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# McDowell on Transcendental Arguments, Scepticism and “Error Theory”

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## Abstract

John McDowell has recently changed his line of response to philosophical scepticism about the external world. He now claims to be in a position to use the strategy of transcendental argumentation in order to show the falsity of the sceptic’s misrepresentation of our ordinary epistemic standpoint. Since this transcendental argument begins from a weak and widely shared assumption shared with the sceptic herself the falsity of external world scepticism is now demonstrable even to her. Building on the account of perceptual intentionality defended in the Woodbridge lectures, McDowell argues that the idea of narrow perceptual content is unavailable to anyone, including the sceptic. This argument is assessed by drawing out an analogy with parallel responses to error theories in ethics.

## Keywords

perceptual knowledge – scepticism – intentionality – transcendental argument – John McDowell

## 1 Introduction

John McDowell has recently claimed that his account of perceptual intentionality offers material for a transcendental argument directed against the classical sceptic about our knowledge of the external world (McDowell 2008). Such a sceptic bases a global scepticism about our knowledge of the external world on the under-determination of knowledge by perceptual evidence. I think it is fair to say that this paper has caused more puzzlement to his critics than McDowell’s other recent publications. This is for at least two reasons.

The first is that the whole idea of supplying such a *response* to scepticism seems incompatible with McDowell's avowed, Wittgensteinian, putatively "quietist" methodology. In particular, it is incompatible with his earlier insistence that the proper response to scepticism about the external world is simply to ignore it. The second reason for puzzlement is that it is unclear exactly how much McDowell wants to claim for his renovated transcendental argument. It is presented as defending an epistemically *modest* diagnosis of the errors of scepticism. In this paper, I will reconstruct his argument, identify what I take to be its genuine plausibility, but argue that its central conclusion is not to be combined with a claim of epistemic modesty—far from it. If the argument of the paper succeeds, then Kant's "scandal to philosophy" has finally been resolved. In developing this argument, I will develop a systematic comparison between some of McDowell's claims about the errors of sceptical argument and what we ought to say about a comparable position, namely, error theory in meta-ethics.

## 2 Scepticism: From Dissolution to Engagement

It seems to me clear that, to use a favourite McDowellian word, there is something of an "oscillation" between two lines he wants to take against the sceptic both in his philosophy generally and in McDowell 2008 in particular. His putatively Wittgensteinian methodology inclines him towards a dismissal of the sceptic's doubts on the grounds that the latter involve a mistake that has been exposed and can be dismissed. Scepticism arises from a mistake in a theoretical justification of our epistemic practices; worse, the very need for such a justification is superfluous. You do not meet a false and bad piece of theory with another theory. Instead, you reject the theoretical impulse entirely and replace it with a therapeutic "dissolution" of the problem.

However, the second line of response explored in McDowell's recent work is a different argument: a transcendental argument. It works differently from a therapeutic refusal to engage with the sceptic. Given a shared starting point with the sceptic, we can demonstrate that she must concede the force of the argument. That is the point of the word "transcendental": from some suitably shared starting point the sceptic can be forced to accept a corollary of her own argument that initially she denied. More precisely, McDowell develops an argument that takes the sceptic from her mistaken understanding of perceptual intentionality to McDowell's preferred understanding of the kind of mental states involved in perception (as presented and defended in McDowell's Woodbridge Lectures). Such states always "have the world in view": what

McDowell means by this phrase is that the capacity to represent how things objectively are is built into this kind of mental state *ab initio*. This represents McDowell's gloss on the Kantian idea of objective validity. I will argue that McDowell is correct and that we ought to prioritise this second line of argument over his former quietism. But then, if we do, the only puzzle that remains is the modesty that he claims for his results.

Both the quietistic-cum-therapeutic strand and the transcendental strand of McDowell's approach to scepticism are interwoven in the paper that is my main concern here. The Wittgensteinian methodological framework is very much in evidence when it is asserted that the *only* assumption driving external world scepticism is a narrow, interfacing, conception of experience (McDowell 2008: 378–9). That single error leads to the “contamination” of our ordinary practices by sceptical doubt and with that error removed we are restored to our ordinary perceptual knowledge. This is the least plausible part of McDowell's latest position: it is, I think, straining credulity to say that the very idea of an intentional mental state that always has “the world in view” is a piece of uncontaminated common sense that one simply needs to *restore* to our ordinary way of thinking about experience. This therapeutic or diagnostic part of McDowell's argument does seem unconvincing. But it is not, in fact, the main thrust of the later paper (perhaps fortunately).

The main line of argument does not dismiss sceptical doubts. It rather engages with them by going deeply enough into the sceptic's motivations to find a shared common assumption such that the sceptic is compelled to surrender her scepticism. We are, then, in the region of McDowell's transcendental argument, but that which I find puzzling is not the argument but the context in which McDowell presents it. As he notes, this ground has been much worked over. (In particular, the methodology of transcendental argumentation has been intensively studied.) In their canonical form such arguments are supposed to work like this: we make an assumption about our experience. We then show that a necessary condition of that assumption is an *a priori* condition on our experience taking the form that it does. The paradigmatic form of this argument is found in Kant, where its aim is to show the *a priori* validity of the categories in constituting experience in a weighty sense. Unfortunately, this paradigm usage of transcendental arguments gave rise to two concerns about their use both of which are connected to Kant's independent commitment to transcendental idealism. I will describe these concerns as they contextualize McDowell's claim that his own use of such arguments appeals to a “third way” that avoids both lines of concern.

The first issue is that Kant, the original proponent of this method, believed that he had to begin his transcendental arguments with a necessary truth

about our experience. He took their canonical form to be a first premise that stated such a necessary truth, moved on to a material conditional that took the first premise as its antecedent, and a further necessary truth as its consequent, before concluding with that further (surprising) necessary truth. However, as Ross Harrison pointed out in an important detachment of the methodology of transcendental arguments from the doctrine of transcendental idealism, we do not have to see such arguments as working that way (Harrison 1982). Transcendental arguments can begin with mere contingencies where the bridge to a contingent conclusion is a whole conditional bound by the necessity operator that takes the whole conditional within its scope. It is the conditional that forms the second premise that is necessitated: we neither begin from, nor conclude with, necessary truths. This is helpful if, as McDowell hopes, our starting point is to be this contingent truth: that our experience *is* objective “in a weighty sense.”

The second methodological concern about transcendental arguments is Barry Stroud’s well-known scepticism about all arguments of this form. That there is a direct connection between this concern and the previous one is reflected in Stroud’s comment that:

David Pears described the conclusions of Strawsons’ argument as “conditional necessities” to the effect that such-and-such is necessary if we are to think and speak as we do now.

1968: 252

To see the connection between the two issues you could formulate Harrison’s claim this way: take how we “think and speak as we now do” as our starting point, then derive a necessitated conditional that uncovers the assumptions that sustain that initial assumption.

Even this use of the transcendental argument strategy, however, is rejected by Stroud. His “master argument” is that any transcendental argument tells us only what we must believe. It cannot establish truths about the world. Only a supplementary principle, such as the verification principle or a commitment to idealism, can form the bridge between claims about what we are necessitated to believe about the world and facts about the world. But both the verification principle and idealism are implausible in their own terms. If one were able to establish the truth of that principle or doctrine on independent grounds, then all the philosophical interest would be in that independent argument. There is not very much work left for transcendental arguments *to do*.

In his paper, McDowell implies that his local, tactical appeal to one particular transcendental argument steers between these two options of beginning

from weighty, but contingent, truths about the world (Harrison’s strategy) or merely the tracing of interconnections between our beliefs and concepts (Stroud’s interpretation). That explains what McDowell takes to be the epistemic modesty of his results, but I think his identification of this “third way” in the use of transcendental arguments against scepticism is misleading.

### 3 Transcendental Arguments: The “Third Way”

McDowell introduces his own distinctive take on the methodology of transcendental arguments by distinguishing his approach from the two others I have outlined:

I am not going to consider transcendental arguments of either of the two kinds that have come into view ... the ambitious kind, in which the aim is to establish the truth of general claims about the world; nor the modest kind, in which the aim is to establish only that we cannot consistently go on taking it that our thought and experience are as they are in the relevant respects while withholding acceptance of the relevant claims about the world ... I want to consider a different approach to one sort of scepticism ... through a kind of transcendental argument that belongs to neither of those two types.

2008: 378

This McDowellian “third way” is to diagnose a flawed assumption in external world scepticism. The identification of this flaw allows us retain our ordinary knowledge “without contamination by philosophy.” This puts McDowell’s second approach to scepticism, his appeal to transcendental argumentation, at the service of his first, therapeutic, approach.

The flawed assumption that generates scepticism is that the sceptic cannot so much as make sense of the idea of “direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment” (2008: 378). On this construal, external world scepticism seems compelling only because it describes our epistemic standing in terms that reflect the only way that things could be from that (misguided) perspective where such direct access is ruled out *ab initio*. If we cannot so much as make sense of direct perceptual access, then we are permanently cut off from the world. The sceptic’s error, then, is to fail to see that there are objectively valid perceptually intentional states. It is an error properly to be located in the theory of intentionality. But the sceptic does not pluck that error out of thin air: she gets to it by offering the wrong answer to a perfectly valid question.

*That* is the entry point for McDowell's demonstration to the sceptic that her own mistake can be shown to her by her own lights.<sup>1</sup>

McDowell's thought seems to be that the force of sceptical arguments is that how things are with us, perceptually, is how things must be, perceptually, for a thinker incapable of mental states that always have the world in view. With that "predicament" described we are supposed to recover the external world. That project of recovery fails, but the real point is to undermine the sceptic's starting point: we are not in that predicament. We can at least *make sense* of the idea of direct perceptual access. So we are not, reflectively, in the situation that the sceptic urges upon us; one that would, indeed, invite the term "predicament."

McDowell then poses the crucial question:

*But what does this have to do with transcendental arguments?* Well, it depends on how the undermining move is defended. And it can be defended by an argument that is broadly Kantian. The argument aims to establish that the idea of environmental facts making themselves available to us in perception must be intelligible, because that is a necessary condition for it to be intelligible that experience has a characteristic that is, *for the purposes of this argument*, not in doubt.

2008: 380, emphasis added

The characteristic in question is, precisely, objective validity: "that experience purports to be of an objective reality" (2008: 380). To understand this class of mental states, then, is to take it to be *constitutive* of them that they have such a feature.

When one undergoes perceptual experience, it at least appears to one as if things in one's environment are a certain way... Experiences in which it merely looks to one as if things are thus and so are experiences that misleadingly present themselves as belonging to the epistemically distinguished class. So we need the idea of experiences that belong to that epistemically distinguished class if we are to comprehend that idea that experiences have objective purport.

2008: 380

In other words, the fact that some our mental states possess objective validity makes the sceptic's predicament avoidable *even to the sceptic*.

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1 So I intend the reconstruction of this part of McDowell's argument to address one of the main concerns expressed in Snowdon (2009).

This is a refinement on the first, therapeutic idea that we simply ignore a scepticism based on a false theory by refusing to engage with it. The refinement takes the form of a transcendental argument because it shares with that general methodology the feature that it can only be dialectically effective in a context where the proponent of the argument and the sceptic share an assumption. Furthermore, each party must really share it, not simply be able to put radically conflicting assumptions in a form of words that conceals the extent of real disagreement.<sup>2</sup>

McDowell thinks that his argument can take this form because the focus of the debate is over the *purpose* of this class of mental states: what they purport to do and how they have to be constituted so as to realize this aim. The claim of objective validity is a claim that this class of states is *apt to be perceptual knowledge*. The mental states involved in perceptual intentionality are apt to be an appropriate vehicle for having the world in view only if that idea is built into our understanding of what it is to be such a mental state in the first place (McDowell 1998, Thomas 2009). The sceptic agrees that this is the point of our having this class of states, even if none of them actually succeeds in realizing this aim. By conceding that this is what objective validity must consist in, she must give up her picture of our epistemic predicament. That picture is grounded in a mistake in the theory of perceptual intentionality.

But surely that argument cannot be enough! Even if this aim is built into that class of states, and the sceptic accepts this, she can insist that none of them actually do realize this aim. Our perceptual states all claim the status of objective validity but, as a class, fail to realize this aim, so McDowell has done nothing like enough work against the sceptic. Even worse, something very like the old argument from “paradigm cases” is in the offing: is McDowell going to argue that there could only *seem* to be states like this if some of them *were* actually instances of perceptual knowledge? That would be a very unhappy line of argument. But I do not think that it is the line of argument he is suggesting; this concern misrepresents what McDowell is trying to prove in this local context. A connection that I think it is helpful to make to reinforce this point is with the prospect for an error theory in meta-ethics (Mackie 1977). That is the point I will develop in the next section.

#### 4 An Analogy with Error Theory in Ethics

An error theorist claims, for the central core of ethical representations at stake in her dispute with various irrealist opponents, that they are truth-apt and

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<sup>2</sup> This is, as I have noted, precisely the point at which Snowdon (2009) dissents from McDowell's new strategy.

appropriate vehicles for moral knowledge. But, as a contingent fact, such representations are all false. To which Crispin Wright replied, very convincingly, that absent some further special reason to assent to this combination of claims they stand in a real tension with each other. The combination of the claim of global truth-aptness and the claim of global falsity is problematic (Wright 1988).

Wright's argument is that the global falsity of the representations involved is at odds with the characterization of their point and function. The error theorist tries to represent this global falsity as if it were akin to a mistake, or an inadvertence, the possibility of which was built into the very diagnosis of the point of this class of states itself. The error theorist claims that it is just like being wrong sometimes, but all the time. Thus the perceptual sceptic tries to represent her conclusion as akin to some generalization of our everyday, commonsense, fallibilism. (This point connects to McDowell's diagnosis of his new use of non-conjunctive arguments to which I will return below.) It is precisely this insouciance that critics of the error theory such as Wright find problematic, both in ethics and in epistemology: is it really no more of a problem for all of our beliefs in a certain domain that they are *all* false, globally, as a class, than that *some* of them are? The error theorist is trying to pass off as a difference of degree what is, in fact, a difference in kind. It can hardly be an unfortunate inadvertence that we designed an entire class of ways of thinking and speaking to some purpose only for them all, as a class, to fail to realize that end.

Global error of this kind very strongly suggests that the initial diagnosis of that which this class of states aimed to do is mistaken. When we interpret some local domain in how we think and speak, we always "trade off" in our interpretative choices our assessment of the constitutive aim of this local area and how many of its claims come out true. The word "constitutive" is doing some work here: it is a constitutive rule of chess that one cannot move one's king through check when castling. It is not a constitutive rule of chess that a game be entertaining to spectators. It is because the formal end of the class of perceptual intentional states is that they always "have the world in view" *constitutes* what it is to be this kind of state that a global failure is problematic. If you play soccer badly, then it can still be soccer, but if you play it badly enough in a certain way, then you have invented rugby.

That, then, is the position in which the sceptic will find herself if she is mistaken about the kind of mental states involved in perceptual intentionality. She will be committed to the idea that in understanding this class of mental states they are designed to "have the world in view." But, in fact, none of them ever do realize this constitutive aim. McDowell implies that this is a very

uncomfortable position to occupy and I think he is right about that. But that is not the full extent of his argument. That point is supplemented by an explanation of how this unstable combination of views—that our perceptual states all have the feature of objective validity but are globally false—has to be avoidable, *even for the sceptic*.<sup>3</sup>

This ambitious argument is that the sceptic’s central argument from the highest common factor conception to the narrowness of perceptual contents involves a notion of narrow content that is unavailable to anyone, the sceptic included. The highest common factor conception was introduced in McDowell’s first, influential statement of his form of disjunctivism about perceptual knowledge in McDowell 1982. This early paper is a general critique of a neo-Wittgensteinian combination of psychological internalism with a notion of criterial support as a novel kind of *a priori*, but defeasible, knowledge-conferring relation. One aspect of this paper is its isolation of a certain kind of sceptical strategy. The misnamed “argument from illusion” proceeds as follows: compare a veridical perceptual experience “from the perspective of the subject” with its non-veridical counterpart and isolate the “highest common factor” that those two experiences share. The sceptic hopes to force an acknowledgement of the fact that, from this first personal perspective, the two experiences are indiscriminable to the agent, thereby preparing the way for the introduction of the idea of a narrow perceptual content.

McDowell proposes that we think of this pair of cases differently. On an occasion of perceptual knowledge, the wide contents of veridical perceptual experiences are successful thoughts, whereas on an occasion of perceptual delusion, the narrow contents of delusive cases are failed thoughts. Given that characterization, (now familiar from the intensive study of non-conjunctive arguments) there is a familiar asymmetry in the way in which the two kinds of thought are explained. The explanation of the failed thought depends asymmetrically on the explanation of the successful thought, such that the good cases set the standard that the bad cases fail to meet. They do so, precisely, by characterizing the formal—constitutive—aim of this kind of intentional state. Content is an objective idea. For that reason, the mental states involved in the bad cases were knowledge-apt even if, on some occasion (and for intelligible reasons specific to the case in hand) they failed to *be* knowledge.

This asymmetry in explanation plays an important role in McDowell’s transcendental argument. This is because the sceptic has to concede, even in the case

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3 Thus we can go beyond the standoff between two conceptions of content, and hence between a “neo-Moorean” critique of, and a response from, scepticism diagnosed in MacArthur (2003). See note 5 below.

of non-veridical thoughts, that characterizing the intentional state involved has to advert to their aim. That aim sets up a “task specification” for the kind of intentional states involved in perception that narrowly construed experiences could not discharge. The constitutive aim for perceptually intentional states is to be the appropriate vehicle for perceptual knowledge. Owing to the asymmetry in the explanation between the good and the bad cases, without acknowledging that the good cases are possible, the sceptic is not even entitled to her own proprietary notion of a narrow content or of an “appearance.” That latter idea is incompatible with the aim of having such a class of states in the first place.

Disjunctivism now plays a different, tactical, role in McDowell’s argument in this later paper from his earlier work represented by McDowell 1982. Whereas we have seen that in this earlier work disjunctivism is the primary strategy for therapeutically dissolving the temptation to scepticism, this approach has now changed. As McDowell’s overall strategy for responding to the sceptic has been revised—we now go deeply enough into her assumptions to show how the mistakes to which they lead are avoidable even for her—so disjunctivism is relegated to a supplementary role. It is now a recognition of the truth of epistemic fallibilism; the fact that the exercise of our capacity for perceptual knowledge is such that it can, on occasion, fail. But both the error theorist in ethics and the perceptual sceptic about the external world are, from McDowell’s point of view, guilty of presenting the claim of global falsity as a harmless generalization from this fallibilism.

By contrast, he argues that a local fallibilism does nothing to sustain the sceptic’s narrow conception of content:

This is where the disjunctive conception does its epistemological work. It blocks the inference from the subjective indistinguishability of experiences to the highest common factor conception ... and the transcendental argument shows that the disjunctive conception is required, on pain of our losing our grip on the very idea that in experience we have it appear to us that things are a certain way.

2008: 382

What is puzzling to me about McDowell’s transcendental argument is the modesty with which he presents it. That is because its linchpin is that the idea of a narrow, interfacing notion of content is unavailable to anyone, including the sceptic. That thought takes us deeper into the motivations of the sceptic: she is making a theoretical error. Furthermore, we can force an acknowledgement of that point from within her own set of assumptions. Accordingly, we are not now engaged in therapeutic dissolution of the

impulse to scepticism, but a theoretical correction of a false presupposition. The key idea in McDowell's later engagement with scepticism is that the sceptic does not *begin* from a thesis about perceptual intentionality. The sceptic begins from a perfectly good "how possible" question, namely: "How is direct perceptual access possible?" She simply answers that question badly, misled by the commonality between the good and the bad cases into believing that how things seem to a subject could ground a notion of content that it cannot. It is this latter impossibility that I want to explore in more detail in the next section.

## 5 An Asymmetry between Wide and Narrow Content

I want to dig a little deeper here into McDowell's underlying rationale for his diagnosis of the errors of scepticism. The point is that the position of the wide psychologist and the narrow psychologist do not mirror each other, either in the case of perceptual intentionality or more generally. You cannot use any argument from phenomenological indiscernibility to introduce a notion of content picked out criterially by things "seeming to be that way to the subject." Why not? Because content is, after all, a notion constitutively connected to truth, not simply to justification. So any notion of content introduced via an epistemic criterion (such as "seeming to be that way to the subject") is, *ex hypothesi*, compatible with the *existence* of wide contents.

This is for two reasons: that content is constitutively tied to truth and because indiscernibility is not identity. Every party to this debate should agree that, according to an epistemic criterion for content, being indiscernible to the subject is not a way of individuating contents. So by all means introduce "a" notion of content tied to subjective indiscernibility, but accept as a necessary corollary the concession that the notion of a wide content is at least *consistent* with the notion of narrow content thus introduced. The narrow content theorist has to concede that it is possible to be in a situation where the thinker entertains a widely individuated content in thought, but does not know either (a) that she does or (b) which content is thus entertained.

But this asymmetry between the wide and the narrow psychologist is crucial to the prospects for McDowell's argument. If wide contents are so much as possible, then the narrow content theorist is committed to an account of content which, given the possible existence of wide content, has the feature that you cannot know which kind of content *is* the content of your experience. Given this epistemic way of introducing the idea of narrow content, then that is all

that the narrow content theorist is entitled to infer *by her own lights*.<sup>4</sup> In any perceptual engagement with the world matters are, with her, such that she is in either a wide psychological state or a narrow psychological state. But it is internal to the narrow psychologist's view that she cannot know which by inspecting the state alone. (That is what it is to be in the "predicament" with which McDowell began.) Both wide and narrow contents will be indistinguishable to the subject on phenomenological grounds. So the narrow theorist has no resources for disqualifying wide contents; but McDowell's deepest point is that the wide theorist *does* have the resources for disqualifying the idea of narrow perceptual contents. That is precisely what his "local" transcendental argument achieves.

The McDowellian response to the sceptic, then, is that an epistemic criterion (subjective indiscernibility) can only introduce anything properly to be called "content" on one condition: to admit a notion of narrow content is to admit the possibility of wide content. One can go one step further: to admit a notion of narrow content is to admit the possibility of wide content, such that they could both be instantiated to the thinker. For it is no objection to this possible case that one has to know *which* content you are thinking. The idea of a narrow content does not pre-empt or disqualify the idea of wide content; but the converse is not true. The idea of wide content does disqualify the idea of narrow content. That is because it is incompatible with the aim of this class of mental states, namely, to exhibit objective validity. It is the idea of narrow content alone that delivers us into the predicament that the sceptic did not assume from the outset, but failed to avoid.

McDowell's view is that when one veridically perceives a fact, the reflective justification of that knowledge adverts to its grounds. That access to its grounds can be expressed by a report that is also factive: it cites the very same fact that is the content of the perceptually based knowledge claim. This finessing of the

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4 This is so even for an idea of phenomenologically indiscernible content. Even if the narrow theorist stipulates that content is to be whatever is subjectively indiscernible across the veridical and the delusive state, that leads to all kinds of problems as the notion of identity is relativised to the epistemic capacities of the person making the judgement. You saw a speckled hen and saw that it was speckled, but not that it had 16 speckles facing you. You were deluded and thought you saw a speckled hen, and your delusive belief is that you saw a speckled hen, but not that it had 18 speckles facing you. Is the phenomenal content of the two experiences that forms the highest common factor across them its seeming to you to see 16 or 18 speckles? Suppose, as response to that question, we introduce a hedged content of its seeming to you that the hen is determinately speckled in some indeterminate way. We can still ask: "How well did you see *that*?" It is inappropriate to relativise a notion of content to your limited and fallible capacities to attend to features of what you see.

usual contrast between internalism and externalism claims that, in order to know, you must have reflective access to *the grounds* of what you know. (So this is not Moorean dogmatism; it is not a Moorean view at all.<sup>5</sup>) McDowell's position is compatible with the requirement that you must know what you know. However, that is not the same requirement as the requirement that you must know *which thought it is* in virtue of which you know. (As is by now familiar, subjective indiscernibility across wide and narrow thoughts poses a problem for a "know which" requirement, but not for the "knowing that you know" requirement.)

Localised specifically to perceptual contents, we can find a fulcrum for McDowell's deepened diagnosis of where the sceptic goes wrong in the "how possible" question to which the sceptic, mistakenly, gives one answer. McDowell gives another answer whose correctness the sceptic is forced to concede. Ironically, you could summarise McDowell's view as this: narrow contents are not all they seem for the simple reason that they could not be all that they seem. Wide theorists have a resource, in the perceptual case, for forcing the sceptic to accept that perceptual contents are wide in such a way that our epistemic "situation" is not a "predicament." Furthermore, this line of reasoning is not one that the sceptic can refuse: it begins from a shared starting point, namely, making sense of the constitutive, formal aims of a class of mental states. Every one of its assumptions is demonstrable to the sceptic: she has no reasonable grounds for denying them.

## 6 Conclusion

Wherein lies the modesty of McDowell's argument? It seems to me very plausible; that which puzzles me is his putative agreement with Stroud's critique of the whole methodology of transcendental arguments. (This is the basis for the "modesty" of McDowell's conclusions.) As Quassim Cassam noted some time ago, Stroud's claim that the methodology of transcendental arguments requires

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5 Pace Pritchard, who argues that McDowell's view succeeds in being Moorean, but not *eo ipso* dogmatic (Pritchard 2008, 2012). For a convincing critique of Pritchard's interpretation of McDowell as any kind of "Moorean," see Schönbaumsfeld (forthcoming). I should note that the main thrust of Schönbaumsfeld paper is to make the case that McDowell's original anti-sceptical strategy, focused on the rejection of the highest common factor conception and the therapeutic dissolution of scepticism, suffices to refute the sceptic. I don't share that optimism about McDowell's early work taken as self-standing. I should add that, for reasons of scope, I cannot give full consideration here to the extended interpretation of McDowell's disjunctivism in Pritchard 2012; that must await another occasion.

supplementation by verificationism or idealism can pass unchallenged only if we ignore one of Stroud's defining assumptions. This is his claim that: "the sceptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we believe that S is true ... but that S need not actually be true" (Stroud 1982: 128). As Cassam protests:

It is simply asserted, without anything in the way of supporting argument, that the sceptic can always 'very plausibly' substitute his weaker claim for the stronger one made by the original transcendental argument. Once such a substitution has taken place, there will indeed be a gap to be bridged but the substitution will be resisted by the Kantian.

1987: 356

Cassam is surely correct about this: the claim that belief is always as explanatorily successful as knowledge is too controversial an assumption from which to begin an argument (Williamson 2000: ch. 1).

One can now go further in the light of McDowell's claims: relativised solely to the case of perception, precisely that which McDowell has demonstrated (with his "asymmetry" argument) is that the notion of "appearance" playing the role of the object of reasonable belief is only available to anyone *if* the notion of objective validity makes sense. Objective validity only makes sense if the idea of being in a situation in which perceptual knowledge is available to one makes sense. Note I have said "available," not "actual," to emphasise the point that this is not the argument from paradigm cases. It is, rather, the claim that there is a tension inherent to the analogue in the theory of perception to an error theory in ethics: the view that all our perceptual mental states have the aim of objective validity, but an aim that none of them realize as they are all false.

Mackie's error theory in ethics is in systematic bad faith as it represents as a mere inadvertence in our ethical judgements a defect that was, in his diagnosis of their constitutive aim, built into them from the outset. If you place an impossible set of demands on one notion—such as that values must be wholly independent of human sensibility and yet necessarily motivating to those who come to know them—it is hardly a discovery that nothing can fit that profile (Thomas 2006: 15–18). The real objection to Platonism in ethics is not that it is false, but that it is impossible, but according to Mackie Plato is the only moral realist in the history of ethics who understood what such a view would *have to be*. So while I take Platonism to be the result of placing inconsistent demands on one and the same notion of objectivity in a way that is evidently self-defeating, Mackie thinks it expresses an *insight*. Global falsity stems, here, from a

systematic misconception of the constitutive aims of moral contents. McDowell is, I think, pressing a comparable worry about global scepticism about the external world. From a shared starting point, the sceptic introduces a notion of content that turns our ordinary situation into a predicament, but that is no discovery. It is no discovery because the global falsity of all our claims perceptually to know stems from the sceptic’s misconception of how this class of mental states operates in the first place.

So the overall aim of McDowell’s argument is, in the particular context of perceptual knowledge, to show that substituting a narrowly construed notion of intra-individual cognitive role (a purely syntactic notion of “belief”) for knowledge is an avoidable error. So, in this particular case, Stroud’s sceptical undermining of the whole strategy of transcendental argumentation can be stopped in its tracks. McDowell’s argument is only modest in the claims it seeks to defend but it is hardly epistemically modest in Stroud’s sense that it tells us simply about what we ought reasonably to believe. It is not about reasonable belief, but about knowledge and what follows from the fact that we have perceptual knowledge of the world. Its local and tactical appeal to transcendental argument succeeds in showing that the perceptual sceptic and the error theorist in ethics share the same unhappy predicament.<sup>6</sup>

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