least on the high-level kind to which an object belongs—natural, artefactual or artistic—and arguably on more specific kinds as well. (I will leave more specific kinds out for this discussion.)⁴ Second, at least some aesthetic responsiveness is experiential and a dimension of perceptual experience (see Walton 1970). If the first contention from aesthetics is correct—that aesthetic response depends at least on higher-level kinds to which the object belongs—then it follows that insofar as aesthetic responsiveness can be perceptual, the requisite understanding needs to be able to inform perceptual experience. Since aesthetic responsiveness may be integral to any perceptual experience, understanding of the kind to which the object belongs needs to be in operation.

But what about appearances, and what it is to have a thing in view at all, which are of importance to disjunctive theories? Can aesthetic responsiveness be part not only of having a thing perceptually present to one, but also of having a thing in view at all? This is the key question with respect to McDowell's view that we can have a coloured and shaped object in view without any understanding of the kind to which it belongs. Let's take this in two steps that offer illustrative examples to argue, first, that perceptual experience of colour and shape may include aesthetic responsiveness, which draws on understanding; and second, that having

a thing in view at all involves aesthetic responsiveness (so that it draws on understanding).

First, consider two monochromatic canvases with the same paint and colour, where one is a paint sample and the other an artwork. A large stretched canvas that is painted all over with a certain shade of grey colour would have one range of aesthetic properties if it is a decorative sample in a fancy paint shop—for example, drab, gloomy or elegant. But a canvas of the same size, painted all over with the same shade of grey colour, would have a different range of aesthetic properties if it is a painting made by a specific artist at a particular time, such as Gerhard Richter's *Grau 1970* (247–10). A work's aesthetic properties would be connected to 'what' it conveys or 'what' it is about—a feeling, a mood, a content. One might find the same grey colour gloomy for example, but in the case of the artwork it would be gloominess intentionally conveyed, rather than the gloomy effect of a certain colour. Perhaps an all-over-grey painting might seem not to convey anything—it might seem strangely neutral or ambiguous, lacking in a forceful effect or content. But then this would be precisely its content and aesthetic impact—ambivalence or absence, or a withholding of message. This example illustrates that aesthetic response depends on the high-level kind to which an object belongs, here artefact versus artwork; and it suggests that the response at issue may be perceptual, since it is a response to the object's colour (and shape, size, texture).

One might counter that aesthetic properties are higher-level properties that depend on basic visual properties such as colours, contours and perhaps shapes to draw a distinction in kind between aesthetic and basic visual non-aesthetic properties. But monochromatic paintings put pressure on distinguishing the basic property of colour and the aesthetic property that is that same colour. Return to a monochromatic work that is an expanse of a single colour and has aesthetic effect, such as Gerhard Richter's all-over-grey painting, *Grau 1970* (247–10). There is only one colour, and that colour is aesthetically present to one. A distinction in kind between aesthetic properties and basic visual properties would entail that the aesthetic impact of the single colour depends on the non-aesthetic property which is also that single colour. The one colour is both an aesthetic and a non-aesthetic property. At this step we are at the beginning of more extended argumentation that lies beyond the scope of this chapter. But this should suffice to indicate that we can avoid undue complexity by maintaining the intuitive view that the colour of the monochrome has aesthetic impact; it is an aesthetic property.

Undercutting a distinction in kind between aesthetic and basic non-aesthetic properties such as colours and contours suggests that (i) perception of colours and contours can include aesthetic impact, and (ii) involves understanding of the kind to which the particular coloured object belongs.

But what about the claim that having the object in view at all does not need to involve understanding of the kinds to which the object belongs?

Let's return to our grey monochromes, but in the following scenario. I enter a fancy paint store and consider the grey colour of a large stretched canvas, displaying the latest 'in' shade. I find it too dark and gloomy to be surrounded by it in a living space. Now, suppose I learn that I have actually entered a gallery done up like a paint store, so that I am in an immersive installation space that probes our differential responsiveness to artefacts and artworks, to a grey monochrome paint sample and painting.

It is safe to say that my experience will change. What I am seeing—the grey rectangular object, including its aesthetic impact—would change as a whole. The experiential change in perceiving an installation in place of a paint store—and, more specifically, a paint sample in place of an artwork—involves a change in how the rectangular object in front of me appears to me, and that change involves aesthetic impact. Some change in aesthetic property or impact is integral to the whole in the immediate experiential shift from sample to work. This change is explained by my understanding of the object I am looking at, incorrect or correct as it may be. Insofar as I was wrong in apprehending a paint sample, the content that explains how the object appeared to me includes its aesthetic impact or aesthetic property. When I learn that I am looking at a painting, the content that explains how the painting appears to me also includes its aesthetic impact or aesthetic property.

Though these considerations touch only the tip of the iceberg that aesthetics provides, they should suffice to suggest the following. (i) In any particular case, perceptual experience may involve aesthetic responsiveness, and such responsiveness necessarily draws on understanding. (ii) In any particular case, the way an object appears, and hence the content that explains such appearance, may include aesthetic responsiveness; such aesthetic appearance and content necessarily involves understanding. (iii) In any particular case, having an object in view at all may involve aesthetic responsiveness, and hence having the object in view at all would necessarily involve understanding. In short, since any particular experience and appearance may be aesthetic, our understanding is internal to having an object in view at all.

This discussion illustrates how McDowell's approach opens up a range of topics—for example, concerning the nature of the contents, perhaps *de se*, that need to figure in a context of conceptual capacities to secure perceptual relatedness whereby an object and its properties are perceptually present to one.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on McDowell's account to illustrate the explanatory resources that become available if we explain perceptual relatedness

in terms of contents and capacities of understanding. I have not argued directly that such an approach is correct—that is beyond the scope of this chapter—though showing its explanatory power is part of such an argument. The main aim has been to show that commonsense or conceptual realism makes good sense of our perceptual capacity—and that it is important to recognize the position when we think about disjunctive accounts of perceptual experience and its epistemic standing. In particular, conceptual realism offers an important alternative to naïve realist, purely relational approaches with which ‘disjunctivism’ has come to be readily associated.

Notes

1. In presenting the account of perceptual experience to show the explanatory resources it offers for epistemic issues, I am not going against McDowell’s clear statement that he has argued for two disjunctivisms—one concerning singular thought and one “about the epistemology of knowledge warranted by perceptual experience”—and that the latter is not based on or does not “exploit considerations about the former.” See McDowell (2013b). McDowell’s point is that singular thought is made possible by perceptual experience and that the nature of its content—*de re*—content is different from the *de se* nature of perceptual content, as I will explain.
2. McDowell makes this connection by contrasting the capacity to act for reasons (which we share with animals) with the capacity to act for reasons *as such*, which is distinctive to us.
3. The following discussion draws on a more extended discussion in Sedivy (2018).
4. I also leave out of the discussion here Immanuel Kant’s seeming proposal in the *Critique of Judgement* that pure judgements of beauty do not involve *any* conception of the object, even a high-order one.

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