

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Dretske & McDowell on perceptual knowledge, conclusive reasons, and epistemological disjunctivism

Peter J. Graham¹ | Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen²

¹ University of California, Riverside

² Yonsei University

Correspondence

Peter J. Graham, University of California, Riverside.

Email: peter.graham@ucr.edu

Have you ever wondered what John McDowell is getting at in passages like these?

If we avoid fantasy, we have no reason not to allow [that] positions like seeing... that things are thus and so are standings in the space of reasons... even though there is an irreducible element... of kindness from the world, in whether one occupies them (1994b, p. 216; 1995, p. 886; 2001, p. 105; 2002a, p. 105; 2006b, p. 84).

If we rescue the idea of the space of reasons from the distortions of fantasy, we can say that the particular facts... that the world does us the favor of vouchsafing to us... actually shape the space of reasons (1995, p. 887).

The deformation is an interiorization of the space of reasons, a withdrawal of it from the external world. [...] The upshot of this interiorization is [that] knowledge of the external world cannot be completely constituted by standings in the space of reasons (1995, pp. 877, 885).

[At] their best, impressions constitute an availability... of facts themselves (1999, p. 15; 2002b, p. 276)

When someone has a fact made manifest to him, the... fact... is... not blankly external to his subjectivity (1982, p. 476).

Fantasy, kindness, retreat, deformation, interiorization, and blankly external? What do McDowell's metaphors mean?

If you want to understand them, start with Fred Dretske on perceptual knowledge and conclusive reasons. That's for two reasons. First, McDowell travels on many of the same tracks as Dretske. Second, compared to McDowell, Dretske is an easy read. Dretske's writing is a model of clarity and cognitive empathy while McDowell writes in difficult prose with confusing imagery and a penchant for the profound. Though you won't understand all of McDowell's metaphors and imagery from reading Dretske, you'll get grip on some of them if you see the parallels with Dretske. That's what we set out to show.

Many of our readers may find this surprising. Approaches to knowledge associated with Dretske are often the target of scorn from followers of Sellars: Bonjour, Brandom, McDowell, Rorty, and Williams, among others. McDowell, additionally, is a disjunctivist, and if anyone is not a disjunctivist, it's Dretske. Furthermore, McDowell, in all of his writings, never discusses Dretske's views. If McDowell never saw any parallels worth mentioning, why should anybody else? Our opposing view is that they share a good deal of common ground on perceptual knowledge, despite a host of other well-known differences, especially differences surrounding explanation and reduction in the philosophy of mind and the nature of normativity: here Dretske thinks if you can't build one, you don't know how it works, McDowell seems to think if you can build one, you're not talking about what he's talking about.

As for Dretske's overall epistemology, we invite you to put aside his case against epistemic closure (1970, 2005). Dretske's denial of closure is an optional (and we think mistaken) part of Dretske's epistemology of perceptual knowledge. There's more to Dretske's epistemology than zebras and painted mules.

We begin with Dretske before turning to McDowell. We'll see that Dretske and McDowell say many of the same things, target the same target, and give the same arguments. That surely suggests they reach the same conclusion. We then show how to read McDowell's metaphors. When then turn to McDowell's disjunctivism. We think you'll find our interpretation of McDowell's disjunctivism surprising and rewarding.

1 | DRETSKE

Dretske says if you know that P, you know it on the basis of evidence, grounds, or reasons. "S can know that...P only by having a reason to believe it" (1969, p. 136; 1968, p. 117; 2003, p. 117). Reasons are accessible mental states. *Pace* Armstrong (1968) and Davidson (1986), conscious sense-perceptual representations (and not just beliefs) serve as reasons (1969, p. 122). Perceptual experiences are explanatory and normative reasons for perceptual beliefs (Dretske, 2017). Such support doesn't involve reasoning or inference (Dretske, 1969, pp. 120, 123; 1971a, pp. 15–16). You can have a reason for belief without forming the corresponding belief and without being able to give the reason to others.

Dretske then says if "you know, if you *really* know, then you cannot be wrong" (1989, p. 632). He does not mean the trivial point that if you know that P then P is true, in the same way if you know that P then you believe that P. Rather he means the substantive claim that if you know that P on reason R, then R *excludes the possibility of error* (1971a, p. 14; 2017, p. 349). Your reason R must be *conclusive*:

Anything short of conclusive reasons, though it may provide one with justified true beliefs, fails to give...knowledge (1971a, pp. 1–2).

If you know that P, then your reasons for believing P are so strong that, given simply these reasons, you can't be wrong... [Knowledge enabling] justification is conclusive. You can't have it for a false proposition. That's what gives [it] the power to transform your belief that P into the knowledge that P. It provides—what knowledge is supposed to provide—security from error (2017, p. 349).

The *kind* of justification (the kind of *reason*) required for knowledge does not allow for the possibility of error. "The reasons (justification) alone must guarantee the truth of P" (2017, p. 349). Knowledge is not just *weakly* "factive" in requiring true belief, but *strongly* factive in requiring reasons that exclude the possibility of error (1971a, p. 14; 1991, p. 195).

Dretske's view targets the "traditional" analysis of knowledge:

S knows that P iff

1. P is true
2. S believes P
3. S is justified in believing P

where the third condition does not entail the first, where the *justification* condition does not make the *truth* condition *redundant*. That's because justification (the kind sufficient for knowledge on the traditional analysis) is compatible with error. On this analysis, the reasons that suffice for knowledge are *fallible*, *inconclusive* reasons. Whether the belief so justified is true is then an open question. But since knowledge requires truth, the truth of the subject's belief has to be added *as an extra condition*. That's why the traditional analysis has three lines, not two (or just one). On this analysis, if you know, though you have a true belief (and so are *not* wrong), you *might* be wrong. Dretske rejects this view.

Here's Dretske's account of knowledge from "Conclusive Reasons":

S knows that P iff S believes P on conclusive reasons R for P

There's no independent condition that S's belief is true on Dretske's analysis: if R is a conclusive reason for P, P can't be false. Dretske's analysis makes the truth condition redundant (1969, p. 113; 1971a; 1979a; 2017).

What exactly does Dretske mean by *conclusive reasons*? Here are four possibilities:

R is a logically conclusive reason for P iff given R, it is logically impossible that $\sim P$. Conclusive reasons are *logically necessary* reasons. Logical necessity guarantees if R then P. Given the laws of logic, it is impossible that (R and $\sim P$).

R is a metaphysically conclusive reason for P iff given R, it is metaphysically impossible that $\sim P$. Conclusive reasons are *metaphysically necessary* reasons. Metaphysical necessity guarantees if R then P. Given the laws of metaphysics, it is impossible that (R and $\sim P$); there is no metaphysically possible world where R and $\sim P$.

R is a nomologically conclusive reason for P iff given R, it is nomologically impossible that $\sim P$. Conclusive reasons are *nomologically necessary* reasons. The laws of nature necessitate if R then P. Given the laws of nature, it is impossible that (R and $\sim P$); there is no nomologically possible world where R and $\sim P$.

R is a circumstantially conclusive reason for P iff given R, it is circumstantially impossible that $\sim P$. Conclusive reasons are *circumstantially necessary* reasons. Circumstantial necessity guarantees if R then P. Given the particular circumstances that obtain on the occasion and the laws of nature, it is impossible that (R and $\sim P$) (1969, p. 83–84; 1971a, pp. 6–11).

The phrase “If you know that P on R, then R is a conclusive reason for P” thus has (at least) four interpretations. Conclusive reasons are either logically, metaphysically, nomologically, or circumstantially necessary reasons.

This four-way distinction grounds four grades of strong factivity. A reason R for P can be logically factive, metaphysically factive, nomologically factive, or circumstantially factive. Even “strong factivity” is not a univocal notion.

Most philosophers take conclusive reasons to be metaphysically necessary reasons. Dretske, on the other hand, takes conclusive reasons to be circumstantially necessary reasons:

[If R is a conclusive reason for P], then *in these circumstances*... it is false to say that R and not-P might both be the case or that, given R, not-P might be the case... [W]hen R is given, *in the kind of circumstances which actually prevailed on the occasion in question*, the possibility of not-P is eliminated. (1971a, pp. 11–12, emphasis added; also pp. 6–7; 1969, pp. 83–84; 2003, p. 15)

According to Dretske, then, knowledge requires *circumstantially* factive reasons.

Do we have such reasons? Dretske thinks so.

Conclusive reasons are not that hard to come by. We have them for many of our beliefs. If the reason I have for believing there is gas in my automobile tank is that the gas gauge indicates so, then if the gauge is functioning properly, I have conclusive reasons for thinking I have gas in my tank. [This] is the sort of reason you might have for thinking my birthday is in December—viz., I told you it was. If I am... the sort who wouldn't have told you this if it weren't true, then my telling you gives you a conclusive reason for believing it. (2017, p. 351)

Everyday knowledge — the things we know *if* we are not being tricked by cunning demons or misled by extraordinary circumstances — remains secure. (1981a, p. 191)

If the circumstances are right—if we are not being fooled by evil demons, if we are functioning normally and the conditions are normal, among other conditions—then we have circumstantially necessary reasons, conclusive reasons in Dretske's sense.

Dretske glosses such reasons in subjunctive (modal) terms: R is a conclusive reason for P if and only if *R would not be the case unless P*. You will find this phrase throughout Dretske's 1969 book *Seeing and Knowing*. After the first chapter, it's on practically every page. In *Seeing and Knowing* he focuses on the analysis of perceptual knowledge, what he calls *epistemic seeing*. He argues that:

S sees that b is F (hence knows that b is F by seeing) on the basis how b looks to S (S's visual experience of b) only if b would not look the way it does to S unless b were F.

S sees that b is F only if S's perceptual experience is a conclusive reason to believe that b is F. The 1971 and 1969 views are the same.

One can, but need not, gloss the modal phrase “R would not be the case unless P”—and so the notion of a circumstantially necessary reason—by a sensitivity or a safety conditional. On a sensitivity reading, R in the actual world is a conclusive reason for P iff in all the nearest possible worlds where P is not the case, R is not the case. On a safety reading, R in the actual world is a conclusive reason for P iff in all of the nearest worlds where R is the case, P is also the case. Since the worlds where R is the case will all be nearby (for R is the case in the actual world), but the worlds where P is not the case may not be nearby (for P is the case in the actual world, not the negation of P), safety and sensitivity are not equivalent. What gloss did Dretske prefer? Sensitivity (1991, 2003). But we think a safety reading is not only possible but preferable (Graham, 2006). That’s partly why denying closure is an optional feature of Dretske’s view (Luper, 2006).

If Dretske’s right about knowledge requiring circumstantially necessary reasons, then whether you know depends on your broader set of circumstances. That’s Dretske’s externalism. Unfortunately, ‘externalism’ in epistemology has many meanings. For some it means knowledge does not require evidence, reasons, or grounds. That is not Dretske’s view.¹ For Dretske, “externalism” means that “external” circumstances—circumstances “out there” in your environment, beyond the fact that makes your belief true—matter to whether you know:

Perceptual knowledge, if we have it, derives from the circumstances in which one comes to believe... (2003, p. 105). It is the fact that Russell’s hypothesis is false... that enables one to remember what one had for breakfast. [...] It is the fact that I am suitably connected to the world that underlies my knowledge of the world. [...] This is externalism. [...] Whether S knows that P depends on the circumstances... (2003, pp. 106–107).

The *conclusiveness* of reasons—a requirement for knowledge—depends on external circumstances. Reasons as such, however, do not. “I am an externalist about knowledge” Dretske says, “but not about justification” (2004, p. 31, fn. 1).

If that’s Dretske’s view, how does he make his case? He gives a number of arguments. Here are four.

First, if the justification sufficient for knowledge is compatible with error, there can be “accidental” knowledge; but “accidental knowledge” is no more knowledge than a toy gun is a real gun:

...if the justificatory condition can be satisfied with respect to a false P, requiring thereby the imposition of a non-redundant truth condition, then genuine knowledge appears to be somewhat of an accident, a lucky coincidence. For two people (or the same person at different times) can be identical in their satisfaction of the belief and evidential [justification] condition... one knows and the other not. The one knows because what he justifiably believes is true, while the other does not know because what he justifiably believes is false (1979a, p. 256; 2003, p. 107).

If the justification is compatible with error, then there’s a sense in which it’s a matter of luck—an accident—that the subject’s belief is true, on that justification. But that’s not enough for knowledge. Here Dretske agrees with Unger (1968) that S knows that P only if it is not at all accidental that S’s belief is true (Dretske 1971a, p. 18; 1981a, p. 195; 2017, p. 352). In order to exclude “accidental” knowledge, knowledge must involve conclusive reasons, reasons that guarantee truth.

Dretske's second argument involves sheer statistical evidence. Suppose you draw a ball from an urn containing 99 pink balls and one green ball. Suppose, before looking, you believe that you have drawn a pink ball. Do you know that you did, when you believe that you did, and as a matter of fact you did? "You may be ever so reasonable in believing it (or betting on it), but you were not in a position of someone who actually took a peek at the color of the ball" (1981a, pp. 94–95; 1969, p. 87; 1979a, p. 257; 1988, p. 270). Or in a fair lottery you have one among thousands of tickets. Even if you correctly predicted that you were going to lose, you cannot know you're going to lose if your only reason is a correct estimate of the odds. (1971a, pp. 3–4; 1981a, pp. 94–95; 2017, p. 349; see Harman 1968) These are cases of justified true belief on the basis of *inconclusive* reasons, where the subject's justified true beliefs fall short of knowledge. The absence of *conclusive* reasons explains why the subjects don't know.

Dretske's third reason involves objectively probable alternative possibilities, like the well-known barns case (Goldman, 1976). Here are two of Dretske's cases:

Zippo Lighters. "Suppose... I pick... up [the lighter on the table] and announce that is my lighter. [Do I know that it is?] If Francis Donovan, who also happens to own a Zippo lighter with his initials engraved on it, is present, we will have to answer this question in the negative. Perhaps it is my lighter; nonetheless, I cannot [know] that it is—at least not if... the particular way it looked to me... involve[s] nothing more distinctive... than its being a Zippo with the initials 'F.D.' engraved on its side" (1969, p. 85).

Two Volcanoes. "[C]onsider [an] embellishment on Goldman's [lava example from 'A Causal Theory']. Not far from M is another mountain, N. The geology of the area is such that... if M had not erupted, N would have. Furthermore, the location of N is such that if it, rather than M, had erupted, the present distribution of lava would have been, in all respects relevant to S's taking it as a reason for believing M erupted, the same. In such circumstances Goldman's necessary [causal] condition is satisfied, but mine is not... S is still correct in supposing that M did erupt, still correct in supposing that it was M's eruption which is causally responsible for the present existence and distribution of lava, but does not know... M... erupted" (Dretske 1971a, p. 5).

In these cases, objectively probable alternatives in the environment robs the subject of knowledge, even though the subject has a justified true belief. Given the circumstances, it is not circumstantially necessary that if R then P. The subject does not know, according to Dretske, because the subject lacks a *conclusive* reason.

Like the barns case, these are counterexamples to Goldman's (1967) causal analysis of knowing. They undermine the idea that *veridical* perceptual experience—an experience caused by the fact that makes the experience veridical—suffices to ground perceptual knowledge. Dretske is looking at (veridically perceiving) his very lighter, though he doesn't know that it is his, just as Henry sees a barn and correctly believes it is barn but doesn't know that it is. A *weakly* factive perceptual experience is not, as such, a *strongly* factive conclusive reason.

Dretske piled on further examples throughout his career (Transistors/Capacitors (1969, pp. 181–182); Cigarettes at a Party (1969, p. 182); Grebes/Gadwalls (1981b, 1981c); Steaks on the Grill (1981a, pp. 95–96); Robot Wives (2003, p. 107)). Dretske's discovery and appreciation of these kinds of cases pioneered the idea that knowledge involves a modal dimension. Dretske was on to these ideas seven years before Goldman (1976) and twelve years before Nozick (1981).

Dretske's fourth reason involves Gettier cases. The problem with the traditional analysis of knowledge is the idea we started with, that the kind of justification required for knowledge (on the analysis) allows for justified false beliefs. When the justification condition does not guarantee truth, that allows for the subject to hold a justified but false ground, and then for the truth of the belief to be restored through some separate route. It's the separate route that makes the beliefs in Gettier cases true by luck, and not true by the subject's justification. To avoid Gettier cases, Dretske claims, we need an analysis of the justification "which implies the *truth* of what one justifiably believes (thereby making the truth condition superfluous)" (1979a, p. 258; see also Zagzebski, 1994, Merricks, 1995).²

That's Dretske. We now turn to McDowell. You will find the parallels striking.

2 | MCDOWELL

It goes without saying that McDowell insists perceptual knowledge requires reasons, where our primary reasons for perceptual beliefs are conscious sense perceptual representations, what he calls *experiences* or *appearances* (1994a, pp. 14, 53, 61, 68, 69, 82, 99; 1996, pp. 297–300; 2001, p. 184; 2006f, pp. 134–5; 2008, p. 11). The *experience* is the reason for belief, *not* a belief *about* the experience (2011, p. 33). Though he once held reasons, and so experiences, must have propositional form (1994a, 1999), he later gave up that idea (2008, pp. 3, 10–12; 2013a, pp. 265, 277; 2013b, p. 145).

Like Dretske, McDowell thinks you can have experiences as reasons without believing the proposition they are reasons for (2004a, p. 215; 2006d, p. 116; 2006e, p. 133; 2008, p. 11; 2018a, p. 91). When we do form the belief, the force of the experience, though rational, does not involve or rely on inference or reasoning (1982, pp. 477–478; 195, p. 882; 2002a, p. 100; 2004a, pp. 214–215; 2006b, p. 83; 2006d, p. 115; 2006f, p. 135; 2008, p. 12; 2010, p. 254; 2011, pp. 12–13; 2013a, pp. 264–265).³

Unlike Dretske, however, McDowell thinks we must be able to *give* our reasons (2008, pp. 12–13; 2011, pp. 16–17, 20–21, 33; 2013b, p. 146). And that is, in part, because having reasons requires having language. McDowell has a considerably more demanding conception of reasons, and so a narrower scope for perceptual knowledge. Though this a deep difference between Dretske and McDowell, it does not undercut the parallels we see.

Like Dretske, for McDowell perceptual knowledge requires *conclusive* reasons; to ground knowledge the experience must exclude the possibility of error. "[I deny] that non-conclusive warrants can suffice for knowledge" (2013a, p. 278; 2018b, pp. 104–105). Knowledge requires "justification [that is] incompatible with falsehood. . . , [that] guarantees truth" (2002a, pp. 98–99).

McDowell calls his target the "hybrid" view (1994b, p. 214, 1995, pp. 881–885; 2002a). The hybrid view "interiorizes" the space of reasons; interiorized reasons are circumstantially fallible, inconclusive reasons (1994b, 1995, 2002a, p. 98). Since "interiorized" reasons don't guarantee truth, knowledge requires an "extra" condition that the belief is true, a condition "external to" or "outside of" the "space of reasons." Though it still places knowledge "in the space of reasons" (knowledge still has a justification condition), it insists that knowledge requires *more than* a standing in the space of reasons, for the justification condition is compatible with error. Since knowledge requires truth, we must add that the subject's belief is true. The so-called "hybrid" view is then just the "traditional" three-part analysis of knowledge where the truth condition is non-redundant; knowledge is a "hybrid" (a "factoring") of inconclusive reasons and truth. Like Dretske, he rejects this view:

[I]t is not satisfactory to leave [reasons]... interiorized but add that what a putative knower [believes is true], conceiving [truth as] an extra condition over and above an interiorized [reason]. (2002a, p. 102)

I argue against views according to which knowledge is only partly constituted by standings in the space of reasons, with the [truth condition] conceived as an extra condition, over and above her standing in the space of reasons. (2002a, p. 101)⁴

And so, like Dretske, McDowell thinks knowledge is not weakly but strongly factive. Knowledge involves conclusive standings “in the space of reasons.” That’s why, in McDowell’s vocabulary, knowledge just *is* a “satisfactory standing in the space of reasons” (1982, p. 477; 1994b, pp. 205, 214; 1995, pp. 884–886, 890; 2002a, pp. 99, 101; 2011, p. 30; 2018a, p. 91). You don’t need an “extra” or “external” element “outside” the space of reasons to convert belief into knowledge.

Does McDowell think we have conclusive perceptual reasons? Yes. McDowell “deplores” the idea “that justification that rules out falsehood cannot be had for empirical” beliefs (2002a, p. 98). “The fact is that conclusive grounds are to be had, in experiences of perceiving” (2018a, p. 97).

We’ve seen that for Dretske conclusive reasons depend on the subject’s environmental circumstances. Does McDowell emphasize the role of the subject’s circumstances for conclusive reasons? Yes. Here are some telling passages:

[O]bservational knowledge that something is, say, red *depends on*... the fact that *the circumstances* are... suitable for telling the colors of things... Her reason is that she sees it to be red. That *could not* be the case—she could not have that reason—if *the circumstances were not* suitable. (2004b, p. 296, emphasis added)

If one nevertheless describes the perceptual state as a *seeing*, one must be claiming, or at least implying, that even so, *in the present circumstances* the warrant that the perceptual state provides for a belief is good enough for the belief to count as knowledgeable. (2011, p. 28, emphasis added)

What I object to is interiorizing [warrants], in the sense of refusing to let the *connivance of the world* enter into constituting [them as warrants] (2002a, p. 102, emphasis added).

The world—the individual’s circumstances—thus helps constitute the individual’s experiences as *conclusive* reasons. Given the circumstances, it is impossible that (R and \sim P).

Now we can understand why McDowell says perceptual knowledge and conclusive reasons depends on “favors” or “kindnesses from the world, the world “vouchsafing” facts for us (1994b, p. 216; 1995, pp. 886–887; 2001, p. 105; 2002a, p. 105; 2006b, p. 84). Those are just metaphors for the importance of being in the right kind of circumstances for knowledge. Or to put this point in Dretske’s terms:

Perceptual knowledge, if we have it, derives from the circumstances in which one comes to believe.... [...] It is the fact that I am suitably connected to the world that underlies my knowledge of the world... (Dretske 2003, pp. 105–107)

When there are no other lighters or packs of cigarettes, no demons or malicious scientists, the world does us a “favor” and “vouches” for the facts.

This means McDowell, like Dretske, puts an “externalist” condition on conclusive reasons: whether one has knowledge depends, in part, on environmental circumstances, and not merely on the veridicality of the experience or the truth of the belief. Weak factivity is not enough.

When McDowell rejects “externalism” he rejects what he calls *outright* externalism, the idea that knowledge does not require evidence, reasons, or grounds of *any kind*, that knowledge is not a standing in the space of reasons *at all*. He calls this position “sinister” (1994b, p. 215; 1995, p. 882; 1996, pp. 289, 294; 2011, p. 21; 2013b, p. 146). In this respect, Dretske agrees. Dretske is no “outright” externalist either.

Since Dretske thinks conclusive reasons involve a modal or subjunctive conditional relation between the reason and what it is a reason for, grounded in the subject’s external circumstances, we expect McDowell to note that an experience (that is a conclusive reason) is a conclusive reason because of a modal property of the experience. And that’s exactly what he says:

... experiences that conclusively warrant associated beliefs [embed] a *modality*—given the experience, there’s no possibility of the belief’s being wrong. (2013a, p. 269, emphasis added)

Knowledge that P requires belief on reason R that, given the circumstances, would not be the case unless P.⁵

McDowell then gives the same arguments as Dretske. First, McDowell expresses the idea that “accidental” knowledge isn’t knowledge at all:

Suppose a knower has a justified true belief, but the justification is not conclusive. Given this interiorization of justification, [the putative knower’s true belief]... looks accidental in relation to the putative knower’s [justification]... How does this add up to a picture of knowing that things are thus and so, as opposed to having good but not conclusive reason to suppose that things are thus and so, in a situation in which, as it happens, things are thus and so? (2002a, p. 103; 1995, p. 884; 2006g, pp. 220–221)

Second, he gives “sheer numbers are not enough” arguments involving lotteries and urns of balls where a “high probability of being correct is what one [believes] is not the right kind of thing to underwrite [knowledge]” (2011, pp. 50–53; 1994b, pp. 201, 203).

Third, he gives fake barns—Zippo lighters—cases:

[A] case in which... an experience subjectively indistinguishable from that of being confronted with a tomato, even if it results from confrontation with a tomato, need not count as *experiencing the presence* of a tomato occurs when... there are a lot of tomato façades about, indistinguishable from tomatoes when viewed from the front: cf. Alvin Goldman [1976]. (1982, p. 475, emphasis added)

[If] fakes are prevalent, the subject does not have an experience of the kind that would put herself in a position to have perceptual knowledge. (2018b, p. 110, emphasis added)

Also like Dretske, McDowell thinks “fakes” cases show that a veridical perceptual experience is one thing, and an experience that counts as a conclusive reason for belief is another (2010, p. 245; 2013a, pp. 269, 277; 2013b, p. 152).

What about Gettier cases? McDowell never cites Gettier, let alone appeals to Gettier cases, at least not in *Mind and World* (1994a), his four collections (1998a, 1998b, 2009a, 2009b), or any of his post 2009 papers that we have read. Does that mean that we’ve got him wrong? Not at all. We think his view treats Gettier cases just like Dretske’s. That’s a reason in McDowell’s favor. We are not alone. Duncan Pritchard (2008, p. 292) rightly notes McDowell’s view handles Gettier cases.

Let’s now sum up some of the parallels between Dretske and McDowell. They both say

- that perceptual knowledge requires reasons; perceptual experiences are perceptual reasons;
- that the justified true belief analysis (where truth is a non-redundant condition) is false;
- that perceptual knowledge requires conclusive reasons, where conclusive reasons are strongly factive reasons;
- that having strongly factive perceptual reasons turns on features of the subject’s external circumstances;
- that conclusive reasons have a modal dimension;

And they have the same reasons:

- knowledge excludes truth by accident
- lotteries
- Zippo lighters and fake tomatoes
- Gettier cases

As we promised, we can then translate the imagery and metaphors. Consider these phrases:

- *experience makes worldly realities manifest*
- *experiences make objective reality directly available*
- *an experience is an openness to the world*
- *an experiencer has the world in view*
- *facts make themselves manifest*
- *facts are disclosed to the experiencer*
- *facts are not blankly external*
- *objective realities are perceptually present*

They all mean the subject has conclusive, strongly factive perceptual reasons. Whenever you see imagery and metaphors like these, just read them as talking about experiences as circumstantially factive reasons.

“Interiorization” or “deformation” of reasons just means denying that perceptual experiences are ever conclusive reasons. The world “vouchsafing” for facts or doing us a “kindness” just means environmental circumstances play a role in grounding a reason as a conclusive reason. The “hybrid” view is just the traditional analysis of knowledge, where the truth condition is non-redundant with the justification condition. If you want to grasp McDowell’s imagery, read it through a Dretskean lens.

Dretske and McDowell walk down a similar path. Though there are differences, some deeper than others, we have shown the following: for perceptual knowledge, both require perceptual reasons that are conclusive reasons in Dretske's sense, circumstantially factive reasons.

3 | WHAT ABOUT DISJUNCTIVISM?

What about McDowell's disjunctivism? Does it derail our interpretation? As we said, if anyone is not a disjunctivist, Dretske isn't.

We begin with "Metaphysical Disjunctivism" (MD). MD is a metaphysical thesis about the contents of perceptual representations (Burge, 2005, 2011). Consider two subjectively indistinguishable perceptual experiences:

The Veridical Case. You are looking, in good lighting conditions, at a red ball in front of you.

It "looks" like there is a red ball in front of you, and there is.

The Illusory Case. You are looking at white ball illuminated by a red light to look exactly like the other ball. It then "looks" to you like there is a red ball in front of you, but there isn't.

Here are three competing theses about these experiences:

All Content in Common: The two cases have exactly the same content. Sameness in total content explains why they are indiscernible.

Nothing (Specific and Fundamental) in Common: The cases have no common content specific to (unique to) the two cases at the fundamental level of psychological explanation. In the veridical case, the content involves the red ball itself. The object and its properties are the content of your experience. In the illusory case, the content is something mental, not an object in the world: sense-data, appearances, or mental representations. The two experiences then have no content, specific to the two experiences, in common. It is just a fact that they are indiscernible.

Something (Specific and Fundamental) in Common: The two cases have a shared (common) fundamental mental state type in their contents, specific to the two experiences. For example, they both represent as of the very same shade of red. The common specific mental state type explains why they are indiscernible. But as distinct token experiences, they also have differing token elements in their contents. As tokens, since the objects differ, the two contents differ. Or, since they involve distinct applications of de re demonstrative or de se indexical representational elements, the contents differ.

MD is the second thesis, that "veridical" and "illusory" perceptual experiences, even when subjectively indiscernible, have no specific mental state type in common at the fundamental level of psychological explanation. Some contemporary philosophers admire this idea; others deplore it.

Its truth is not our question. Our question is whether McDowell holds it. The majority of commentators say McDowell embraces MD.⁶ Are they right? Here are four reasons for their view:

- McDowell favorably cites Hinton's classic papers advancing MD (1982, pp. 472–475).
- McDowell says visual experiences are *either* an external fact making itself manifest *or* a mere appearance. That suggests the content in the “good” case involves external objects or facts and the content in the “bad” case involves “mere” appearances in the mind.
- McDowell rejects the “highest common factor” conception of perceptual experience (1982, pp. 471–472). This implies that he thinks the *contents* of the “good” case (veridical experience) and the “bad” case (illusion) have no factor—no element—in common (Pritchard, 2003, p. 276).
- McDowell—as we've seen—thinks the “good” case involves the impossibility of error. If the fact *itself* were the *very content* of the subject's experience, then we'd have an easy explanation for the impossibility of error. If MD implies both the *referential* and *representational* success of the experience in all possible worlds, MD would explain the impossibility of error. Veridical perceptions would be metaphysically factive reasons (Pritchard, 2012, p. 24).

The majority view makes sense.

It is, however, mistaken. McDowell rejects MD. You can find clear evidence and explicit disavowals throughout his writings over a nearly twenty-year period (1994b, p. 212; 1995, pp. 887–888; 2006a, p. 33; 2006c, p. 98; 2006f, p. 136; 2006g, pp. 220–221; 2008, pp. 9–10; 2010, pp. 243–244, 249–253; 2013a, pp. 260, 263; 2013b, pp. 144, 155). Here are two conclusive passages:

Blackburn... attributes to me the bizarre thesis that there is nothing in common between someone who perceives that things are thus and so and someone to whom it merely seems that she perceives that things are thus and so. In fact, it is boringly obvious that there is something in common between the cases. The location “seems” and its kin are precisely suited to capture the common feature. In Blackburn's example [of a veridical perception and an illusion], both Mary and her twin are subjects to whom it looks as if (i.e., it visually appears that) there is butter in the fridge. (2006g, p. 220)

It is simply not true that my account fails to make room for content shared between perception and misperception. (2006c, p. 98)

McDowell insists that there is a “mental state *type* in common” between both sides of his disjunction (2010, p. 244, emphasis added; 2013a, p. 260). McDowell *rejects* MD.⁷

If McDowell rejects MD, why does he call his view “disjunctive?” Simple. He thinks perceptual experiences as of P are either *conclusive* reasons for belief or *inconclusive* reasons. An experience as of P that is a *conclusive* reason is one where “the experience makes itself manifest to the subject that things are that way” (2006f, p. 136). An experience as of P that is *inconclusive* does not do that—it only “appears” to do that—it is a “mere” appearance (2013a, p. 259). So an experience as of P is *either* a conclusive reason *or* an inconclusive reason. McDowell's “disjunctivism” is a distinction between two *epistemological* categories that experiences fall under. That's why he calls it *epistemological* disjunctivism (ED).

The basic shape of my epistemological disjunctivism is as follows. In perceptual experience the subject has it appear to her that things are a certain way in her environment. In some cases ('good' cases), the experience makes itself manifest to the subject that things are that way; and others ('bad' cases), the appearance that things are that way is a *mere* appearance. (2013a, p. 259)

"Good" cases (for McDowell) involve perceptual experiences that provide conclusive reasons for perceptual belief; "bad" cases are all the cases that don't, even veridical cases.

So when McDowell rejects what he calls the "highest common factor" conception of experience, he is rejecting the *epistemological* claim that experiences that provide for knowledge are *never* conclusive reasons but are only ever at best *inconclusive* reasons. "On the 'highest common factor' conception...no appearance can have a warranting capacity better than the warranting capacity of mere appearance" (2013a, p. 271). He is rejecting the hybrid view, the "interiorization" of reason, where perceptual experiences can only provide justifications compatible with error. The passage just block-quoted continues:

What I reject is this idea: if someone knows something about her environment through an experience, it must be partly by virtue of something additional to the experience itself; ...so the experience itself leaves open the possibility that a belief grounded on it is not...knowledge. (2013a, p. 259)

For McDowell an experience qua conclusive reason is sufficient. Nothing "external" to the reason—viz. a non-redundant truth-condition—is required.

And so when McDowell rejects the *epistemological* highest common factor conception of the epistemic force of perceptual experiences, he is not rejecting the *metaphysical* claim that conclusive and inconclusive perceptual representations can have a specific common mental state type in common. He is not rejecting the existence of a common *psychological* factor:

My point is not to deny there is no highest common factor...My claim [is that] the highest common factor *does not exhaust the epistemological significance of experience*. (2006g, p. 220, emphasis added)

The essential thing is that the two sides of the disjunction differ in epistemic significance, whereas on the highest common factor conception the "good" disjunct can afford no better warrant for perceptual claims than the "bad" disjunct. This difference in epistemic significance is of course consistent with all sorts of commonalities between the disjuncts. For instance, on both sides it appears to one, say, there is a red [ball] in front of one. (2006a, p. 33)

McDowell's "disjunction" isn't a deep *metaphysical* distinction between the *psychological* natures of veridical and non-veridical experiences, but an *epistemological* distinction between those experiences that are conclusive reasons and those that are not (2006f, p. 135). McDowell advances ED not MD.

To drive this point home, recall cases involving fakes. A subject might have a veridical perception as of a red tomato *in good conditions*. The subject thereby acquires a *conclusive* reason to believe a red tomato is present. That same subject in a counterfactual case might have a psychologically type identical veridical perception as of the very same tomato, but in bad conditions

where fake tomatoes are prevalent. In that case, the subject only acquires an *inconclusive* reason to believe a red tomato is present. It is the same type of mental state in both cases. It is veridical in both cases. But only the first provides a conclusive reason. The second, though veridical, “would not have... provided [the subject] with a *conclusive warrant* for... belief” (2013a, p. 269, emphasis added; see also 2010, pp. 245–246; 2013a, p. 227; 2013b, p. 152).

Philosophers often talk as what is important is whether an experience is veridical. But for an experience to be veridical would be for things in the environment to be the way it makes them seem to be, and that does not suffice [to provide knowledge]... [If] fakes are prevalent, the subject does not have an experience of the kind that would put herself in a position to have perceptual knowledge. (2018b, p. 110)

Veridicality [on its own] is not quite what is needed. (2013a, p. 277)

McDowell’s distinction isn’t between veridical and non-veridical perceptual representations. It’s a distinction between knowledge enabling conclusive perceptual reasons and those perceptual reasons that “only appear” to be conclusive reasons. “In my account of how experience relates to beliefs the important distinction is between cases in which experience makes knowledge available and all others” (2006f, p. 136).

We can now dispel another common misinterpretation of McDowell. When McDowell says “experiences of seeing” provide for knowledge but “mere appearances” do not, does that mean beliefs based on “experiences of seeing” are rational—based on reasons—but beliefs based on “mere appearances” are not? Does it mean that beliefs based on “mere appearances” are at best blameless beliefs? That is how many have read McDowell. Here’s Juan Comesaña:

McDowell thinks mere appearances don’t provide an epistemic basis for beliefs... [M]ere appearances can explain why we have certain beliefs, but the explanation will be, for McDowell, more like an explanation in terms of a brain tumor that provides random beliefs than like a rationalizing explanation. (2005, p. 376).

But that’s not McDowell’s view. Like Dretske, even an inconclusive reason is still a reason. Even inconclusive reasons can rationalize beliefs. They just fall short of knowledge, even if true.

Appearances as such... afford reasons, good as far as they go, for believing that things are as they appear. Here we have a rational force that is to be found, symmetrically, on both sides of the distinction that figures in the disjunctive conception of experience. (2006b, p. 82; 2006f, p. 137; 2018, p. 106).

Just as Dretske would say the subject has a reason whether the reason is conclusive or inconclusive, so would McDowell.

There are other parallels. For instance, Dretske and McDowell also agree that “good” cases (conclusive reasons) are prior to “bad” cases (inconclusive reasons); they both hold there is no intentional content without epistemic success. In a slogan, no inconclusive reasons without conclusive reasons (Dretske, 1983; McDowell, 1999; 2006a; 2006d). They are not both just externalists about what makes a particular experience a conclusive reason, they are also externalists about representational content in general.

We have shown that McDowell, like Dretske, rejects MD. We have shown that McDowell is at least committed to the thesis that the two experiences that began this section have a specific, fundamental representational content in common. Given all that we have said so far, he might also hold, at least for the case of experience (as opposed to thought), that they have all of their content in common.

Reading McDowell through a Dretskean lens makes it easy to see that the majority view is mistaken. McDowell isn't a metaphysical disjunctivist. Indeed, with all of this said, it is now apparent that Dretske is just as much an epistemological disjunctivist as McDowell; they both accept that experiences qua reasons for belief are *either* conclusive reasons *or* inconclusive reasons. Indeed, if Dretske is just as much of an "epistemological disjunctivist" in McDowell's sense, but Dretske never saw the need to call his view "disjunctive," one might wonder whether the label provides any genuine illumination—or whether, as we have seen, it easily invites misinterpretation instead. That's certainly how we see it.

We conclude on their different uses of the phrase 'seeing that P.' In *Seeing and Knowing*, Dretske says seeing that P is knowing that P by visual means. Since knowing that P is believing that P on conclusive reason R, seeing that P is knowing that P on a conclusive perceptual reason. Seeing that some object b is F entails, according to Dretske:

1. b is F (so seeing that P is at least weakly factive);
2. S sees b (S successfully perceptually refers to b) and represents b as F. (Hence S successfully perceptually refers to b and successfully represents b as F.);
3. b would not look (be represented as) F to S unless b were F. (Hence S's perceptual representation is a conclusive reason for S to believe b is F, and so seeing that P is strongly factive.);
4. S believes that b is F on the basis of b's looking F to S. (Hence S believes b is F on the basis of a conclusive reason.) (1969, pp. 30, 121, 126–127; 1979b, pp. 1–2)

Dretske notes the first condition (weak factivity) is redundant given the third (strong factivity), and so it can be dropped. Since seeing that P entails knowing that P, Dretske can't explain knowledge in terms of seeing that P. Instead he explains it in terms of conclusive perceptual reasons.

McDowell, on the other hand, says seeing that P puts a subject *in a position to know* that P by visual means (2002b, p. 277; 2004a, p. 213; 2006c, p. 99; 2011, p. 13). The subject may suspend judgment, or may possess a misleading defeater, blocking knowledge. Since seeing that P is not the same as knowing that P, McDowell can then explain perceptual knowledge in terms of seeing that P, where seeing that P just is having a conclusive perceptual reason to believe that P.

Though Dretske and McDowell disagree over the use of the phrase 'seeing that P', they do not disagree over the explanatory basis of perceptual knowledge: strongly factive, conclusive perceptual reasons.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Dretske published *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* in 1981. There he argued that: S knows that P only if S's belief that P is based on the information that P. Is this a new account that does away with evidence, grounds, reasons? No. Knowledge that P must still be based on some psychological antecedent—a psychological signal—that carries the information that P. And what is it for the signal s to carry the information that P? S carries the information that P only if s would not be the case unless P. That signal is the conclusive reason. As Dretske puts it in a 2003 paper, "Given the way I conceive of information, these formulae [in *Seeing and Knowing*, 'Conclusive

- Reasons,' and *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*] come down to pretty much the same thing" (2003, p. 108). Different words, same idea.
- ² For additional arguments, see Dretske (1971b; 1981a, pp. 102–106).
- ³ McDowell famously thinks perceptions are fully conceptual. Though Dretske does not, he agrees with Evans that perceptual representations exercise conceptual capacities (Dretske, 1995, pp. 19–20). In that sense, Dretske does not fall into what McDowell calls "the Myth of the Given."
- ⁴ Even Dretske can indulge in metaphor to make this point: "As long as the evidential relation is conceived of as itself defective—in the sense that the relation itself *does not put us in touch with the truth* (hence, requiring an independent stipulation of truth in the analysis of knowledge) – then its defectiveness can never be completely suppressed" in an account of knowledge (1979b, p. 268, emphasis added). "Interiorized" reasons are "defective" for they do not "put us in touch with the truth."
- ⁵ McDowell also says knowledge involves reasons that are *indefeasible*. Does he mean something different by this? No. For he always glosses indefeasible reasons in terms of conclusive reasons. "And this justification is *not* defeasible. If someone sees that P, it cannot fail to be the case that P" (2006a, p. 27). If the subject has "an... indefeasible warrant, there is no possibility, compatibly with her experience's being as it is, that she might be wrong in believing that things are the way her experience is revealing them to be" (2010, p. 245; 2013a, p. 267). In a reply to Burge, McDowell says "nothing turns on the word 'indefeasible.' I do not need that word" (2013a, p. 267). When McDowell says knowledge requires *indefeasible* reasons, he means *conclusive* reasons.
- ⁶ Those in favor: Snowdon (1990, p. 58); Robinson (1994, p. 164); Langsam (1997, p. 202); Martin (1997, p. 111); Wedgwood (2002, p. 363; 2017, p. 173); Pritchard (2003, p. 276); Johnston (2004, p. 263); Burge (2005, p. 43; 2011); Comesaña (2005, p. 375); Blackburn (2006, p. 213); Kaplan (2006, p. 182); Neta (2008, pp. 312–313); Schellenberg (2013, p. 705); Avramides (2019, p. 386); Bar-On and Johnson (2019, p. 323); Littlejohn (2019, pp. 235, 237). Those against: Byrne and Logue (2008; 2009, p. xv–xvi); Haddock and Macpherson (2008, p. 8); Pritchard (2012, pp. 54–55) and Doyle, Milburn, and Pritchard (2019, p. 11).
- ⁷ Burge (2011, p. 48–51) thinks these passages do not suffice to reject MD. Regardless, that is McDowell's clear intent. See McDowell's reply to Burge on just this point (McDowell, 2013a, p. 260).
- ⁸ We are grateful to feedback that caught mistakes and led to improvements from audiences at the University of Glasgow, the University of Antwerp, and the University of Cologne, and from written comments from Kim Frost and Anil Gupta. This work was supported by a Yonsei University Research Grant (2020 Special Research Project to Support Academic Research Funds for Humanities and Social Sciences grant no. 2020-22-0278) and a Research Award from the Humboldt Foundation.

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