

Original Paper UDC 130.123

Mark A. Wrathall, BrighamNon-rational Grounds and Non-conceptual Content<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

*The phenomenological tradition has long contended that natural perception is neither conceptually articulated nor governed by deterministic laws, but rather organized according to the practically articulated structure of bodily being-in-the-world. But this leaves the problem of explaining how perception can provide justificatory support to thought. The phenomenologists' answer is to say that the meaningful (but not conceptual) structure of natural perception makes it possible for us to think about objects by motivating particular thoughts about the objects as they present themselves in perception. I show how this view provides a way out of worries that plague contemporary philosophy of mind.*

A measure of the remarkable influence of cartesian dualism is found in the fact that it often constrains even the ways in which it is rejected. Few accept, it is true, the basic picture of a dualism of mental and physical *substances*. But a dualism still shapes the philosophy of mind – for instance, in that almost everyone sees as central the task of figuring out the relation between mind and body. And it sometimes seems as if the only possible accounts of human beings consist in either giving a mental description, or a physical description, or explaining how the mental descriptions and the physical descriptions relate to one another other.

This same dualism constrains the ways in which perception is understood. Much of the controversy over the nature of perception is driven, however, by the way that the objects of perception seem to resist categorization as either mental or physical. They stand in an odd position in the sense that, while they are available for thought, they are also independent of thought. This independence is manifest, for instance, in the way that not every feature of a perceived object is presented in perception at once. It is also manifest in the way that no single thought or series of thoughts we have about the object could exhaust all there is to be thought about it. As Merleau-Ponty notes,

»... each aspect of the thing which falls to our perception is still only an invitation to perceive beyond it, still only a momentary halt in the perceptual process. If the thing itself were reached, it would be from that moment arrayed before us and stripped of its mystery. It would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment when we thought to possess it. What makes the 'reality' of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp.«<sup>2</sup>

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An earlier version of this paper appeared as »Non-rational grounds and mind-transcendent objects« in Jeff Malpas (ed.), *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the idea of the transcendental* (Routledge, 2003), pp. 197–209. I would like to thank Hubert Dreyfus for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and for our numerous discussions of these

issues. I would also like to thank Dennis Packard for helping me make a number of corrections.

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 233.

But there is no small tension between these two features of mind-transcendent objects, at least for certain ways of conceiving of an object's concurrent availability to and independence of thought. For example, on the transcendental idealist position that an object is available for thought precisely because we constitute it in thought, it is hard to see how it could be independent of thought. But, of course, such a position is given impetus in the first place by the sense that, if the object is *not* constituted in terms of our concepts, it is equally hard to see how it could be available for thought. Recent work by John McDowell<sup>3</sup> has suggested that one way to eliminate this tension is to reject an unnecessary exclusivity between causal and logical structures — between the »space of reasons« and the »realm of law«, in McDowell's terminology. While accepting in modified form the traditional distinction between the conceptual structure of the space of reasons, and the structure operative in the realm of law (i.e., of natural objects and their impingements on our natural bodies), McDowell proposes that perceptual experience can be understood in terms of conceptual powers permeating and being operative in operations of sensibility characterized in terms of the realm of law. Such a view would, it seems to me, resolve the tension outlined above. But it would do so by giving a phenomenologically inaccurate account of perception.

Amongst phenomenologists, by contrast, the solution is found not in accommodating the mental and the physical, but in uncovering a content proper to perception (and action, for that matter) which is neither causal nor logical in structure. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, argues that no variation played out in cartesian terms will ever account for the human mode of being in the world. »There are two classical views«, he notes:

»... one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an a-cosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him«. <sup>4</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, »neither view is satisfactory«; <sup>5</sup> any adequate account of human existence will need recourse to a mode of explanation that is neither causal nor rational, and it will need to see the content of human states as neither physiological nor logical. Merleau-Ponty argues that the model for understanding human being can not be either that of the inferential and justificatory relations of explicit thought, nor that of the blind and mechanistic workings of material causality. Instead, he proposes that the paradigm should be the »perception of our own body and the perception of external things« which, when properly understood,

»... provide an example... of consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a logic lived through which cannot account for itself, and that of an immanent meaning which is not clear to itself and becomes fully aware of itself only through experiencing certain natural signs«. <sup>6</sup>

The dualist assumption of minds in an objective, material world, in other words, mistakes both the objects of experience and the consciousness of those objects – the former it treats as fully objective and determinate, the latter as self-evident and fully available for reflection. If we are to capture the true character of our experience of the world, Merleau-Ponty suggests, »a complete reform of understanding is called for« (49).

In this paper, I pursue one step in the »complete reform« by considering an alternative approach to that of McDowell, discussed above. Where

McDowell seeks to dissolve the tension by suggesting that perceptual experience is conceptually articulated, phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty maintain that »natural« perception – the kind of perception in which we are absorbed while engaged in our natural, everyday course of affairs – is most properly and accurately characterized in non-conceptual terms. In particular, natural perception is neither conceptually articulated nor governed by deterministic laws, but rather organized according to the practically articulated structure of bodily being-in-the-world. The independence of objects from thought, on the phenomenological picture, is understood in terms of the objects' non-conceptual presence in perceptual experience. But this leaves the problem of explaining how such objects can be present to thought. The phenomenologists' answer is to say that the meaningful (but not conceptual) structure of natural perception makes it possible for us to think about objects by motivating particular thoughts about the objects as they present themselves in perception. This allows us to see that the non-conceptual experience of natural perception grounds our thoughts by

»... arrang[ing] around the subject a world which speaks to him of himself, and gives his own thoughts their place in the world.«<sup>7</sup>

The phenomenologists, in short, would see McDowell's position as driven by an unnecessarily dichotomous way of thinking that can't do justice to perceptual experience. To make the case for the phenomenologically-inspired account, it will be necessary to explain how a phenomenology of pre-propositional manifestness differs from what Sellars labelled the 'Myth of the Given', or the view that propositional states can be rationally supported by non-propositional contents. McDowell has, rightly to my mind, followed Sellars in criticizing as untenable the idea of a given that rationally supports our beliefs. This has led McDowell to argue that perceptual experience should be thought of as conceptually-articulated through and through, for only if it is can it stand in any sort of grounding or justificatory relationship to other intentional states. Similar consideration have led philosophers like Davidson to argue that the world as causally constituted can cause, but not rationally support, our beliefs about the world. These seem like the only plausible alternatives as long as there is no non-myth-of-the-given way of characterizing the relationship of thoughts to non-logical and non-causal perceptual contents. Thus, if the dichotomous account of spaces and realms is to be rejected, and the phenomenological observation is to be vindicated, one would need to distinguish it from the myth of the given account.

To be more precise, a complete vindication would require that one show both (1) how perceptual content is not necessarily propositional, and (2) how non-propositional contents can in some sense ground propositional states and attitudes. Rather than offer an argument on the first issue, however, I will to a large extent simply accept Heidegger's and Merleau-

<sup>3</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World*.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, »The Battle over Existentialism«, in: *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, pp. 71–72.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 132.

Ponty's phenomenological description of perception as non-conceptually articulated.<sup>8</sup> I believe that the description is correct. But I will not be trying to justify it here, because I would like to focus on articulating the phenomenological answer to the second question.

Before doing this, however, I want to explore briefly the way that McDowell's approach to the problem is driven by a dualism of logical and causal structures. I think this point is helpfully illustrated by reviewing the idea of intentional content, and the development of McDowell's argument as a response to Davidson's account of intentional content.

### 1. The Problem of Intentional Content

I want to begin by taking a more detailed look at the tension between the presence of objects to thought and the independence of objects from thought. One traditional, and I think correct, way of cashing out the notion of »presence« to thought is in terms of success in directing our thoughts at objects in the world. Whatever else we say about directedness toward the world, we can be sure that our thoughts, our propositional attitudes, are not directed toward objects in the world if satisfaction of those attitudes does not depend (at least to some degree) on the state of the world. Thus, any complete explanation of our relationship to the things around us must be able to provide an account of how intentional attitudes derive their content from the objects themselves. Without such an account, our ability to think about, desire, entertain beliefs about (etc.,) mind-transcendent objects seems magical.

The obvious source of intentional content is the world itself as we encounter it in our everyday activities. The propositions we entertain and the concepts we employ seem to be responsive to our experience of the world. It is natural to think, then, that content finds its way into our intentions as we form and revise concepts in the light of our interaction with the world. There is undoubtedly something right about this thought. But given that our perceptual interaction with the world is seemingly an interaction between material bodies, and thus is best characterized in causal terms, the problem becomes: how can a causal interaction give rise to conceptually contentful states?

In the empiricist tradition of thought, the content of our thoughts is more or less directly »keyed«, as Quine says, to causal stimulations of our sensory surfaces. »Two cardinal tenets of empiricism remain«, according to Quine, »unassailable«:

»One is that whatever evidence there *is* for science *is* sensory evidence. The other ... is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence.«<sup>9</sup>

In Quine's case, the content of our observation sentences is tied to »the temporally ordered class of receptors triggered during the specious present.«<sup>10</sup> Thus, even though his attack on the »Two Dogmas of Empiricism« undermined the idea of any tight connection between sentences or thoughts on the one hand, and particular causal interactions with the world on the other, his philosophy is nevertheless party to the empiricist view that content is bestowed on our intentions by a causal interaction with the world.

There is, however, a problem with any view that sees the content of intentional states as consisting in merely sensory stimulations – namely, explain-

ing how sensations give rise to properly propositional contents. It is not clear how sensations can contribute either to fixing the content of our thoughts and utterances, or of providing rational justification for them. Adding sensations or other intermediaries to the mix adds a new problem – explaining how sensations can be grouped together in such a way as to correspond to the familiar objects of the world we inhabit, for it is to these familiar objects that our thoughts and words (at least for the most part) are directed. More importantly, adding sensations as intermediaries between our thoughts and the world serves to undermine the idea that we are in direct contact with a mind-transcendent world. This is because, as Davidson notes,

»... patterns of stimulation, like sense data, can not be identified and described without reference to 'what goes on around us'. If our knowledge of the world derives entirely from evidence of this kind, then not only may our senses sometimes deceive us; it is possible that we are systematically and generally deceived... The familiar trouble is, of course, that the disconnection creates a gap no reasoning or construction can plausibly bridge. Once the Cartesian starting point has been chosen, there is no saying what the evidence is evidence for, or so it seems. Idealism, reductionist forms of empiricism, and skepticism loom.«<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Davidson argues that any theory that attempts to ground our thoughts in such intermediaries must be able to explain »what, exactly, is the relation between sensation and belief that allows the first to justify the second?«<sup>12</sup> The problem is that »the relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.«<sup>13</sup> If Davidson's argument is correct, we're left with two potentially incompatible assumptions: first, that our perceptual encounter with the world is a causal transaction; and, second, that thoughts, being propositional in content, are rationally responsive only to other propositional entities. The assumptions are incompatible if we can see no way to move from a causal transaction to a propositional content. Their incompatibility is a problem if we want to tell a convincing story about how our thoughts can be in contact with mind-transcendent objects – hence, the tension observed in the introduction.

One obvious way to avoid the incompatibility is to see the causal transaction as generating in us a propositional state – a belief about the world. And this, in fact, is Davidson's view:

»What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs.«<sup>14</sup>

Once we've acquired a language, Davidson claims, the world can cause us to have beliefs. Davidson calls this kind of interaction with the world »propositional perception«. With language, he argues, comes the capacity for

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Others have begun offering a defense of the phenomenological view of non-propositional and non-conceptual contents. See, for example, Sam Todes, *Body and World*, and Sean Kelly, »What do we see (when we do)?«, *Philosophical Topics* 27 (1999): pp. 107–128.

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Quine, »Epistemology Naturalized«, in: *Ontological Relativity*, p. 75.

10  
Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*, p. 17.

11  
D. Davidson, »Myth of the Subjective«, p. 162.

12  
D. Davidson, »Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge«, p. 310.

13  
Ibid., p. 311.

14  
Ibid.

propositional thought. In virtue of this capacity, the world can cause us directly to have perceptual beliefs. But then there is no need to give perceptual experience itself a justificatory role in relation to those beliefs:

»Of course, our sense-organs are part of the causal chain from world to perceptual belief. But not all causes are reasons: the activation of our retinas does not constitute our evidence that we see a dog, nor do the vibrations of the little hairs in the inner ear provide reasons to think the dog is barking. 'I saw it with my own eyes' is a legitimate reason for believing there was an elephant in the supermarket. But this reports no more than that something I saw caused me to believe there was an elephant in the supermarket.«<sup>15</sup>

Thus, on Davidson's view, we are, as physical organisms, interacting causally with the world, and this interaction bears no information with a propositional content. But it does, in virtue of our linguistic capacities, causally give rise to perceptual beliefs.

This is a coherent story to tell, but it does have one fateful consequence for the idea of intentional content. Because the world acts only causally in the production of our beliefs, and causes can not serve as reasons for holding beliefs, it follows that we can be indifferent about which causes we correlate with which beliefs. The result is an indeterminacy of reference – that is, an inability to find any unique correlation between a particular object as causally constituted, and a particular belief.

The consequence of this indeterminacy, as McDowell is quick to point out, is that we can put down no fixed linkages between our beliefs about the world and the particular features of the world. As Quine explained,

»... the total field [of beliefs] is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.«<sup>16</sup>

But without fixed linkages, McDowell argues, we put at risk the idea that our ideas are about the world at all:

»... we can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness, and we can understand answerability to the empirical world only as mediated by answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world's direct impacts on possessors of perceptual capacities.«<sup>17</sup>

As McDowell explains,

»... if we do not let intuitions stand in rational relations to [thoughts], it is exactly their possession of content that is put in question. When Davidson argues that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, he helps himself to the idea of a body of beliefs, a body of states that have content. And that means that, however successfully the argument might work on its own terms, it comes too late to neutralize the real problem.«<sup>18</sup>

McDowell thus, by contrast to Davidson, argues that the idea of intentional content is only coherent if we can see our way to attributing to things in the world a more-than-causal role. McDowell proposes that we avoid the incompatibility between the causal structure of perceptual interactions with objects and the rational relations between perceptions and beliefs by supposing that, in causally interacting with us, the world draws on our conceptual capacities. Thus, the world is presented at the outset as being propositionally articulated. The difference is thus that for McDowell, and not for Davidson, in our experience of the world itself, we can see the world as bearing the kind of content to which our thoughts can be responsive. In



other words, McDowell's approach would redeem the idea of intentional content by explaining how our thoughts can be directly responsive to experience.

The interesting point is, however, that despite their differences, McDowell and Davidson are both in agreement that if the content of perception is not conceptually articulated then it can stand at best in a merely causal relationship to intentions. They differ only on whether the world presents itself to us in perceptual experience as conceptually articulated.

Phenomenologists in the tradition of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, however, are convinced on the basis of the phenomenology of perception that our propositional states and attitudes are grounded, not caused, in our experience of the world, and that our experience lacks, for the most part, a propositional structure. Before turning to a discussion of this 'grounding' relationship, however, I want briefly to review the phenomenological basis for the claim that most experience is not conceptually articulated.

## 2. Natural and Propositional Perception

A central feature of both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of perception is an insistence that intentional modes of comportment depend on pre-conceptual modes of being-in-the-world. This is because, both argue, intentional modes of comportment are directed toward their objects via propositional contents, and propositional contents can only have an object in virtue of a pre-propositional manifestness of the objects of our intentions. Heidegger's insistence on this point seems to be motivated by the following observation: our ability to make assertions about things or have explicit thoughts about things – i.e., our ability to be in states or attitudes characterizable in terms of a propositional content – seems to depend on removing ourselves from a fluid practical involvement with those things, and in removing ourselves from a fluid practical involvement, our experience of the situation itself seems to change.

In »natural perception« – our perception of things in the course of our everyday commerce in the world – Heidegger notes that what we perceive is not readily available for thought. Indeed, he argues that the very idea that we can think about our natural perception of something is a »constructivist violation of the facts«. This is because

»... we never think a single thing in our natural comportment toward things, and whenever we grasp it expressly for itself, we take it out of a context to which it belongs according to its content«. <sup>15</sup>

The context to which Heidegger is referring is »the *equipmental* context«, in which things are articulated according to our »practical everyday orientation«.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, »Seeing through Language«.

<sup>16</sup> Quine, »Two Dogmas of Empiricism«, in: *From a Logical Point of View*, pp. 42–43. See McDowell's discussion of this and the indeterminacy thesis at *Mind and World*, pp. 129 ff.

<sup>17</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> M. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, pp. 162–163 (translation modified).

»The contexture of things as they surround us here stands in view, but not for the contemplator as though we were sitting here in order to describe the things.«<sup>20</sup>

Heidegger calls the kind of seeing we perform in natural perception »circumspection«. In circumspection, the objects around us »stand at first, completely unobtrusive and unthought«. Indeed, we do not propositionally apprehend things at all in circumspection:

»When we enter here through the door, we do not apprehend the seats, and the same holds for the doorknob. Nevertheless, they are there in this peculiar way: we go by them circumspectly, avoid them circumspectly, stumble against them, and the like.«<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty argues that in our dealings with familiar situations, »just as we do not see the eyes of a familiar face, but simply its look and its expression, so we perceive hardly any object«. <sup>22</sup> He explains:

»... in the natural attitude, I do not have *perceptions*, I do not posit this object as beside that one, along with their objective relationships, I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively.«<sup>23</sup>

Acts of explicit perception – perception in which we see determinate objects in determinate relationships to one another – only emerge from »ambiguous perceptions«. By this, I take it, Merleau-Ponty means that a perceptual experience becomes articulated in a way that would lend itself to discovering rational relations only when a particular need arises – such as when the ambiguity of the situation resists any ready response, and thereby prevents us from continuing in the »flow of experiences«. As a consequence, such derived forms of perceptual experience should not be taken as paradigmatic:

»... they cannot be of any use in the analysis of the perceptual field, since they are extracted from it at the very outset, since they presuppose it and since we come by them by making use of precisely those set of groupings with which we have become familiar in dealing with the world.«<sup>24</sup>

Thus, both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are committed to the view that much of our perceptual experience of the world is articulated according to the »groupings« of our familiar, practical dealings with the world. As I have already noted, I don't intend to offer an argument to show that these practical groupings are incommensurate with conceptual articulations. The argument here is restricted, instead, to establishing that, if natural perception *is* non-conceptually articulated, then it can nevertheless ground propositional perceptions and thoughts.

This hypothetical claim should be of interest, not just in its own right, but also because its denial is itself part of McDowell's argument against non-conceptual content. McDowell's argument turns on two claims: first, that it is always possible to articulate a proposition precisely as detailed as the content of perception,<sup>25</sup> and, second, as we have already seen, that if the content of perception were not already conceptually articulated, then it could only stand in a causal relationship to our propositional attitudes.

With regard to the first claim, it does at least fend off a certain brand of argument in support of the view that perceptual experience is not conceptual – namely, the argument that experience can't be conceptually articulated because concepts are too crude a way of dividing the world to do justice to the detailed nature of our experience of it. But, of course, there is a difference between being describable as..., and being already articulated in terms of... Thus, this observation will not, by itself, undermine the phe-



nomenological account of the content of natural perception. Nevertheless, if we believe that our thoughts need to be supported in some way by our natural perception of the world, and we accept the second claim – that they cannot be supported in the right way unless our perception is conceptually articulated – then this would be enough to throw the phenomenological account into doubt. And so, it is to the second claim that I now turn.

As I have noted, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are both committed to a denial of this claim. But what can be said in response? First, I think it is important to see that the Davidson/McDowell line of argument does teach us something about the way to construe a pre-conceptual experience of the world, and the relationship such an experience has to propositional thoughts about the world. In particular, the relationship cannot be an inferential or justificatory relationship – such a relationship could only hold between *relata* with the same kind of content (namely, a conceptual content). But nor can a pre-conceptual experience of the world be an experience of something that cannot possibly be picked out conceptually. We can see this without accepting McDowell's argument that demonstratives in point of fact make language flexible enough to pick out anything that can be experienced (although I am inclined to accept McDowell's argument on this point). It also follows directly from that fact that, if the objects of our perceptions so completely resisted description in conceptual terms, it would make it impossible to see how being directed to them could inform or ground the content of a propositional attitude.

What we need, then, is a way to think of the content of our natural perceptions as describable in conceptual terms, but not articulated in conceptual terms. Now, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both hold that once we break out of the flow of experiences, we can come to see the same things that were previously articulated pragmatically as being conceptually articulated. Heidegger describes the distinction in content between a pragmatic and conceptual articulation as a distinction between different kinds of 'as' structures – the hermeneutic 'as' of circumspective understanding versus the apophantic 'as' of assertion.<sup>26</sup> That is, in simply pragmatically coping with something, I am treating it *as* something. But I am not yet necessarily taking it *as* something that can figure in thoughts, be expressed in words, etc. Of course, once the change-over from the hermeneutic to the apophantic 'as' occurs, there is no mystery how our experiences, now conceptually articulated, could rationally connect with our thoughts. But this is, of course, no solution at all since we would still need to say how natural perception, being non-conceptually articulated, could stand in a grounding relationship to propositional perception, being conceptually articulated. And so, we need to focus directly on the way that a non-conceptually articulated

<sup>20</sup>  
Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>21</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>  
*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>  
»In the throes of an experience of the kind that putatively transcends one's conceptual powers – an experience that *ex hypothesi* affords a suitable sample – one can give linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience, by uttering a phrase like 'that shade', in which the demonstrative exploits the presence of the sample.« *Mind and World*, pp. 56–57.

<sup>26</sup>  
See *Sein und Zeit*, p. 158.

experience could non-rationally ground, rather than cause, a conceptually articulated thought.

What we first need to consider is how a relationship of non-rational grounding differs from a relationship of rational grounding. An experience is able to provide rational grounding to the extent that it is available for use in inference and justification. Thus, we can conclude that if the experience that gives rise to the thought is not available for use in inference and justification, then the thought is not rationally grounded. This is, of course, precisely McDowell's (and Davidson's) objection to seeing the relationship between thoughts and perceptual experiences as a causal relationship – a belief cannot be inferred from or justified by a cause (although, of course, it might be inferred from or justified by a belief about the cause).

### 3. Motivations

If there were some features of our perceptual experience which are not available for use in inference or justification, but which nevertheless dispose us (rather than cause us) to have the thoughts that we do, then we could say that the perceptual experience stands to the thought in a non-rational grounding relationship. Merleau-Ponty calls such relationships 'motivational', and explicitly distinguishes them both from relationships of 'objective cause' and from rational relationships. Non-phenomenological approaches to perception, he argues,

«... can choose only between reason and cause... On the other hand, the phenomenological notion of *motivation* is one of those 'fluid' concepts which have to be formed if we want to get back to phenomena. One phenomenon releases another, not by means of some objective efficient cause, like those which link together natural events, but by the meaning which it holds out – there is a *raison d'Être* for a thing which guides the flow of phenomena without being explicitly laid down in any one of them, a sort of operative reason.»<sup>27</sup>

To get a handle on this 'fluid' concept, let's review briefly a couple of the examples Merleau-Ponty adduces in illustration of it. I will then conclude by saying a word or two by way of explaining how this would constitute a way out of the dichotomy between reasons and causes that traps even McDowell, despite his best efforts to show that the realm of law and the domain of reasons are not mutually exclusive.

Let's first distinguish motivation from rational grounding by looking at some examples meant to show how something can be present in perceptual experience, can dispose us to having a thought or propositional perception, but can nevertheless not be available for inference or justification. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this by noting that only after centuries of painting did artists perceive that reflection on the eye without which the eye remains dull and sightless as in the paintings of the early masters. The reflection is not seen as such, since it was in fact able to remain unnoticed for so long, and yet it has its function in perception, since its mere absence deprives objects and faces of all life and expression. The reflection is seen only incidentally. It is not presented to our perception as an objective, but as an auxiliary or mediating element. It is not seen itself, but makes us to see the rest.<sup>28</sup>

Suppose, in other words, that I see that there is a live person standing in front of me. My seeing this, it turns out, is grounded in part in the fact that the reflection of light on the eye of the person is a part of what I see, but

not present in such a way that it is available for use as a *reason* for my seeing that there is a person there. The fact that the reflection remained unnoticed, even in the face of centuries of effort to faithfully capture what it is that we *do* see, provides *prima facie* evidence that what we saw was not available to thought, and thus could not ground an inference (from the fact that I see a reflection on the eye to the conclusion that I see a person, for instance), or could not serve to justify the belief that I see a person. The role the reflection plays, instead, is to dispose me to seeing a person there in front of me (rather than, say, a mannequin).

Generalizing on such examples, Merleau-Ponty argues that all our conceptually articulated perceptual experiences are motivated by the existential grasp we have on the world around us – that is, by a preceding familiarity with the world and how to act in it. Because this familiarity with the world is itself the condition of our ability to see that anything is the case, and hence, of our ability to reason, it is not itself generally available for use in inference and justification. To take another example, our ability to see objects in the world is motivated by our experience of space. »A poplar on the road which is drawn smaller than a man« Merleau-Ponty notes, »succeeds in becoming really and truly a tree only by retreating towards the horizon«. <sup>29</sup> That we see it as a tree (and thus as describable by the word ‘tree’, or as instantiating the concept *tree*) depends, in other words, on our ability to situate it spatially. But there is no *reason* for situating the tree spatially in the way that we do, we can appeal to no conceptually articulated feature of our experience of the drawing which justifies the spatial orientation we give it, if only because everything we see in the picture is equally a consequence of, and thus not a basis for, the spatiality into which it gets organized. If there is no reason for seeing the tree as receding toward the horizon, and hence as a tree, then what makes us see it in this way? It is motivated by the fact that seeing it in that way gives us the best practical grip on the scene. Our way of being in the world is one in which we are ready for objects to be situated at varying depths. This readiness, no doubt, is ingrained into our bodies by the fact that the world itself is arrayed about us in three dimensions. As a result, our mode of being in the world motivates us to see objects as arrayed three-dimensionally. This mode of being, in other words, grounds our perception by motivating our seeing of the object at the appropriate depth.

A motivational relationship is, then, one in which the enviroing world, in virtue of the practical significance that its various quarters hold for us, operates on us by drawing us into a particular kind of readiness. This readiness, in turn, by projecting into the world a determinate kind of activity, ‘polarizes’ our experience of the world, bringing certain elements of the environment into salience, and concealing others. <sup>30</sup> Because our involvement in the world is geared to particular elements of the environment, when that involvement gives rise to thoughts, we can see those thoughts as responsive to, and bearing on, particular objects.

<sup>27</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309 (translation modified).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>30</sup> »For the normal person his projects polarize the world, bringing magically to view a host of signs which guide action, as notices in a museum guide the visitor.« *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 112.

But now to complete the story, we need to be able to say something about why the motivational story doesn't simply collapse into a variant on Davidson's account – why, that is, we don't simply say that our bodily disposition *causes* us to situate the object spatially in the way that we do. The response is to be found in the way that the particular readiness for the world that we have in our pre-thematic involvement with the world is a direct response to specific features of the world.<sup>31</sup> We saw already that the heteronomy of reasons and mere causes means that we can be indifferent about the way we correlate particular thoughts with particular objects causally defined. »No appeal to causality can affect the determinacy of reference«, Davidson notes, »if the only significant effects are responses to whole sentences«. <sup>32</sup> This is because sentences can only be interpreted within the context of a whole pattern of beliefs which, in turn, is given content only by being mapped on to truth conditions. The current pattern of causal stimulations of the agent being interpreted are, of course, important features to take into consideration while carrying out the mapping. But they will be much too sparse as points of reference to fix the whole context of beliefs. As long as different mappings are equivalent in terms of reserving the overall truth and coherence of the beliefs being mapped, there is no basis for distinguishing between them.

But the world as experienced in natural perception and the bodily readiness that motivate both natural and propositional perceptions are not indifferent to each other in the same way. A bodily readiness, while not necessarily responsive to conceptually delineated features of the world, nevertheless operates in a meaningfully ordered world, and, as a consequence, will only respond to a meaningfully rather than causally delineated object. Because a particular kind of being ready is always a current involvement with particular things in a particular context, it can't be mapped arbitrarily onto whatever feature of the environing world we choose. A particular readiness will only be motivated by particular situations, and will only uncover particular features of the world to us. Thus, it follows that motivational relationships are not merely causal influences on perception. Instead, they serve in an important sense as a ground of propositional thoughts.

#### 4. Conclusion

If we return, now, to the problem of the transcendence of the objects of perception, we can see that the notion of motivation allows phenomenology to offer a fuller account of the way in which objects are present to, but independent of thought.

For Davidson, the object's independence of thought is understood in terms of its causal constitution. But, as McDowell objects, this means that mind-independent objects cannot possibly have any direct rational bearing on thought at all, and thus threatens to put the mind out of contact with a transcendent world altogether. »We need to conceive this expansive spontaneity [of thought] as subject to control from outside our thinking«, McDowell complains, »on pain of representing the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in a void«. <sup>33</sup>

What McDowell can't account for, on the other hand, is the way that mind-transcendent objects present themselves in perception as in some

way irreducible to all the things we could say or think about them. For McDowell, it is enough to make an object transcendent that »the spontaneity of the understanding can be constrained by the receptivity of sensibility.«<sup>34</sup> He argues that our »craving for a limit to freedom« can be satisfied, that is, simply by seeing that »in experience one finds oneself saddled with content.«<sup>35</sup> Indeed, to demand any more, McDowell believes, would force us once again into putting the mind-transcendent world beyond the reaches of our thought.

The phenomenologists, however, have proposed a third way of understanding the mind-transcendent object. The object transcends thought in that its presence in perception is not articulated conceptually. But this doesn't force us into seeing thought as cut off from any direct relation to the mind-transcendent world, so long as we see the world as motivating a bodily disposition which, in turn, motivates the thoughts we can bring to bear on the world. At the same time, the phenomenologist can do justice to the observation that there is a distinction between seeing that such and such is the case, and the way perceptual experiences tend toward a maximal grip on the world.

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In fact, as Hubert Dreyfus has pointed out to me, our bodily readiness often pulls us toward beliefs that we know are wrong. And yet, we still feel pulled to see things in a particular way. As examples of such a phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty discusses perceptual illusions like the way that the moon looks bigger when low on the horizon than when directly overhead, or Zöllner's illusion. Although we can demonstrate to ourselves that the moon is always the same size, still the »various parts of the field interact and motivate this enormous moon on the horizon« (PP, p. 31). Likewise, we can easily convince ourselves that the lines in Zöllner's illusion are in fact parallel, but the overall configuration of lines »motivates the false judgement«

by producing a bodily readiness that disposes us to the contrary beliefs (PP, p. 35).

32

Davidson, »Replies to Seventeen Essays«. In: Ralf Stoecker (ed.), *Reflecting Davidson: Donald Davidson Responding to an International Forum of Philosophers*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1993, p. 55.

33

*Mind and World*, p. 11.

34

McDowell, »Precis of *Mind and World*«, p. 366.

35

*Mind and World*, p. 10.

Mark A. Wrathall

### Nicht-rationale Grundlagen und nicht-begrifflicher Inhalt

*Die phänomenologische Tradition war lange Zeit der Auffassung, dass die natürliche Wahrnehmung weder begrifflich artikuliert ist noch von deterministischen Gesetzen beherrscht wird, sondern dass sie eher nach der praktisch artikulierten Struktur des körperlichen In-der-Welt-Seins organisiert ist. Dabei bleibt die Erklärung dafür problematisch, auf welche Art und Weise die Wahrnehmung dem Denken eine rechtfertigende Unterstützung bieten kann. Die Antwort der Phänomenologen lautet, dass es die bedeutungstragende (nicht aber begriffliche) Struktur der natürlichen Wahrnehmung ist, die uns ermöglicht, über Objekte nachzudenken, indem sie die einzelnen Gedanken über die Objekte motiviert, wie sie sich in der Wahrnehmung darstellen. Der Autor zeigt, welchen Ausweg aus den Sorgen der modernen Philosophie des Geistes dieser Standpunkt weist.*

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### Fondements non rationnels et contenus non conceptuels

*La tradition phénoménologique a longtemps considéré que la perception naturelle n'était ni actualisée conceptuellement ni régie par des lois déterministes, mais qu'elle était plutôt organisée d'après la structure pratiquement articulée de l'être-dans-le-monde physique. Or, cela laisse entier le problème d'explication de la façon dont la perception peut assurer un support justificatif à la pensée. La réponse de la phénoménologie est que c'est la structure significative (et non conceptuelle) de la perception naturelle qui nous permet de penser des objets en motivant nos pensées sur ces objets par la manière dont ils se présente à notre perception. Ce pont de vue permet de sortir des problèmes qui tourmentent la philosophie de l'esprit contemporaine.*