

Reasons for Belief

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Davidson claims that nothing can count as a reason for a belief except another belief. This claim is challenged by McDowell, who holds that perceptual experiences can count as reasons for beliefs. I argue that McDowell fails to take account of a distinction between two different senses in which something can count as a reason for belief. While a non-doxastic experience can count as a reason for belief in one of the two senses, this is not the sense which is presupposed in Davidson's claim. While I focus on McDowell's view, the argument generalizes to other views which take experiences as reasons for belief.

In his influential article, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Donald Davidson defends the claim that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (1986, 310). The point of this claim is to deny that beliefs can be justified by, or grounded on "the testimony of the senses: sensation, perception, the given, experience, sense-data, the passing show" (ibid.). Davidson's argument focusses on the case of sensation. While a belief can be justified by the awareness of a sensation, the awareness of a sensation is "just another belief" (311). The sensation itself, the object of the awareness, can stand in a causal relation to a belief but cannot ground, justify or be a reason for it.

A number of philosophers have challenged Davidson's view, arguing that sensory or perceptual experiences can be reasons for beliefs. This conclusion has been argued most explicitly and forcefully by John McDowell, who accepts Davidson's point that mere sensations cannot be reasons for beliefs, but holds that experiences can count as reasons for beliefs as long as their content is conceptual.¹ Other philosophers have argued that experiences can serve as reasons for belief, but without requiring that they have conceptual content. For some, it is enough that experiences have representational or intentional content.² Others depart still further from Davidson, holding that any conscious state, even a mere sensation, can serve to justify a belief.³

¹ References to McDowell will be given below. An argument along similar lines is given in Brewer 1999. See also Martin 1993.

² Heck 2000, Schantz 2001, Ayers 2004.

³ Gilbert 1992, Pryor 2005.

Typically, philosophers who take these approaches see themselves as broadening the scope of reasons for belief to include other psychological states in addition to beliefs. They grant that reasons for beliefs include, perhaps paradigmatically, other beliefs. What they deny is that the candidates for such reasons should be restricted to beliefs.

There is, however, a more general issue which might be raised in connection with Davidson's position: namely, whether beliefs are the kinds of things that are properly thought of as reasons at all. This issue is usually discussed in the context of practical rather than theoretical reasoning. If it is cold outside and, recognizing that fact, I decide to wear a coat, is my reason for deciding to wear a coat my belief that it is cold or the fact that it is cold? But the question can be, and has been, raised also about reasons for belief. If the streets are wet and, recognizing that fact, I come to believe that it has rained, is my reason for believing that it has rained my belief that the streets are wet or the fact that the streets are wet? If, as some philosophers hold, the right answer in these cases is that it is the fact rather than the belief which serves as a reason, then Davidson is mistaken about something more fundamental than the question of which psychological states can serve as reasons for belief. The mistake is to think that, in general, reasons for belief are psychological states in the first place.

Discussions of the first of the two issues I raised, that of whether the scope of reasons for belief can be expanded to include experiences as well of beliefs, are usually conducted without reference to the second, more general, issue about what kinds of things can count as reasons. But, as I shall argue in this paper, they need to be addressed together. Consideration of the second issue, I shall suggest, requires us to distinguish two senses in which something can be a reason for belief, one of which corresponds to the intuition that reasons for belief are typically the facts that are believed to hold rather than beliefs themselves, and the other of which corresponds to Davidson's view that reasons for beliefs must themselves be beliefs. I shall argue that McDowell's view, in particular, fails to take account of this distinction. Once we recognize the distinction, and understand how the two senses of reason are related, we see that experiences, at least as McDowell conceives them, cannot be reasons for belief in the sense that McDowell takes them to be, that is, in Davidson's sense. While I shall focus on McDowell, my argument can be generalized, at least in part, to tell against other attempts to include experiences among reasons for belief.

I

Let us begin with T. M. Scanlon's characterization of a reason for something as a "consideration that counts in favor of [it]" (1998, 17). What kind of considerations count in favour of an action or belief? On the face of it, they

would seem in the typical case to be facts rather than beliefs. What I consider when deciding what to do, or what it is rational to believe, is not my beliefs themselves but how things actually are. As Dennis Stampe puts it, “[w]hen we reason from our beliefs it is from *what* we believe—the objects of our beliefs—that we reason: the facts as we believe them to be” (1987, 337). Thus “if I believe that it has rained because the streets are wet, it is the fact that the streets are wet, not the fact that I believe them to be, that comprises my reason for believing that it has rained” (343). As Stampe goes on to point out, it is possible for the fact that I believe the streets to be wet to comprise the reason for my belief, but only in exceptional circumstances: for example if things have been arranged in such a way that I will be allowed to acquire the belief that the streets are wet only if it has in fact rained (343n.9).

Given the seeming evidence of these considerations, why should Davidson have thought that it is psychological states like beliefs, rather than facts, which are reasons for belief? Part of the answer might be thought to relate to his view in the philosophy of action that explanation by reasons is a species of causal explanation.⁴ But this cannot be the whole story. For one thing, the view that explanation in terms of reasons is causal explanation might be thought to depend on the assumption that reasons for action are psychological states, rather than the other way around. For another, Davidson’s view that the only reason for a belief is another belief is well-entrenched among writers in epistemology. According to Laurence Bonjour, for example, “the most natural way to justify a belief is by producing a justificatory argument: belief A is justified by citing some other...belief B, from which A is inferable in some acceptable way and which is thus offered as a reason for accepting A” (1978, 2). So there is nothing idiosyncratic about Davidson’s view that beliefs are the kinds of things that can serve as reasons. As Jonathan Dancy notes, “[a]ll agree that some of our beliefs are justified by their relation to other beliefs” (1985, 55); what is in dispute among most epistemologists is not whether beliefs are proper candidates for reasons or justifiers, but whether some beliefs can be justified non-inferentially, in particular by appeal to psychological states—such as experiences—which are not beliefs.

How, then, should we approach the divergence between these two ways of thinking about reasons? Should we say that Davidson and other philosophers in this epistemological tradition are simply mistaken when they identify reasons with beliefs? That would seem to be the implication of the following passage in John Skorupski’s (1997): “[T]he fact that the freezer has been left open is a reason for thinking, gives one reason to think, that its contents will melt. I take it to be the fact that rationalizes the belief; if the freezer has not been left open, but you think it has, then you have no reason to believe that the food will melt—unless some other fact, as that the fuse is blown, gives

⁴ Davidson 1963.

you a reason to believe it" (345). If it is indeed true that, under the specified circumstances, I "have no reason" to believe that the food will melt, then there is something wrong with an account like Davidson's on which beliefs are capable of justifying, or serving as reasons for, other beliefs.

However, contrary to Skorupski's implication, and in conformity with Davidson's view,⁵ there does seem to be a sense in which my belief that the freezer is open "rationalizes" the belief that its contents will melt. One way to capture this sense is to notice that we can cite the former belief as evidence that the latter belief has been arrived at rationally: given that I believe that the freezer is open, we might say, it is rational or reasonable for me to form the further belief that its contents will melt. Alternatively, we might say that the former belief helps to make the latter rationally intelligible or explicable: others can come to understand why I, as a rational being, believe that the contents of the freezer will melt, by being told that I believe that the freezer is open.⁶ The reasonableness or rational intelligibility at issue here is indifferent to the question of whether the freezer really is open or not. So in order to determine whether my belief that the food will melt was arrived at rationally, we do not need to know whether I "have a reason" in Skorupski's sense, or whether, to put the point in Scanlon's terms, there is in fact a consideration which favours the belief. But nonetheless it still seems natural to think of one of the two beliefs as rationalizing or rationally supporting the other; and it is a small step to describe this relation by saying that one is a reason for the other.

If this is correct, then we need to distinguish two different senses in which we can speak of reasons for belief.⁷ The first sense corresponds to the sense of "reason" invoked by Stampe when he says that it is the fact that the streets are wet which comprises the reason for my belief. To speak of a subject's reason for belief in this sense is to speak of the fact which presents itself to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Although it is important to keep in mind that citing the former belief helps to show the rationality of the latter belief only to the extent that the first belief is assumed to be rational in its own right.

⁷ There is a further and weaker sense in which something can be a reason for belief, which I will discuss in section IV. To anticipate briefly: the distinction with which I am concerned in this section applies to what might be called "internal" reasons or reasons "for the subject"; but there is a further "external" sense in which, say, a fact can be a reason for a belief without being a reason *for* the person who has the belief, or without being that person's reason. In what follows I will be concerned, except where specified, only with reasons in the internal sense. It should also be noted that, in distinguishing different senses in which we speak of reasons for belief, I do not mean to be endorsing a distinction among *kinds* of reasons for belief. It may be that there is just one kind of reason, but which is spoken of in different ways depending on the context.

the subject as favouring the belief.⁸ This sense of “reason” is the one we most naturally invoke when we are concerned with the first-person perspective from which a subject assesses her beliefs or potential beliefs and considers which ones she ought to retain or adopt. A subject’s reason in this sense is typically a consideration which she herself will cite in defending her beliefs. We might call this the “first-person” sense of reason, but in this paper I will refer to reasons in this sense simply as reasons in the first sense, or reasons₁ for short.

The second sense of reason, on the other hand, is the sense we invoke when, from a third-person perspective, we assess the rationality of someone else’s beliefs, or, relatedly, try to make her beliefs rationally intelligible.⁹ From this perspective, in contrast to the first-person perspective occupied by the subject, the actual facts are irrelevant to the determination of what reasons the subject has and whether they are good reasons. As a subject assessing my own beliefs, what I need to determine is what the facts are independently of those beliefs: if the issue is whether I am justified in believing that it has rained, I need to determine whether the streets are wet, not whether I believe that the streets are wet. But if I am assessing someone else’s beliefs, then I need to determine how things present themselves as being from her point of view. As William Alston puts it, “when we ask whether S is justified in believing that *p*...we are...asking a question from the standpoint of an aim at truth; but we are not asking whether things are in fact as S believes. We are getting at something more ‘internal’ to S’s ‘perspective on the world’... we are asking whether the truth of *p* is strongly indicated by what S has to go on” (1985, 71). To give someone’s reason for a belief by way of answering the kind of question Alston describes, is to specify a psychological state, typically another belief, in the light of which her original belief can be recognized, from a third-person perspective, as rational. Reasons in this sense might be referred to as “third-person” reasons for belief, but, as in the case of the other sense of “reason,” I shall refer to them as reasons “in the second sense” or reasons₂.¹⁰

⁸ Can reasons in this sense include, not just facts, but also supposed facts which the subject falsely believes to obtain? I am inclined to think not. Here my understanding of the relevant sense of reason may diverge from Stampe’s.

⁹ This is not to rule out that I can adopt a third-person perspective on my own beliefs or a first-person perspective on someone else’s. An example of the first would be a case where I seek to defend a belief by showing the rationality of the procedure by which I arrived at it (“I thought you wouldn’t mind my arriving late because I assumed you had brought something to read while you were waiting”). An example of the second would be a case where I am assessing the reasons for someone else’s belief, not because I am interested in whether they arrived at it rationally, but because I want to know whether I should adopt it myself.

¹⁰ The distinction which I am making here is related to the distinction sometimes made, in theories of practical rationality, between normative and motivating reasons. See for example Michael Smith’s discussion in §2 of his (1987). On Smith’s understanding of the

From the way I have characterized these two senses of reason, it should be clear that they are related. If someone has a reason₁ for some belief, then she also has a reason₂ for that belief, namely, the belief or other psychological state through which she represents the fact which serves as her reason₁. Conversely, while her having a reason₂ does not imply that she has a reason₁, it does imply, at least on the face of it, that she takes herself to have a reason₁, which, again on the face of it, will be the fact or supposed fact represented by the belief or other psychological state which serves as her reason₂. But there is also a stronger point to be made about the relation between the two senses, namely that the first sense of “reason” is more fundamental. In particular, we can make sense of a fact’s serving as a reason₁ for belief without having to appeal to the idea of one belief’s serving as a reason₂ for another, but we cannot make sense of one belief’s serving as a reason₂ for another without appealing to the idea of a fact’s serving as a reason₁. Suppose a subject’s belief that she is overweight leads her to go to the doctor, who tells her that her cholesterol level is too high and that she needs to exercise in order to lower it. In this case, the subject’s belief that she is overweight not only is a cause of her belief that she needs to exercise, but also is related to that belief in respect of its content: typically someone who is overweight needs to exercise. But the first belief does not necessarily serve as a reason₂ for the second. Our intuitions about whether it does, depend on whether we think that the subject takes the corresponding fact to be a reason₁ for her belief; whereas, conversely, we can have clear intuitions about whether a fact is a subject’s reason₁ for a given belief without needing to reflect on the relation between that belief and the psychological state which represents the fact. We can say, then, that the notion of a reason₁ has priority over that of a reason₂: a psychological state counts as a reason₂ for a subject’s belief only if her being in that state involves her representing some fact as a reason₁ for that belief.¹¹

distinction, normative reasons and motivating reasons both purport to justify an agent’s behaviour, but motivating reasons are in addition “potentially explanatory” of an agent’s behaviour, and as a result may be identified with certain of the agent’s psychological states (38). Dancy has recently argued that motivating reasons should be understood, not as psychological states, but rather as considerations “in the light of which” an agent acts, and hence, at least in some cases, as coinciding with normative reasons (2000). But I agree with Jay Wallace (2003) that this does not do justice to cases in which agents fail to act for good reasons, for example when the beliefs on which they act are false. In arguing against Dancy’s position, Wallace emphasizes that normative and motivating reasons respectively figure in two quite different points of view, that is the first-person standpoint of deliberation, and the third-person standpoint of explanation. While the distinction I draw in the text was arrived at independently, through reflection on reasons for belief rather than action, it closely parallels the distinction as drawn by Wallace, and places a similar emphasis on the contrast between first- and third- person perspectives.

¹¹ Stampe makes a similar point, but without distinguishing two different senses of “reason”: “[w]hether the belief that *p* may... be described as a reason for something, depends on whether the *fact* that *p* would be a reason for that thing” (1987, 337n.4). Considerations along the same lines in the case of practical rationality lead Wallace to propose that we

II

I now want to turn to the other issue which I raised in the introduction, an issue which on the face of it seems to be quite different from the one discussed in the previous section. Let us grant that there is a sense of “reason” in which reasons for belief are typically themselves beliefs. Should we hold that reasons for belief, in that sense, are restricted to beliefs, or can other states of a subject rationalize beliefs in the same way that beliefs themselves do? In his *Mind and World* (1994), McDowell defends the second alternative, claiming more specifically that a subject’s perceptual experiences can serve as reasons for belief. Davidson’s denial of this possibility, McDowell says, is based on the assumption that the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual, that “experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility” (14). But if we instead construe experiences as endowed with conceptual content, as cases in which a subject sees that things are thus and so, or in which it appears to her that they are thus and so, then, according to McDowell, there is no impediment to viewing them as reasons. We can thus accept a reformulated version of Davidson’s principle, as follows: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts” (140). This reformulation captures at least part of the point behind Davidson’s slogan, but does so in a way which allows the inclusion of experiences, as well as beliefs, within the scope of possible reasons for belief.

McDowell’s primary motivation for including experiences among reasons for belief is that, if we fail to do so, we cannot account for what he calls the “empirical content” (14) of beliefs or, more broadly, thoughts. That is, we cannot explain how beliefs and thoughts can be answerable to, or have bearing on, or be intentionally directed towards, the empirical world. And this in turn implies that we cannot make sense of the intentional content of beliefs and thoughts at all, since our understanding of “answerability to how things are” more generally must begin with an understanding of answerability, more specifically, to the empirical world (1997, xii). In order to make sense of thought as contentful, then, we must take our empirical beliefs to stand not just in a causal, but in a rational, relation to the empirical world; and this in turn requires that they be rationally constrained by experiences. Otherwise, in McDowell’s striking images, empirical judgments threaten to become “moves in a self-contained game” (5) and the empirical thinking through which we arrive at them “frictionless spinning in a void” (11). It is important to note, moreover, that the issue is not just epistemological but, as McDow-

reserve the term “reason” for the considerations that are salient from the first-personal viewpoint, so that the psychological states which figure in the explanation of action from a third-person perspective are no longer referred to as reasons (2003, 453).

ell sometimes calls it, transcendental.¹² The problem with Davidson's coherentist picture is not just that the system of our beliefs lacks justification if experiences do not serve as reasons for belief. It is that it relies on a notion of contentful belief, and hence of empirical content, which it lacks the resources to make intelligible. "[W]e can have empirical content in our picture only if we can acknowledge that thoughts and intuitions [i.e. perceptual experiences] are rationally connected. By rejecting that, Davidson undermines his right to the idea...of a body of beliefs" (17-18).

The line of thought I just described represents an important part of McDowell's argument for the view that experiences should be included in the scope of reasons for belief. But McDowell's defence of that view also relies on the commonsense intuition that we do in fact regard experiences, construed as conceptual states in which one sees that *p*, or in which it appears to one that *p*, as reasons for beliefs. "[A]ppearances can constitute reasons for judgments about objective reality—indeed, do constitute reasons for judgments in suitable circumstances ('other things being equal')" (62). For example: "[s]uppose one asks an ordinary subject why she holds some observational belief, say that an object within her field of view is square. An unsurprising reply might be 'Because it looks that way.' That is easily recognized as giving a reason for holding the belief" (165). And as McDowell makes explicit in later writing, the same holds when an experience is understood factively, as a case of seeing that *p*. It is "sheer common sense" that statements of the form 'I see that *p*' are "proper moves in the game of giving reasons" (2002a, 98); one can justify one's belief that there is a candle in front of one "precisely by saying 'I see that there's a candle in front of me'" (2002a, 100). When there is in fact a candle in front of the subject, the subject's entitlement to (i.e. reason for) her belief is just "the fact that she *sees* there is a candle in front of her" (2002a, 99).¹³

It is this aspect of McDowell's position which will be my primary concern in the rest of this paper. In particular, as I shall go on to argue in sections III and IV, the notions of reason and entitlement invoked here need to be scrutinized in the light of the distinction made in section I. But before turning to this, it is important to be clear about how McDowell understands the notion of experience. I will spend the rest of this section trying to clarify this notion, and considering some objections to it. The latter will be helpful not only in understanding McDowell's view, but also in distinguishing my line of objection from other, albeit related, objections which focus on the notion of experience rather than on the notion of reasons for belief.

We have already seen that McDowell proposes to understand experience as consisting in conceptual states which can be described as cases, either of its

¹² See for example 1998, 365; 2002, 286.

¹³ The same intuition is endorsed by Pryor (2000, 536).

appearing to a subject that p , or of the subject's perceiving that p .¹⁴ But two further features of his conception of experience must be emphasized: first, its nonjudgmental character, and second, its status as "openness to reality" or "taking in facts." The first is important because if it is allowed that its appearing to a subject that p , or a subject's perceiving that p , is a way in which the subject judges or believes that p , then experiences can serve as reasons for beliefs without contravening the coherentist principle. Davidson himself holds that experiences, so conceived, can be reasons for belief. Against McDowell's suggestion that Davidson does not "want to give the deliverances of the senses an ultimate evidential role," Davidson replies by identifying the "deliverances of the senses" with beliefs: "[w]hat the senses 'deliver' (i.e., cause) in perception is perceptual beliefs, and these do have an ultimate evidential role" (1999, 106).¹⁵

But it is central to McDowell's view that having an experience is not a matter of making a judgment or acquiring a perceptual belief. Although we cannot have experiences unless we have conceptual capacities which are exercised in judgment and belief-formation, experience itself does not involve the full-fledged exercise of these capacities, but only their being "brought into play" or "actualized."¹⁶ Relatedly, in having experiences we are passive, whereas having a belief involves, or at least can in principle involve, actively making up one's mind.¹⁷ This feature of experience is exemplified by cases in which it appears to a subject that things are a certain way, but without the subject believing that they are that way. For example, to take a standard case cited by McDowell in support of his view, the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion can appear to a subject to be unequal even though the subject is familiar with the illusion and believes them instead to be equal (1994, 11n9). Or to take an example McDowell offers later, and which in fact serves his purposes better, the appearance might indeed be veridical: we can, McDowell thinks, make sense of a subject's seeing that an object is a certain colour but doubting his senses and hence refraining from believing that the object has that colour. It is quite intelligible for someone to say "I thought I was looking at the tie under one of those lights that make it impossible to tell what color things are, so I thought it merely looked green to me, but I now realise that I

¹⁴ As will become clearer shortly, a subject counts as experiencing that p only when she perceives (e.g. sees) that p , and not when it merely appears to her that p ; but when she does perceive that p we can also describe the situation as one in which it appears to her that p . Cf. McDowell 1995: "when the world does present us with a manifest fact, it does so by presenting us with an appearance" (407n18).

¹⁵ A similar objection is implicit in Robert Brandom's claim that, given a suitable background of social practices, "seeing that p " has just "two elements": "its being a fact that p , and one's being visually prompted to *take it that* p (believe, judge, or commit oneself to the claim that p)" (1997, 192).

¹⁶ 1994, 10; 1998b, 439-441.

¹⁷ 1994, 60.

was seeing it to be green” (2002, 277). In such a case the subject “did see that the tie was green, though she withheld her assent from that appearance” (2002, 278).¹⁸

If McDowell is right in ascribing to experience this nonjudgmental character, then he avoids the objection that his view is no more than a restatement of Davidson’s coherentism. But the view as described so far remains open to a related objection. As Crispin Wright puts it, a reader of *Mind and World* might well wonder “how anything essentially at odds with Coherentism has been proposed—since all that may seem to have been effected is an enlargement of the terms of the coherence relation” (2002, 145). In other words, it may be objected that McDowell’s extension of reasons for belief to include experiences does nothing to address the problem which led McDowell to be critical of coherentism, namely that of explaining how our beliefs and thoughts can be answerable to the empirical world. For why does the same problem not arise in turn for experiences? We can focus the objection in terms of a difficulty McDowell himself raises for the proposal that the scope of reasons for belief be extended to include “the succession of circumstances that consist in its appearing to one that things are thus and so” (1994, 139). McDowell offers this as a possible move for the coherentist, but then objects to it on the grounds that the problem of empirical content applies no less to appearances than to beliefs. “Appearings are just more of the same kind of things beliefs are: possessors of empirical content, bearing on the empirical world. And now we cannot make the question ‘How can beliefs (say) have empirical content?’ look any less pressing by talking about a rational interplay between appearances and beliefs. The question is really ‘How can anything have empirical content?’, and it is no good just helping ourselves to the fact that appearances do” (1994, 142). But if the question really is “how can *anything* have empirical content?” then it is natural to ask why it doesn’t apply equally well to experiences as McDowell conceives them. And if it does, then McDowell’s own view may seem to be simply an extended version of coherentism.

It is in the context of this concern that we can best understand McDowell’s emphasis on the second of the two features I mentioned, namely that experiences are cases of “openness to reality” or of a fact’s being “taken in.” The question of how experiences come to be directed towards, or have bearing on reality, does not arise for experiences because there is no gap to be bridged between an experience and the fact experienced: an experience just is a state or occurrence in which a fact is made manifest to a subject. This conception of experience as openness to facts is of a piece with McDowell’s commitment, in earlier writing, to the “disjunctive” view of experience.¹⁹ When a subject

¹⁸ See also 1998b, 437n10 and 474; 2003, 680-681.

¹⁹ See especially 1982, §3; also 1986, §5 and 1994, 111-113.

sees that things are a certain way, it is tempting to think that her actual perceptual experience is limited to whatever would be common to her seeing that things are that way, and her either hallucinating or being under the illusion that they are that way. That is, it is tempting, first, to factor her situation of seeing that p into the two elements of its visually appearing to her that p , and p 's causing that appearance by appropriate physiological means; and second, to identify her experience with the first of these elements alone. But according to the disjunctive view, this conception of experience (the "highest common factor" conception) must be rejected. There is no element common to the veridical and deceptive situations. Rather, "an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone" (1982, 386-387). Even though we can, in both cases, speak of how things appear to the subject, the appearance in the veridical situation is not comparable to the appearance in the deceptive situation. In the veridical situation, which is fundamental, the appearance is a case of a fact's being disclosed to the subject; whereas in the deceptive situation, which is intelligible only in terms of the veridical situation, it is a case of the subject's being under the illusion of a fact's being disclosed to her. Given this conception of experience, the question of how experiences bear on empirical facts makes no sense: an experience just is an empirical fact made manifest to a subject. It follows that what it is for an experience to be a reason for belief is for the manifest fact to be a reason for belief: what McDowell calls the "rational responsiveness" of thought to experience is no less than a rational responsiveness of thought to reality itself. As McDowell puts it in *Mind and World*, "experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks" (1994, 26). Or, to quote his explicit response to Wright on this point, experience "lets objective reality itself come into view, to be rationally responded to in the formation of beliefs" (1998a, 426).²⁰

I have drawn attention to two features of experience, as McDowell conceives it, which help to distinguish his view from the coherentist alternative: its nonjudgmental character, and its status as "openness to facts." But each of these supposed features might, in turn, be found problematic. To begin with the second, it might be complained that the notion of "openness to facts" is hopelessly obscure: what can it mean for a subject to be open to a fact, if not for the fact to cause in her a matching belief or other propositional attitude? As Davidson puts it, "McDowell talks of our 'taking in' facts, but it is entirely mysterious what this means unless it means that the way the world

²⁰ See also the response to Brandom at 1998a, 407: "experience...is simply the way in which observational thinking is directly rationally responsive to facts."

is causes us to entertain thoughts" (1999, 107).²¹ Davidson thus holds that the only way to make intelligible the difference between McDowell's view and his own is to understand McDowell as holding that "what is caused is not a belief, but a propositional attitude for which we have no word. We then decide whether or not to transform this neutral attitude into a belief" (ibid.). But if there is nothing more to taking in a fact than the fact's causing one to entertain a corresponding propositional content, then McDowell's position is after all no more than a form of coherentism, albeit of the enlarged variety invoked by Wright.

To this objection, however, McDowell can reply that Davidson himself is vulnerable to the charge of mystery. In refusing to accept at face value the notion of a fact's being disclosed to a subject, Davidson can be accused of making mysterious the notion of empirical content, and hence the very notions of thought and belief themselves. Indeed, McDowell is quite explicit about the "mystery" in Davidson's view: "if we cannot conceive impressions as transparent, we distance the world too far from our perceptual lives to be able to keep mystery out of the idea that our conceptual lives...involve empirical content" (1994, 145). In other words, if we cannot conceive experience as openness to facts in a stronger sense than that proposed by Davidson, then we cannot understand how facts can serve as rational constraints on empirical thought and belief, which in turn prevents us from understanding thought and belief as intentionally directed towards the empirical world. And given McDowell's commitment, noted at the beginning of this section, to the primacy of empirical thought with respect to thought more generally, this means that the notions of thought and belief themselves become mysterious.²² The point here is the same as the one I mentioned earlier in emphasizing the "transcendental" character of the issue with which McDowell is concerned. Davidson claims that that the idea of "taking in facts" can be made intelligible only if we understand it in terms of facts' causing beliefs (or more generally, thoughts). But according to McDowell, he cannot simply help himself to the notion of belief: it presupposes rational constraint by experience, where experience in turn must be understood as being open to facts in a way which does not simply reduce to the perceptual acquisition of belief. If McDowell's point is granted, then the objection leads, at most, to a standoff. Davidson takes the notion of taking in a fact to be more mysterious than the

²¹ Davidson's formulation of what it must mean to "take in" a fact needs to be made more precise by specifying, first, that "the way the world is" causes us to entertain the thought *that the world is that way* (as opposed to some other thought with an unrelated content); and, second, that the fact causes its matching thought through normal perceptual routes. Otherwise there is clearly more to taking in a fact than being caused to entertain a thought.

²² For this line of argument, see 1982; 1986; 1994, 112-113; and 1996, 292-298. The last-mentioned passage, which responds to Brandom, strikes me as an especially clear statement of the argument.

notion of belief; for McDowell on the other hand the notion of belief cannot be understood except by appeal to the notion of taking in a fact.²³

Turning now to the other feature I mentioned, it might be objected that McDowell is wrong, given his other commitments, to understand experience as nonjudgmental. The conception of experience which McDowell articulates is supposed to correspond to the intuitive notion of *perceiving that*, for example *seeing that*, things are thus and so. And it is also supposed to correspond to the notion of *taking in*, or *having impressed on one*, that they are thus and so. But it might be argued that this conception of experience involves the subject's *taking* things *to be* the way they are experienced as being, or in other words, the subject's committing herself to the claim that they are that way. As Barry Stroud puts it: "A person who sees that it is raining judges or believes or accepts or otherwise puts it forward as true that it is raining.... To see that *p* is to judge that *p*" (2002, 84).²⁴ Now as we noted above, McDowell can offer by way of counterexample the case of someone who withholds assent from a veridical appearance because she thinks there are reasons to mistrust her senses. (I shall call cases of this kind "bogus illusion" cases since the subject mistakenly thinks that she is, or at least may be, under an illusion.) But the objector here might insist that, in such cases, the subject is not after all properly described as seeing that things are the way they appear to her to be. A subject to whom the tie looks green, but who refrains from judging that it is green because she erroneously believes that the lighting conditions are abnormal, might be said to see the green colour of the tie, but not that the tie is green. Nor, it might be added, can she be said to take in the fact that the tie is green. If you see a tarantula in the bathtub, but you assume that someone is tricking you with a lifelike replica, then you can hardly be said, at least in normal usage, to have taken in, or had impressed on you, the fact that there is a tarantula in the bathtub.

But the objection, at least in this form, is not decisive. First, it might be maintained that ordinary usage does after all allow for a sense of "seeing that *p*" or "perceiving that *p*" which does not imply belief that *p*. According to J.M. Hinton, "one may have occasion to say or think 'Either I perceive that *p*, or else I am having the illusion that *p*; I don't know which'" (1973, 105). It certainly seems permissible for someone to whom it appears that *p* to say that she is in doubt about whether or not she is, in fact, seeing that *p*; and if

²³ The situation is not quite as symmetrical as it might appear, since McDowell does not take the notion of openness to facts as more basic than the notion of belief. Being open to a fact requires that we have conceptual capacities which are in turn intelligible only on the assumption that we are capable of belief-formation.

²⁴ It is not clear that this remark is offered explicitly by way of objection; Stroud seems to think that McDowell himself is committed to the view that seeing that *p* involves judging that *p*, and hence to a distinction between seeing that *p* and merely having the unendorsed visual impression or appearance that *p* (2002, 84-85).

it is permissible, then her seeing that *p* cannot imply her believing that *p*, for in that case her doubt would enable her to rule out the former possibility. Second, even if the objector insists that this is not a permissible way of speaking—that while the subject can report being in doubt about whether she sees a green tie, she cannot report doubt about whether she sees *that* the tie is green—it is still possible to stipulate an extended use of “seeing that *p*” which does not carry the implication of belief that *p*. Hinton explicitly proposes such an extended use of the locution “perceiving that *p*,” one on which “*x* perceives that *p*” is short for “*x* perceives something, from his perceiving which it follows that *p* and that he either believes that *p* or is withholding [belief from the evidence of his senses]” (1973, 111). Even if McDowell were not to endorse that particular explication of “seeing that *p*,” he can still maintain his right to use the expression in what Hinton calls a “not narrowly doxastic” (104) sense which covers situations of bogus illusion. (For brevity I shall refer to seeing that *p* in this sense as “nondoxastic” seeing that *p*, although I am tempted by Hinton’s proposal to mark it with a “weakening” umlaut, as in “perceive that *p*” [111n1.])

This still leaves open a further line of objection to McDowell’s construal of experience as nonjudgmental. To allow that there is an intelligible notion of nondoxastic seeing that *p* is not necessarily to concede that standard cases of seeing that *p* are intrinsically nondoxastic, or have a nondoxastic component. More pointedly, it might be maintained that this notion of seeing that *p* is parasitic on a more fundamental sense of seeing that *p* which implies the subject’s believing that *p*. So it might be claimed that McDowell is wrong to take “bogus illusion” cases as having any significance for our understanding of experience in the standard case. When a subject sees that it is raining and, having no reason to doubt her senses, believes that it is raining, her situation need not be analysed into, first, a nonjudgmental taking-in that is raining, and, second, an act of judging through which that content—the fact of its raining—is accepted or endorsed.²⁵ More strongly, we might hold, it cannot be analysed that way, for the nondoxastic sense of seeing depends on the ordinary, doxastic sense. What it is for a subject to see nondoxastically that it is raining is for her to be in a situation which is just like seeing that it is raining in the ordinary way, except that she does not believe that it is raining.

²⁵ McDowell himself seems to concede something along these lines in the Woodbridge Lectures: “unless there are grounds for suspicion...having it look to one as if things are a certain way...becomes accepting that things are that way by a sort of default” (1998b, 439). But while he describes this “acceptance” as a case of “perceptual belief acquisition” (ibid.) he still distinguishes it from judgment, and relatedly, regards it as passive (a mere “actualization” of cognitive capacities) rather than active (an “exercise” of them) (439-440). I find the concession puzzling, since it seems to allow that subjects can acquire perceptual beliefs, in this “default” way, without those beliefs needing to be grounded on reasons. If it does, then it seems that McDowell has conceded to Davidson the intelligibility of coherentism.

However, I shall not pursue this line of objection here. For present purposes, I want to grant McDowell the (or at least a) notion of experience as nonjudgmental. More specifically, I want to grant that when a subject cites, in the course of justifying her belief that *p*, the fact that she sees that *p*, her seeing that *p* can be understood in a sense which does not itself carry the implication that she believes *p* or takes *p* to be the case. The question I want to press is that of whether experience, so understood, can be a reason for belief in the way McDowell thinks it can. If, as I shall argue, it cannot, then that might provide a ground for rejecting McDowell's understanding of experience. But the considerations I have described so far do not, on their own, offer sufficient reason for doing so.

III

My main aim in the previous section was to clarify, and in part to defend, the conception of experience presupposed by McDowell's claim that experiences can be reasons for belief. But now I want to consider a challenge that bears directly on that claim. Can experiences, conceived as nonjudgmental, be reasons for, or justify, beliefs? We can motivate the question by noting that the mere entertaining of a proposition does not seem to constitute a reason for believing any of the implications of that proposition. My merely considering the possibility that the moon is made of cheese does not give me a reason to believe that it is edible. So the reason-giving force of an experience that *p* must lie in something about the way in which the content *p* figures in the experience. And it is natural on the face of it to suppose that this has to do with the fact that someone who has an experience that *p* typically accepts *p* as being the case. As Stroud puts the point, "it is not simply the content of a person's experience that gives the reason to believe something; it is the person's experiencing, or being aware of, or accepting, or somehow 'taking in' that content" (2002, 89). The context makes clear that what is crucial here is "accepting." If my experience that *p* does not involve my accepting the fact that *p* or otherwise judging or believing that *p*, then it does not give me reason to believe any of the implications of *p*.²⁶

On its own, however, the challenge may seem to consist in nothing more than a restatement of Davidson's claim that reasons for beliefs must themselves be beliefs, which is precisely what is in question. Why should we accept Davidson's view that experience can have reason-giving force only if it involves judgment or belief, rather than allowing that there might be some-

²⁶ The challenge is hinted at very briefly by Davidson: "[McDowell] gives no explanation of...why an attitude which has no subjective probability whatever can provide a reason for a positive belief" (1999, 107). The more general idea that a cognitive state has to be assertive in order to justify a belief is articulated by Bonjour (1978, 12); there is a similar implication in Heck (2000, 507-511), although his view is unusual in allowing that a state can be assertive without having conceptual content.

thing else about the way contents are entertained in experience which allows experiences to serve as reasons? As we saw earlier, McDowell defends the reason-giving character of experiences by pointing out that it is quite natural for subjects to cite their experiences as reasons for their beliefs. This holds for experiences both non-factively described (“Why do you believe that the object is square?” “Because it appears to be square”) and factively described (“why do you believe that there is a candle in front of you?” “Because I see that there is a candle in front of me”). At least in the former case, the reason-giving practice seems perfectly intelligible whether or not we suppose that the subject’s experience carries with it a commitment on her part to the object’s being square. And even though the latter case is more complicated, since the subject will not say that she sees the presence of a candle unless she also believes the candle to be present, this need not invalidate the example. A subject who sees that p without believing that p will not cite her seeing that p as a reason for believing that p ; but if she *did* believe that p , then she *would* cite her seeing that p as a reason for that belief, and that might be sufficient for saying that it serves as a reason even when she refrains from forming the belief. Relatedly, if she later comes to believe p and is asked whether, at the earlier time, she had reason to believe that p , she may well say that she did, on the grounds that, at the time, she saw that p . In short, the reason-giving practices to which McDowell appeals do not, on the face of it, seem to require that the experiences cited involve belief. So why are they not sufficient to defeat the challenge?

It is at this point that I want to invoke the distinction made in section I. In describing both the challenge to McDowell’s view, and a possible line of response to it, I have been assuming a univocal conception of what it is to be a reason, and more specifically, what it is for an experience to be a reason for belief. But the considerations raised in section I suggest that there are two ways in which an experience might be capable of serving as a reason for belief. My experience of an object as square can be a reason₁ for believing that the object is square: that is, it can present itself to me as a consideration favouring the belief, one that I am likely to cite when asked to justify the belief. But this is different from the experience’s serving as a reason₂, that is, from its playing a rationalizing role from a third-person perspective. For it to be a reason in this sense, it has to be the kind of thing which someone else might ascribe to me in an attempt to make rationally intelligible my belief that the object is square.

Which of these two senses of “reason” does McDowell have in mind when he claims that experiences are reasons for belief? It cannot be the first. For then there would be nothing special about experiences as distinct from anything else to which a subject might appeal in support of her beliefs, including mental states without conceptual content, or facts lacking any psycho-

logical dimension at all, such as the fact that the streets are wet. Moreover, if this were the sense he had in mind, he would not be disagreeing with Davidson. When Davidson claims that only a belief can be a reason for another belief, so that sensations cannot be reasons, he surely does not mean to deny that a subject can cite her sensations, as she might cite any other features of the world, in support of her beliefs. All he means to deny is that the presence of a sensation can, on its own, and independently of any beliefs that she has about it, contribute to the rational intelligibility of her beliefs as assessed from a third-person perspective. In order for his disagreement with Davidson to be a substantive one, then, McDowell must take experiences to be reasons for beliefs in the same sense that Davidson takes beliefs to be reasons for beliefs, that is, the second sense. But that means that he cannot support his view by appeal to the fact that we cite our experiences in giving reasons for our beliefs. The fact that, when *I* am asked my reason for believing that an object in view is square, I can reply by saying “because it looks square,” or “because I see that it is square,” shows only that my experience is a reason₁ for my belief, that is, a reason in the same sense in which the fact that the streets are wet can be my reason for believing that it has rained. But what is needed is that the experience be a reason for belief in the same sense in which my *belief* that the streets are wet can be my reason for believing that it has rained. And at least on the face of it, the fact that I myself can cite the experience as a reason in this first sense has no bearing on the question of whether it serves as a reason in this second sense.²⁷

If this is correct, then McDowell needs to find another way to justify the claim that experiences can be reasons for belief. Specifically, he needs to show that they are reasons for belief in the same way that beliefs are reasons for belief: that, like beliefs themselves, they are states of mind which can be recognized from a third-person perspective as contributing to the rational intelligibility of a person's beliefs. To get clearer about what this involves, I want to return to what I said in section I about the relation between the two senses of “reason.” I claimed there that, rather than the relation being symmetrical, the first sense has a certain priority. The idea of a subject's having a reason in the second sense depends on the idea of her having a reason in the first sense. More specifically, someone counts as having a reason in the sec-

²⁷ The same point tells against James Pryor's proposal that we take at face value the “intuitive appearance” that “having an experience as of [a] proposition” can justify one in believing the proposition to be true. According to Pryor, “[a]n experience as of there being hands seems to justify one in believing that there are hands in a perfectly straightforward and immediate way. When asked, ‘What justifies you in believing that there are hands?’” one is likely to respond “I can *simply see* that there are hands” (2000, 536). But the legitimacy of responding in this way shows only that the experience justifies the belief in a sense associated with reasons₁, whereas I take it that the sense of justification Pryor has in mind is meant to be the same sense that is in play in disputes between coherentists and foundationalists, that is, the sense associated with reasons₂.

ond sense only when she takes herself to have a reason in the first sense. My belief that the streets are wet counts as a reason₂ for my belief that it has rained only because I take the fact that the streets are wet to be a reason₁ for, that is a consideration counting in favour of, believing that it has rained. In the present context, what this means is that if an experience is to be a reason in the second sense, then there must be some fact, or supposed fact, which presents itself to the subject as a reason in the first sense. If the experience that *p* is, from a third-person perspective, to rationalize my belief that *p*, then my having the experience that *p* must involve the representation of some fact which I regard as favouring the belief that *p*.

What fact might that be? One option that might be considered is that it is the experience itself. When I have an experience that *p*, it might be claimed, *eo ipso* take it, both that I am having the experience that *p*, and that that experience is a reason₁ for believing that *p*. So my experience is a reason₂ precisely because it is a reason₁: my belief is rationally intelligible in light of my experience precisely because it is part and parcel of my having the experience that I take myself to have a reason₁ for my belief: namely, the experience itself. If that option is taken then the possibility of my citing experiences as reasons₁ for my beliefs is, after all, relevant to the possibility of their serving as reasons₂. But leaving aside questions about whether this is a satisfactory approach in its own right,²⁸ it does not seem to be an appropriate route for McDowell to take. For it is incompatible with McDowell's view, noted in section II, that experience is a case of "openness to facts," in which "reality itself come[s] into view, to be rationally responded to in the formation of beliefs" (1998a, 426). This conception requires that when I experience that *p*, the fact which presents itself to me as a reason for belief is not an "intermediary," such as the appearance that *p*, but *p* itself: in experience "facts themselves come to be among the justifiers available to subjects" (*ibid.*, 430). We see this also from McDowell's denial, in response to Brandom, that the rationality involved in making observational judgments is that associated with inference from one content to another. "[W]hat matters [in making observational judgments] is the rationality exemplified in judging whether things are thus and so in the light of whether things are (observably) thus and so.... The only inferences corresponding to the rational connection in question would be of the 'stuttering' form, 'P; so P.'" (*ibid.*, 405) If we set on one side the parenthetical "observably,"²⁹ the implication is that the relevant fact is *p* itself, and not the experience that *p*. When a subject believes that *p* on the basis of the experience that *p*, what she herself represents as her reason

²⁸ The main difficulty is that if the experience itself is the reason₁, then it would seem that it is not the experience that is the reason₂, but rather the belief that I have the experience.

²⁹ I come back to this in note 33.

for believing that p is not the fact that she sees that p , or that it appears to her that p , but p itself.

The challenge under consideration in this section can now be presented in a more focussed form. If I see that p , but without believing that p , do I nonetheless take p to be a reason₁ for believing that p ? That is, do I take myself to have, in p , a reason₁ for believing that p ? It is important to be clear that the question is not just whether I take p to imply p . I take the proposition that the moon is made of cheese to imply the proposition that the moon is edible. But it does not follow that I take the moon's being made of cheese to be a reason₁ for believing that the moon is edible, or in other words that I take myself to have, in the fact that the moon is made of cheese, a reason₁ for believing that it is edible. So for any propositions p and q , there is more involved in taking p as a reason for believing that q than simply taking one to imply the other.³⁰ Now intuitively it appears that the reason that I do not take the moon's being made of cheese as a reason₁ for believing that the moon is edible is that I do not believe that the moon is made of cheese. Taking something as a reason₁ for a belief is a matter of being prepared to cite it in defence of the belief, as a consideration which counts in its favour; and I cannot cite the moon's being made of cheese in defence of anything unless I believe that the moon is made of cheese. But if I am right about the relation between reasons₁ and reasons₂, this intuition is just what McDowell has to deny in extending the scope of reasons₂ to include experiences as well as beliefs. He has to be able to say that even if I do not believe that an object presented to me is square, its veridically appearing to me as square can nonetheless make it the case that I regard its squareness as a consideration counting in favour of a belief, in particular the belief that it is square.

We can see clearly what is problematic about this when we ask why, if I regard the object's being square as a reason for believing that the object is square, I do not in fact form the belief that the object is square. The problem is that if I am to regard the object's being square as counting to any degree in favour of my believing that the object is square, I must regard it as doing so conclusively. It makes no sense to suppose that I could take it to be a reason for believing that the object is square, yet refrain from forming that belief because of other considerations which counterbalance or outweigh it.³¹ The situation is different if it is not the object's being square, but rather its appearing to me to be square, which I regard as a reason for believing it to be

³⁰ This point is made in Stroud 2002. Michael Martin argues that experiences can rationalize the acquisition of beliefs, on the ground that experiences and beliefs can stand in logical relations of consistency and inconsistency (1993, especially section III). I think the present point tells against this argument.

³¹ Martin makes a similar argument against Brewer (2001, 445), but thinks that McDowell himself is not vulnerable to it. As will become clear later, I disagree with Martin on this last point.

square. In that case, we can understand how I can fail to believe that the object is square while still taking its square appearance to be a consideration in favour of that belief. I take the appearance to be a reason for the belief, but a reason which is counterbalanced by other considerations, for example my having been informed that I suffer from distortions in my perception of certain shapes, or my remembering that when I measured the object on an earlier occasion I determined that the sides were unequal. But as we have seen, McDowell is committed to holding that it is the fact itself which is presented to me as a reason for my belief, and not my experience of it.³²

At this point McDowell might take issue with my characterization of how the two senses of “reason” are related. I have claimed that a psychological state with content p can be a reason₂ for a belief only if the subject takes herself to have, in p , a reason₁ for the belief. But this constraint, McDowell might say, is unwarrantedly strong. Why isn’t it sufficient, instead, for p to be *available* to the subject as a reason₁ for the belief? Why do we have to suppose that she actually *takes* p as a reason₁, as opposed to being aware of p in a way which *puts her in a position to take* p as a reason₁? A response of this kind is suggested in McDowell’s statement that someone who sees that p has an “entitlement” to the claim that p which consists in the “visual availability” to her of the fact that p (2002a, 98).³³ It is developed in more detail in a passage which engages directly with Davidson on the topic of reasons for belief. Here McDowell claims that in a case of what I have been calling bogus illusion, in his example a case where a subject sees that a sweater is brown while mistakenly thinking that the lighting conditions make it impossible to tell what colours things are, the subject has an “entitlement” which consists in “the availability of a fact to a subject in an episode or state of sensory consciousness” (2003, 681). A case of this kind violates Davidson’s dictum that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another

³² A similar argument applies even if McDowell holds that my reason₁ is not p itself but rather my seeing that p . For like p itself, my seeing that p must also be a conclusive reason if it is to be a reason at all.

³³ The passage on which I am drawing runs as follows: “Someone who can truly make a claim of that form [viz., the form “I see that ... ”] has an entitlement, incompatible with any possibility of falsehood, to a claim whose content is given by the embedded proposition. This entitlement consists in the visual availability to her of the fact she would affirm in making that claim.” It is ambiguous whether the fact referred to in the second sentence is the fact that p or the fact that the subject sees that p . The same kind of ambiguity is present in the passage quoted three paragraphs ago, where McDowell describes someone making an observational judgment as judging “whether things are thus and so in the light of whether things are (observably) thus and so.” The parenthesis leaves open whether the relevant fact is the fact that p *tout court* or the fact that p can be observed to hold. For reasons suggested in the text above, I think the former alternative fits better with McDowell’s underlying philosophical motivations. But in any case, since the fact of one’s seeing that p cannot be visually available unless p itself is visually available, the difference does not have much importance in the present context.

belief" because "it is a case in which there [is] an entitlement that [is] not a belief" (ibid.). Because McDowell takes this entitlement to violate Davidson's dictum, he must be equating it with a reason in Davidson's sense, that is, with what I have been calling a reason in the second sense. So in effect he is claiming that a subject can have a reason₂ to believe that the sweater is brown in virtue of that fact's being visually available to her, and regardless of whether she takes that fact—or, for that matter, the fact of its visual availability—to be a reason₁ for the belief.

On the face of it, it looks as though this amounts to a rejection of the initially plausible idea that a psychological state with content *p* can be a reason₂ only if the subject is in a position to cite *p* as a reason₁. But McDowell goes on to suggest that this is not the case. There is a sense in which a subject in a situation of bogus illusion *is* in a position to cite the fact that *p*. McDowell puts the point like this: "Taking the modality one way, we might say the subject *could* cite the entitlement even at the time—her conscious state was constituted by the presence of the relevant fact. Taking the modality another way, she *could not* cite the entitlement, because her misapprehension about the lighting prevented her from recognizing her conscious state as the entitlement it nevertheless was" (ibid.). Of the subject who mistakenly believes herself to be under the illusion that the sweater is brown, we might say both that it is, and that it is not, possible for her to cite the fact of her seeing that the sweater is brown as a reason for believing that it is brown. It is *not* possible, we might say, in the sense that her misapprehension about the lighting prevents her from recognizing that she sees that the sweater is brown. But it *is* possible in the sense that she *does* see that the sweater is brown, and that that fact (the fact of her seeing the sweater to be brown) is present to her consciousness. McDowell proposes to allow that a subject is entitled to believe that the sweater is brown if it is possible for her to "cite her entitlement" not just in the first sense, but also in the second. Denying this amounts to an arbitrary restriction, in Davidson's favour. "Davidson's "coherentist" dictum would be vindicated if it were right to restrict the entitlements a subject has to those she can cite on this second way of taking the modality. But why should we make this restriction?" (ibid.).

If I am right in insisting on the distinction between the two senses of reason, then McDowell's phrasing of his point, in terms of the subject's "citing her entitlement" represents a confusion. Entitlements correspond to reasons₂, and having a reason₂ for a belief is a matter of being prepared to cite, not that very reason₂, but rather a fact which serves as a reason₁.³⁴ So in establishing

³⁴ There is a related confusion in the passage from BonJour quoted at the beginning of section I. BonJour says that the most natural way to justify a belief A is by "citing" a belief B, but if the considerations offered in section I are correct, then what one cites is not the belief, but the fact believed.

that the subject has an entitlement to believe that the sweater is brown, what is at stake is the possibility of her citing, as a potential reason for that belief, not “I see that it is brown” but rather “It is brown.” But we can easily rephrase McDowell’s point in a way which avoids the confusion. Thus rephrased, the point is that her visual experience entitles her to believe that the sweater is brown, regardless of whether or not she actually believes it to be brown, as long as the fact of its being brown is available in that experience. While there is a sense in which she cannot offer that fact in support of her belief, given that she does not believe it, there is also a sense in which she *can* offer it—namely, the sense in which it is consciously present to her in the appearance of the sweater as brown—and that possibility of offering it is sufficient for us to say that her experience constitutes a reason for the belief in Davidson’s sense.

The main objection I see to this approach is that it is not clear how we can limit cases of entitlement, so understood, to those in which the fact figures in the subject’s consciousness. It is undeniable that there is a sense in which the subject in the bogus illusion case “could” cite the fact which appears to her: she could cite it if only she were not under the misapprehension that she was being deceived. But what is to prevent us from saying something similar about a case where the subject is in a position both to see and to believe that things are a certain way, but fails, through inattention, to do either? Suppose the sweater is in plain view, in lighting conditions known to be normal, but the subject simply does not notice what colour it is. In that case, could we not equally well say that she “could” cite the fact that it is brown, meaning that she could do so if only she paid attention to what colour it was? Even though the fact does not register in her consciousness—if asked at a later time why she did not form the belief, she is likely to say that she did not see that the sweater was brown—there is clearly a way in which it is visually available to her, namely that the sweater is there, manifesting its colour, right there in her line of sight. Or to take another case, suppose the man wearing the brown sweater is in the same room as the subject, but it just so happens that she never looks in his direction. In that case it is even clearer that she does not see that the sweater is brown, and yet, once again, the fact is, in an intelligible sense, available to her: being in the same room, she is well placed to know that the sweater is brown, and if she had just turned her head, she would have acquired that knowledge. So why does she not have an entitlement in this case too?

The difficulty can be pressed in the light of McDowell’s characterization of the relevant entitlement as an “opportunity” to acquire knowledge. In an exchange with Wright, he says that in experience, “[a] fact is present to the subject of the experience” so that the situation “constitutes an opportunity for the subject to know that the fact obtains, and in that sense a warrant for her

to believe that it does,” even though “false beliefs about the probability of hallucination and the like may deter [her] from taking the opportunity” (2002, 289). In the comment on Davidson from which I quoted in the previous paragraph, he says that the subject in the original brown sweater example “was in a position to acquire a bit of knowledge about the world, but because of a misapprehension about the circumstances... did not avail [herself] of the opportunity” (2003, 681). and he concludes the discussion of Davidson by suggesting, more generally, that “epistemology’s topic should be, not what subjects know, but what they are in a position to know, which is separated from the first topic precisely by cases in which opportunities to know are not taken—cases in which subjects have entitlements that are not beliefs” (ibid.).³⁵ However, it seems as though the two cases I have mentioned are also cases in which “opportunities to know are not taken.” It is true that the subject fails to take the opportunity, not because of a misapprehension about the circumstances, but rather because of inattention, or because she happens to look in the wrong direction. But why should that make a difference to whether or not she has an opportunity to know, or an entitlement to believe?

The objection I am raising here is related to a point made by Wright, when he says that it is “inept” for McDowell to speak of “the fact observed” as a justifier, since “if facts really could carry the weight of the first term of the justification relation, there would be no need to experience them in order to be justified in one’s empirical beliefs” (2002a, 169). McDowell responds by insisting on the right to say that an observed fact can justify a belief, even though he disavows the view that a fact, merely as such, can justify a belief. “Of course the sheer obtaining of a fact, say some state of affairs on the far side of the moon, cannot justify someone in believing it obtains. But why does Wright think that makes it “inept” to say an *observed* fact can justify?” (2002, 289). We may indeed grant McDowell a sense of “justify” in which an observed fact can justify the belief that it obtains, but a fact about how things are on the far side of the moon typically cannot. But what about an unobserved fact about how things are in a subject’s immediate vicinity, a fact which she easily *could* observe if she paid attention to her surroundings? The difficulty for McDowell’s position is that, in contrast to the case of a fact about how things are on the far side of the moon, the obtaining of such a fact *does* seem to justify, in the relevant sense, the belief that it obtains. If a person is sitting at a dinner table on which there is an uncovered bowl of fruit in plain view, it is natural to say that the presence of the bowl of fruit justifies her forming the belief that there is a bowl of fruit on the table, even if she is

³⁵ See also 1998b, 437n10, where the status of a seeing as an opportunity to know rather than an actual knowing is described as a “minor complication” on which “nothing turns”; the passages quoted above suggest that it assumes more importance in McDowell’s subsequent writings.

so distracted by the conversation that she does not even notice the bowl and so does not come to believe that it is present. And it is by no means clear that she has any less justification for that belief than she would if she noticed the bowl of fruit, but refrained from believing that it was present because she mistakenly believed that she was the victim of a hallucination.

IV

The point which I have just been making can usefully be considered in the light of a distinction McDowell himself makes between two ways in which something might be said to be a reason for, or to stand in rational relation to, a belief. This distinction is drawn in *Mind and World* as part of an argument against Peacocke's view that experiences have nonconceptual content and that this nonconceptual content enables them to serve as reasons for belief. Against the second of these points, McDowell claims that nonconceptual content "can[not] intelligibly constitute *a subject's reasons for* believing something" (1994, 163). The only sense in which an experience with nonconceptual content can be rationally linked to a belief is the more general sense of rational linkage which holds insofar as one state of affairs can be invoked in explaining how a second state of affairs "is as it ought to be from the standpoint of rationality (for instance true, if the explanandum is a belief)" (ibid.). As an example, he gives the relation that holds between the movements of a skilled cyclist and the curves in the road to which she responds. The curves in the road are rationally linked to the cyclist's movements in the sense that they explain why those movements are rationally appropriate. But they are not (except in the unusual case where she registers and responds to them consciously) *her* reasons for those movements. The sense in which experiences serve as reasons for beliefs, on Peacocke's view, is thus different from, and weaker than, the sense in which McDowell takes them to serve as reasons for belief. Experiences for Peacocke are merely "part of the reason why" a subject forms her belief, whereas for McDowell they do and must yield "reasons for which" she forms those beliefs (164).

The distinction comes up again, in a way which makes clear its relevance for our purposes, in an exchange with Brandom (Brandom 1996, McDowell 1996). Brandom claims to agree with McDowell on the fundamental anti-coherentist demand that our beliefs be rationally constrained, not just by other beliefs, but by the world. But he denies that it follows that they must be rationally constrained by *experience* (252-255). It is sufficient for a belief's being rationally constrained by the world, or by the facts, that it can be rationally criticized or assessed in light of the facts, where the person doing the criticizing or assessing does not have to be the same as the person who has the belief. According to Brandom, this demand is met both by reliabilist accounts of observational knowledge, and by Davidson's "semantic external-

ism.” As Brandom reads Davidson, and in apparent contrast to Davidson’s own characterization of his view as coherentist, beliefs *are* rationally constrained by the facts. They are constrained in so far as an interpreter can rationally assess a subject’s observational reports (and accordingly the observational beliefs those reports express) “by comparing [their content] with the facts that responsively elicited those reports, according to the norm that one ought to say of what perceptibly is that it is” (1996, 252).

McDowell responds by claiming that Brandom’s notion of rational constraint by the facts is too weak to avoid coherentism and the consequent problem of empirical content. His response invokes a distinction similar to the one he drew in responding to Peacocke, namely between something to which a subject responds *as* a rational constraint, and something which is not recognized as a rational constraint by the subject herself, but only from the perspective of an outside observer. “The rational constraints that [Brandom] claims he can represent the world as affording are not responded to, by the person who responds.... *as* the rational constraints Brandom wants to be entitled to suppose they are. Their supposed status as rationally related to the supposed reports comes on the scene for the interpreter, not for the responder” (1996, 294). He also puts the distinction in terms of two senses in which something can be a reason for belief, and illustrates it again with the example of the cyclist. Because there is a sense in which a competent cyclist’s bodily adjustments are not merely triggered, but also justified, by, say, alterations in road camber, there is a corresponding sense in which those alterations of road camber “constitute reasons for the adjustments” (296). However, “in the normal case a cyclist does not respond to such things *as* the reasons they nevertheless intelligibly are. They stand revealed as such only from an external perspective, involving explicit knowledge—not usually possessed by competent cyclists, and not acted on even by those who do possess it—about the mechanics of balance and controlled forward motion on a bicycle” (ibid.). Like experiences with nonconceptual content on Peacocke’s view, the facts which “rationally constrain” beliefs on Brandom’s view are reasons for belief only in a weak sense of “reason.” Because the subject does not respond to them *as* rational constraints, they do not qualify—to put it the way McDowell does in *Mind and World*—as “[the] *subject’s reasons for believing something*” (1994, 163), or as reasons “for which” (164) the subject forms her beliefs. Rather, they are reasons only in the sense that we can appeal to them from an external point of view in explaining *why* her beliefs are “as [they] should be from the standpoint of rationality” (163), for example, why they are true.³⁶

³⁶ For the distinction see also 1996, 299, where McDowell contrasts a belief’s being “in good shape in the light of” an experience, and its being “based on” the experience.

Before trying to bring this distinction to bear on the point made at the end of the previous section, I want first to note that it is different from the distinction which I made in section I and which I have been invoking throughout. There is plenty of room for confusion on this issue. On the one hand, McDowell's distinction—which I shall refer to as a distinction between an internal and an external notion of reasons for belief—might seem to parallel my distinction between reasons₁ and reasons₂ insofar as it relies on a contrast between a first-person and a third-person perspective. Relatedly, in responding to Brandom, McDowell characterizes reasons in the internal sense as “things to which a subject responds as rational constraints” or as facts which “come into view” for subjects, and this again suggests that they correspond to reasons₁ rather than reasons₂. So it might be thought that the two distinctions go together in that reasons₁ are a species of internal reason and reasons₂ are a species of external reason. On the other hand, McDowell clearly intends both that experiences qualify as reasons in the internal sense, and that this internal sense correspond to the sense of “reason” in which, for Davidson, beliefs are reasons for belief. This would suggest, by contrast, that reasons₂ are internal rather than external. Correlatively, because reasons₁ are facts rather than psychological states, and hence on the face of it external rather than internal to the subject, it might be thought that it is reasons₁ rather than reasons₂ which should be counted as external.

Because McDowell, at least as I read him, fails to appreciate the distinction between reasons₁ and reasons₂, it is hard to characterize precisely how the two distinctions line up against each other. But it is safe to say that they do not coincide. Roughly speaking, my distinction between reasons₁ and reasons₂ corresponds to two ways of thinking about McDowell's internal reasons. Even though reasons₂ are ascribed from a third-person perspective, it is the perspective of an interpreter who aims to make a subject's belief intelligible in the light of how things are *from the subject's perspective*. To say that a subject believes that it rained because she believes that the streets are wet, with the implication of a rational connection between these two beliefs, is to say that the subject takes the one fact (or supposed fact) to follow from the other. An interpreter interested in that kind of rational connection is not concerned about whether or not the subject's belief that it is rained is *true*, or whether it is in some other way appropriate in light of the facts as she (the interpreter) perceives them to be. She is concerned only about whether the subject's belief is appropriate in the light of the facts as they strike *the subject*. Conversely, while reasons₁ are indeed facts, they count as reasons₁—and more generally as internal reasons—only in virtue of being recognized as such by the subject. McDowell's external sense of reason, then, corresponds to a third sense of reason which has not figured, at least not explicitly, in the previous sections. Moreover, this sense of reason is much less closely related

to either of the first two senses than they are to each other. There is at least on the face of it a very close connection between reasons₁ and reasons₂, in that a person cannot have a reason₁ without having a reason₂, and, in the other direction, cannot have a reason₂ without in some way representing herself as having a reason₁. But a person can have a reason in the external sense without either having, or taking herself to have, any kind of internal reason.³⁷

We can now articulate more clearly the difficulty I brought up at the end of the last section. In a nutshell, it is that the sense of entitlement to which McDowell appeals, when he says that a subject who non-doxastically sees that *p* is entitled to believe that *p*, corresponds to an external rather than an internal notion of "reason." When a subject non-doxastically sees that there is a bowl of fruit on the table, but refrains from forming the corresponding belief on the grounds that she may be hallucinating, she does not, in McDowell's terms, respond to the presence of the bowl of fruit "as" a rational constraint on belief. The fact that the bowl of fruit is present registers in the subject's consciousness, but not in such a way as to count among "the subject's reasons for believing something" or as a reason "for which" she forms a belief. To recall a point I made in the previous section: if she were to respond to the fact as a reason₁, she would have to respond to it as a conclusive or nondefeasible reason₁, and that is in turn to say that she would have to form the corresponding belief. Her failing to form the corresponding belief thus shows that she is not responding to the fact as a reason₁. What stands in the way of a clear appreciation of this point is that there is indeed a fact to which the subject responds as a rational constraint, and which counts among her reasons₁ for belief: namely the fact that *there appears to her* to be a bowl of fruit on the table. This fact does present itself as a reason₁, to be weighed against competing reasons₁, in particular those which support the hypothesis that she is hallucinating (for example, that she has just taken a hallucinogenic drug, or that she is in the presence of a master illusionist). But the fact that there *is* a bowl of fruit on the table does not present itself to her as a reason₁ at all. It serves as a reason only in the sense of explaining to the rest of us why, if she were to overcome her doubts, the resulting belief would be "as it ought to be from the standpoint of rationality." To use Brandom's terms, it shows that the belief would accord with "the norm that one ought to say of what perceptibly is that it is." And this is just to say that there is no difference, as far as the subject's entitlement to believe is concerned, between the case now under discussion and the case where a bowl of fruit is perceptibly present but the subject simply fails to notice it.

³⁷ We thus need to distinguish at least three senses of "reason," which we might call respectively first-person internal reasons (reasons₁), third person internal reasons (reasons₂), and external reasons. However, as remarked earlier (note 7) this should not be taken as implying that there are in fact, three different *kinds* of reasons.

McDowell might respond here that I am failing to recognize the implications of his view of experience as “openness to” or “taking in” facts, a view which, as noted in section II, is of a piece with the disjunctive conception of experience. I said above that while the subject in our example does have a reason (specifically, a reason₁) for believing that there is a bowl of fruit on the table, that reason is not the fact that there is a bowl of fruit on the table, but rather the fact that it appears to her that there is a bowl of fruit on the table. But, McDowell might say, its appearing to her, in this instance, that there is a bowl of fruit on the table, *just is* the bowl’s presence on the table making itself manifest to her. According to the disjunctive conception, there is no one state of affairs which corresponds to its appearing to a subject that *p*: rather, its appearing to a subject that *p* is either *p*’s making itself manifest to the subject (as in the present case) or the subject’s having, or being presented with, a “mere appearance” that *p* (as in a case of genuine illusion). So it is a mistake in the present case to think of the subject’s situation as a hybrid of the bowl’s being on the table, and its appearing to her that there is a bowl on the table. Rather, the subject’s situation is comprised simply by the presence to her consciousness of the bowl’s being on the table, and it is this situation which we are referring to when we say that it appears to her that there is a bowl on the table. Thus, to the extent that she takes the appearance to be a reason for believing that there is a bowl on the table, she *eo ipso* takes the fact itself to be a reason for that belief. The fact of the bowl’s being on the table is, after all, present to her as a reason, even though she mistakenly thinks that it is only the “mere appearance” that can be cited as a reason.

But this response is effective only if McDowell can legitimately appeal to his conception of experience as openness to reality in order to defend the view that experience can provide reasons for belief. And it is not clear that he can, for, as we are about to see, this conception of experience appears to depend for its intelligibility on the possibility of experience’s yielding reasons for belief. This emerges when we ask under what circumstances a subject counts, on McDowell’s view, as being open to, or taking in that, or indeed just seeing that *p*. Now we might at first think, given that McDowell illustrates this conception with cases of bogus illusion, that a subject counts as seeing that *p* just in case it appears to her that *p* and *p* causes that appearance through normal perceptual processes. For it is with respect to just such cases that we might expect a subject to describe herself retrospectively as having seen that *p*, even though, at the time of the experience, she thought it merely appeared to her as if *p*. However, this is not in fact McDowell’s view. There can be cases in which a subject is presented through normal visual means with the appearance that *p*, yet fails to count as seeing that *p*. Two such cases are described parenthetically in a footnote to McDowell 1982: “[In a case where] one’s senses are...out of order, though their operations are sometimes unaf-

fected....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. Another case in which it may not count as that is one in which there are a lot of tomato façades about, indistinguishable from tomatoes when viewed from the front” (390n37). In both of these cases, McDowell suggests, one fails to count as experiencing that a tomato is present because one is not “in a position to know” (ibid.) that a tomato is present. And this failure in turn would seem to stem from the subject’s not being entitled to, or lacking sufficient reason for, the belief that a tomato is present.

This last point is made more explicit in McDowell 1993: “[o]ne does not count as seeing something to be the case (even if the fact that that is how things look to one results, in the way that is characteristic of seeing, from the fact that that is how things are), if one’s taking it that that is how things are is doxastically irresponsible. Consider, for instance, a case in which one has excellent reasons for distrusting one’s vision, although as a matter of fact it is functioning perfectly” (430n25). The case McDowell has in mind is one in which, unlike the bogus illusion cases, the subject to whom it veridically appears that *p* also believes that *p*. But if such a subject is, as in the case McDowell describes, “doxastically irresponsible”—if she forms that belief while recognizing good reasons against it—then she does not count as seeing that *p*.³⁸ As was implicit in the other two cases, she fails to count as seeing that *p* because she lacks sufficient reason to believe that *p*.

This constraint on what counts as “seeing that” *p* may be motivated, at least in part, by the need to distinguish the notion of a subject’s taking in a fact, from that of a fact’s causing a subject to entertain a corresponding appearance. If the notion of openness to facts is to provide a genuine alternative to coherentism, it cannot collapse—as Davidson suspects it must³⁹—into that of facts’ causing thoughts. But the constraint raises at least two difficulties for McDowell’s view of the relation between experience and belief. First, if somewhat tangentially to our immediate concerns, it makes it less clear that bogus illusion cases demonstrate an intelligible notion of non-judgmental or nondoxastic seeing that *p*. For cases of nondoxastic seeing that *p*, in McDowell’s sense, no longer coincide with those cases—which include cases of intermittently malfunctioning perceptual systems, prevalence of façades, and doxastic irresponsibility—in which a subject who falsely thinks herself deceived might describe herself later as having “seen that” *p*. Second, and more importantly in the present context, it means that McDowell cannot

³⁸ Presumably, then, a subject who is doxastically irresponsible in the other direction—a subject to whom it veridically appears that *p* but who refrains from believing that *p* capriciously, or for reasons that are clearly inadequate—also fails to count as seeing that *p*.

³⁹ Davidson 1999, discussed in section II.

appeal to the status of experience as taking in facts in order to make plausible the view that experience yields reasons for belief. For, it now appears, a subject's experience has to involve her having a reason for belief in order to count as her taking in a fact in the first place.

V

In the preceding two sections I used the considerations introduced in section I to challenge McDowell's view that experiences can be reasons for belief. I argued that McDowell is mistaken in holding that the scope of reasons for belief, as Davidson understands them, can be extended to include experiences, as McDowell understands them. I began by arguing that McDowell cannot support his view by appeal to the fact that we cite our experiences as reasons for beliefs: this fact shows that experiences are reasons for beliefs only in the first of the two senses I distinguished in section I, which is not the sense which McDowell needs if his view is to provide an alternative to coherentism. I went on, in a second phase of the argument, to introduce positive grounds for rejecting McDowell's view. Once we understand the relation between the two senses in which a subject can have a reason for belief, I argued, we see that an experience cannot be a reason in the sense McDowell needs unless the subject takes the fact experienced to be a reason in the first of the two senses, and this is possible only if experience, contrary to McDowell's conception of it, involves judgment. In the third phase of the argument, I considered a challenge to my conception of how the two senses of reason are related, a challenge which turned on the idea that nonjudgmental or nondoxastic experiences can entitle us to, and thus provide reasons for, beliefs that we do not in fact have. I argued that this entitlement fails to count as a reason in the required sense, or indeed in either of the senses I distinguished; instead, it exemplifies a further, externalist notion of a reason which McDowell explicitly rejects as failing to serve his purposes. While I have not tried to do so here, it is possible to generalize the argument to any view which allows experiences, construed as nonjudgmental, to be reasons for belief in Davidson's sense of "reason," that is, in the sense in which beliefs are typically reasons for belief. The experience that p can be a reason₂ for believing some proposition which follows from p , including, as a limiting case, p itself: but only if we take such experiences as ways of taking, judging or believing p to be the case.

There is still a reply available to McDowell. In section II I described McDowell's view as motivated by the problem of empirical content. How can we so much as have beliefs about the world unless facts are presented to us in a way which does not itself involve belief, but which allows those facts to stand in rational relations to belief? In arguing that there is no such way,

McDowell will say, I am helping myself to the idea of belief without explaining how beliefs can be answerable to the world, and hence contentful.

Unlike many critics of McDowell, I take the problem of empirical content to be a genuine problem. But I do not think that raising the problem is sufficient to establish, in the face of the argument I have given, that nonjudgmental experiences are, after all, reasons for belief. For it is not obvious that McDowell's approach offers the only solution to the problem. If it were the only solution, then there would at most be a standoff. McDowell could say that the argument I have presented rests on a conception of belief which is unintelligible. But the upshot of that argument is that it is no less unintelligible that experiences, as construed by McDowell, could serve as reasons for belief in the required sense. I am not disputing, then, that McDowell has raised a serious difficulty for Davidson's coherentism. What I have tried to do in much of this paper is to spell out a difficulty—in my view, no less serious—for McDowell's proposed alternative. If the problem of empirical content is a genuine one, it is still in need of a solution.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ I have been helped, in thinking about the issues discussed in this article, by discussions with Randall Amano, Arpy Khatchirian, David Owens, Barry Stroud, Jay Wallace and Daniel Warren. I am especially grateful to John MacFarlane for detailed comments on an earlier draft. A version of this article was presented at Sheffield University, and I am grateful to the audience on that occasion for their comments.

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