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Perceptual Attention and the Space of Reasons

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It is sometimes said that the source of direct perceptual knowledge of the world around us is peculiarly transparent. In Michael Ayers's words, such knowledge is "perspicuous in that one who has it knows how he knows what he knows" (1991, p. 183). What is the content of this immediate understanding we seem to have of the source of perceptual knowledge? And what is the role of perceptual experience in making that kind of understanding available? The classical answer is that the "perspicuity" of perceptual knowledge is grounded in the distinctive intelligibility of ratio- nal belief: experience provides us with justifying reasons, and our aware- ness of the reasons for which we hold a belief normally gives us a ready understanding of how we know what we know. In this chapter I present a line of objection to what I think is the most promising version of the clas- sical picture, John McDowell's account of the epistemic role of experi- ence. My objection is that the account cannot respect the role of perceptual attention in providing for perspicuous perceptual knowledge. My main claim will be that there is an inextricable link between two aspects of the role of perceptual attention: its role in grounding perceptual demonstra- tive thought and its role in yielding noninferential propositional knowl- edge. I argue that the link poses a challenge to McDowell's theory, and simultaneously provides support for an alternative account of the perspi- cuity of perceptual knowledge. The alternative account does not dispute that there is a deep connection between perspicuity and rationality, but it reverses the classical view of the connection: it holds that perceptual beliefs are rational in virtue of the more basic phenomenon of the perspi- cuity of perceptual knowledge.

1. RATIONALITY AND PERSPICUITY

At the beginning of the Transcendental Deduction, Kant writes: "But the combination (conjunctio) of a manifold in general can never come to us

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through the senses" (2007, A 95). McDowell disagrees. He holds that sensory experience has conceptual representational content. For example, a visual experience may represent a particular lemon as being yellow, where this involves a combination of a perceptual demonstrative, "this," and the concept "x is yellow." This kind of combination may come to us through the senses. Still, there is an important point of agreement between McDowell and Kant. A key feature of perceptual experience, as McDow- ell conceives it, is that it is noncommittal or "belief-independent." It is one thing for your experience to represent "this lemon" as being yellow; it is another for you to believe that it is yellow, or even just that it looks yellow. Combination, in the form of content capable of being true of false, may come to us through the senses, but commitment to the truth of the con- tent cannot. On McDowell's (to this extent) authentically Kantian view, commitment is the result of rational self-determination. In the perceptual case, McDowell takes this to be a matter of accepting the content of an experience on the basis of what one regards as a good reason; typically, the reason provided by the representational content of that very experience.

This analysis treats the perspicuity of perceptual knowledge as an (in some ways special) instance of a completely general phenomenon. As McDowell puts it, our responsiveness to reasons is in general "potentially reflective."1 When you infer that p from the fact that q, you will normally be able to articulate your reason for believing that p. If your belief that p constitutes knowledge, it will owe this status partly to its basis. So your ability to reflect on that basis in turn enables you to give a satisfactory account of how you know that p. On McDowell's analysis, perceptual knowledge exhibits the same structure. We can call this a two-step account of the perspicuity of perceptual

knowledge. The first step concerns the intelligibility of perceptual belief. The claim is that perceptual experience yields justifying reasons, our responsiveness to which is potentially reflec- tive. In other words, we are normally aware, or in a position to be aware, of the reasons for which we hold perceptual beliefs. This awareness, the second step adds, in turn enables us to give an account of how we know what we know on the basis of perceptual experience, provided, of course, that the relevant belief constitutes knowledge.

There can be no doubt that, if successful, this account would provide a powerful explanation of the role of conscious experience in yielding per- spicuous knowledge. For example, it would explain and vindicate the intuitive difference between sight and blindsight. Subjects with blindsight lack visual experience of their surroundings in part of the visual field, due to damage to the visual cortex, but they are still able to perform well on a number of visual tasks involving objects in the blind field. They are able to grasp such objects when induced to do so, and to make reliable discrim- inations when induced to guess. Now, consider the thought experiment of super-blindsight. Suppose a blindseer has acquired the disposition sponta- neously to issue guesses about objects in the blind field, and to accept their content. Suppose, further, that she is familiar with the concept of

blindsight, and can tell reliably whether a particular guess is based on blind- sight. When finding herself guessing that there is a yellow object before her, she immediately realizes that her guess is probably the product of her residual visual function, triggered by the presence of a yellow object in front of her. In a sense, the source of her visually based knowledge is trans- parent to her. Still, her situation seems to be quite unlike that of a subject who sees a lemon in good lighting conditions. One difference is that the super-blindseer's reflective understanding of her situation cannot but affect the source of her first-order knowledge. It provides her with powerful evi- dence for the correctness of what would otherwise just be a blind guess. It would be a remarkable feat of irrationality to continue to believe some- thing merely on the basis of a blind hunch when you have your hands on convincing evidence.2 So the super-blindseer's reflective understanding has a strong tendency to make her first-order knowledge dependent on infer- ence. On the other hand, if you see the lemon and in that way come to know that it is yellow, inference will normally not be part of the source of your knowledge.3 Importantly, your reflective understanding of the situa- tion is perfectly consistent with this. McDowell's analysis would make this point readily intelligible. On his analysis, your noninferential belief does not stand in need of evidential backup: qua perceptual belief it is held for a justifying reason, indeed a reason of a kind that's normally decisive. Your reflective understanding, unlike the super-blindseer's, has therefore no ten- dency to affect the source of your first-order knowledge.

All of this is in line with what might be called the "manifest image" of perceptual knowledge. We ordinarily take it that the source of perceptual knowledge is transparent to the perceiver; and we think of it as indepen- dent of inference. Where McDowell's account seems to depart from the manifest image is in giving no significant role to perceptual attention. I think this is no accident. There are two reasons perceptual attention is bound to look like a puzzling phenomenon from McDowell's point of view, both of them deeply rooted in his post-Kantian conception of the relation between experience and commitment.

One reason is that perceptual attention, as we ordinarily conceive it, is a relation to experienced objects (e.g., material objects, visual reflections, shadows, sounds, possibly regions of space, perhaps property instances, and much else). On McDowell's view, experience of mere objects is blind. Only representational content reveals what the world is like. In one of his attacks on the "Myth of the Given," he writes: "when we trace justifica- tions back, the last thing we come to is still a thinkable content; not some- thing more ultimate than that, a bare pointing to a bit of the Given" (McDowell, 1994, p. 29). To point at something is not to articulate a "thinkable content." Rather, pointing is a device for drawing attention to an experienced object. For McDowell, this makes a bare

pointing inade- quate to the task of displaying the source of perceptual knowledge. It would be a matter of offering "exculpations where we wanted justifica- tions" (1994, p. 8).

A second reason is that attending is an activity, whereas for McDowell the epistemic role of experience is closely tied to its passivity. Experience is a matter of "receptivity," of facts impinging on our sensibility. On this picture, there is a clear line to be drawn between the passive enjoyment of experience with conceptual content and the rational activity of endorsing or accepting what experience represents as being so. Now it's a striking fea- ture of perceptual attention that it is active and makes an immediate differ- ence to the sensory character of perceptual experience. From McDowell's point of view, this combination of features is baffling. The basis of per- ceptual knowledge is sensory but essentially passive. Its acquisition involves activity, but merely intellectual activity. What could be the point or the role of an activity that directly affects the sensory character of experience?

It is, of course, not obvious how to respond to these observations. One might argue that the role of attention, as represented by the manifest image of perceptual knowledge, is not actually very significant; or if it is, one might question the credentials of the manifest image. In the rest of this chapter, I defend an alternative response. I argue that we have to take the role of perceptual attention seriously, and that doing so should make us question not just McDowell's version but the very idea of a stepwise account. It should make us question the assumption that any distinctive epistemic role for perceptual experience would have to be traceable to it role in providing for epistemic justification. In the next section, I present my challenge to McDowell's account.4 I go on to sketch (section 3) and defend (section 4) an alternative account, the central claim of which is the following: it's the phenomenon of perceptual attention that makes "perspicuous" perceptual knowledge possible.

2. PERCEPTUAL ATTENTION AND CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

I begin with a brief review of three basic features of perceptual attention. They are familiar and relatively superficial, in as much as they are central elements of the commonsense psychology of perceptual attention. Still, articulating them is not a trivial task. In confronting that task, fortunately, we can rely on helpful discussions in the recent philosophical and psycho- logical literature. Just to have an illustrative example before us, consider a standard visual search task used in experiments on covert attention. You are asked to fixate on a central asterisk. This is surrounded by a number of letters, including the letter 'T'. The test question is whether there is a 'T' among the letters in the circle. It is a robust finding that subjects cannot answer this question straight away. To answer it you have to conduct a serial visual search, moving the "spotlight" of your (covert) attention from letter to letter until you discover the 'T' (Wolfe, 1998). In the current context, the example is no more than a dramatic device; nothing depends on the covert character of your attention to the 'T'. I focus on the case of

visual attention, but the features to be highlighted are arguably not unique to that case. My first point may be put by saying that perceptual attention is a sen- sory phenomenon. Perceptual attention is a relation to experienced things. It is selectively directed at particular items or regions that form part of an experienced scene or array. This contrasts with the sense in which one may be said to be attending to an object simply in virtue of thinking about the object, and with cases in which attention is merely occupied by some activity (See Martin, 1997; Peacocke, 1998). Furthermore, perceptual attention makes a difference to the sensory character of perceptual expe- rience. It seems compelling that as your attention moves around the circle of letters, the character of your experience mutates continuously. This is not because attention influences some parameter that in turn affects the character of your experience, as when you change your auditory experi- ence by turning up the volume. Rather, the direction of attention itself is an aspect of what your experience is like: to change the direction of atten- tion is to alter

the character of your experience.

Second, perceptually attending to something is an activity. It is common to contrast voluntary and involuntary attention, to characterize the latter as passive, and then to set it apart as a separate type of attention.5 But I think this can be misleading. The contrast between voluntary and invol- untary attention is a matter of the way attention is shifted. A shift of atten- tion can be intentional (as when you intend to scan the circle clockwise) or it can be involuntary (as when attention is grabbed by a sudden move- ment at the periphery of the visual field). But note that the involuntary character of a shift of attention does not imply that its result is anything other than the subject's being engaged in the activity of attending. It is consistent with the passivity of an involuntary shift of attention that the attending it prompts is intentional under some description (e.g. "looking to see what is happening"). Passivity may be a matter of an intention being acquired automatically, thanks to habit or evolution, rather than as part of some prior intentional project.6

These two points bring out something of the double aspect of percep- tual attention, as a simultaneously sensory and intentional phenomenon.7 The third point concerns the effects of perceptual attention. In the covert attention experiment, "your attention to the 'T' changed your ability to identify it as a 'T'" (Wolfe, 1998, p. 13). In John Campbell's helpful termi- nology, attention alters the functional role of experience.

> Attending to an object enables you to keep track of it over a period of time, to refer to it demonstratively, to answer questions about it, and to act intentionally on it. (Campbell, 2002, pp. 10–11)

Returning now to McDowell's account, I want to ask how we should understand the relation between perceptual attention and the putative conceptual content of experience. I think there are two possible views a defender of McDowell's account might take here. One is that perceptual attention should be seen as a mechanism by which experience acquires

conceptual content. Attention, on this view, plays a key role in qualifying experience to serve as a basis for perceptual belief. On the second view, perceptual attention merely plays some part in the acquisition of percep- tual belief. It's a matter of selecting a given conceptual content, as the subject matter for a belief or judgement. For ease of reference, let's call these views "early" versus "late selection" views, respectively.

The following passage might be read as encouraging the "early selec- tion" view:

> One's control over what happens in experience has limits: one can decide where to place oneself, at what pitch to tune one's attention, and so forth, but it is not up to one what, having done all that, one will experience. (McDowell, 1994, p. 10, n. 8)

The suggestion here seems to be that the activity of attending enables one to exercise a measure of control over the conceptual content of expe- rience. In a more recent discussion, though, McDowell seems to favour the "late selection" view. In that discussion, he likens the content of per- ceptual experience to an invitation to accept a proposition about the objective world. Whether one responds to the invitation, McDowell sug- gests, depends on the focus of attention. But attention does not affect the invitation itself. Indeed, he maintains that the direction of attention is a topic we do not "need to consider when we give a basic picture of percep- tual experience" (2002, p. 278).

I want to suggest that neither of the two views is satisfactory; and that this gives us a reason to reject McDowell's account of the relation between experience and knowledge. My argument relies on two premises. One is that the conceptual content of experience includes perceptual-demonstra- tive reference. It's hard to see how this could fail to be true if such content is to reveal to us what the world is like. For there can be no doubt that direct perceptual knowledge often, or even typically, involves perceptual demonstrative reference. And it would be mysterious, to say the least, how you could see directly, without inference, that "this lemon" is yellow on the basis of an experience informing you merely that there is a yellow lemon before you. I think the second premise is equally uncontroversial. It is that attending to an object is a prerequisite of

perceptual demonstrative refer- ence to it. The covert attention task provides a compelling illustration. The work of attention is not just to enable you to identify the letter as a 'T'. It's not as if you need to attend to the thing merely in order to answer the question "What is that?" You have to attend to it to so much as grasp the question. In some sense, you may have been enjoying a visual experience of the 'T' all along. But it's not until you attend to it that your experience provides you with the ability to think about it demonstratively.8

The two premises put immediate pressure on the "late selection" version of McDowell's account. They suggest that perceptual attention is an enabling condition of conceptual content—at least perceptual demonstra- tive content. If this is right, the role of attention can't be confined to that

of selecting content, as the subject matter for judgement and belief. At least in relation to perceptual demonstrative content, defenders of McDowell's account would be well-advised to adopt the "early selection" version.9

Now recall Campbell's list of the effects of perceptual attention. Attending to an object enables you to keep track of it over a period of time, to refer to it demonstratively, to answer questions about it, and to act intentionally on it. On the "early selection" version of McDowell's view, we can divide the items on this list into two groups. On the one hand, there are cognitive abilities we acquire straightaway by attending to objects, e.g. the capacity for demonstrative reference. On the other hand, there are abilities that reflect cognitive commitments, acquired not just by attending to an object but by accepting the representational content of perceptual experience. This second group includes the ability to answer questions about an object and to act on it intentionally.

The idea of such a division looks innocuous so long as we consider particular examples. One may consistently come to believe that "this lemon is not the colour it looks to be." What this brings out, you might say, is that demonstrative reference is one thing, acceptance of the represen- tational content of the experience another. What is not clear, however, is whether that distinction can be sustained as a matter of complete gener- ality, as McDowell's account contends. In general terms, I think the prob- lem here is that grasp of a perceptual demonstrative cannot be separated from the ability to make a certain kind of use of it in reasoning, and that this latter ability is inseparable from certain commitments concerning the reference of the demonstrative. One way to see the problem is by consid- ering the role of attention in sustaining perceptual demonstrative refer- ence over a period of time.

Consider the following inference, involving several uses of a perceptual demonstrative: That is F. That is G. Therefore, that is both F and G.

As John Campbell has argued, we ordinarily assume that such infer- ences can be valid as they stand, even if the uses of the perceptual demon- strative in articulating the premises are separated by an interval of time. In Campbell's terms, we assume that we have the right to "trade on the iden- tity of reference" of several uses of a demonstrative (Campbell 1994, pp. 86–88). The inference does not require an extra premise, to the effect that the uses of "that" in the first two premises refer to the same thing. Now intuitively what gives us the right to "trade on identity" is our ability to keep track of the relevant object. Keeping attention focused on an object over a period of time often provides for a temporally extended grasp of a single perceptual demonstrative referring to it, where this means that unless there is evidence to the contrary we are entitled to "trade on identity."

The reason appeal to attention is so natural here is that keeping atten- tion focused on something over a period of time normally makes the per- sistence of a single object manifest to you. In other words, it yields direct propositional knowledge of the numerical identity over time of a single object. If the right to "trade on identity" is an integral element of tempo- rally extended perceptual demonstrative thought, such knowledge is integral to it also. The trouble with this, from McDowell's point of view, is

that it undermines the idea that the effects of attention can be grouped into two separate classes. It implies that the putatively "noncommittal" con- ceptual content of experience is inseparable from commitments concern- ing the existence and persistence of objects of perceptual demonstrative reference. Therefore, such commitments cannot, as a completely general matter, be interpreted as the result of the subject's rational responsiveness to "belief-independent" conceptual content. At least insofar as conceptual content involves the ability to think about an object demonstratively, it also involves propositional knowledge, and hence belief.

A defender of McDowell's view might insist that the sense in which experience has to make the persistence of a single object manifest to us if it is to ground temporally extended perceptual demonstrative thinking should itself be interpreted in "belief-independent" terms. The idea here would be that it's one thing to enjoy the right to "trade on identity," it's another to be disposed to exercise that right. Suppose you observe an object over a period of time, keeping track of it all the while. But suppose you doubt you are successful in tracking a single thing. You suspect there has been an unnoticed substitution, or even a series of substitutions. Your experience, it might be said, still makes the persistence of the object man- ifest to you, providing you with a grasp of a perceptual demonstrative and the right to trade on identity. It's just that, given your scruples, you are not disposed to exercise that right. You do grasp the temporally extended perceptual demonstrative identification, as you have to if it is to be part of the conceptual content of your experience. But you cannot coherently make any active use of the demonstrative, not even in describing visual appearances. The question, though, is whether you can be credited with a grasp of the perceptual demonstrative if you are not disposed to make any use of it. According to McDowell himself, you cannot. He emphasizes that conceptual capacities that are "in play in experience" would not be "recognizable as conceptual capacities at all unless they could also be exercised in active thinking" (1994, p. 11). This seems plausible. Under- standing a perceptual demonstrative requires a grasp of its role in infer- ence. But it's hard to see what the latter might come to, if you are not disposed to deploy the demonstrative in active thinking. Of course, it might be said that you are in fact disposed to use the demonstrative, even though when using it, you incorrectly take yourself to be using two (or more) distinct perceptual demonstratives. For example, you may think, cautiously, "it looks as if this were the same as that", when in fact "this' and "that" express the same demonstrative mode of presentation. However, in

these circumstances the attribution to you of a single temporally extended perceptual demonstrative would not be warranted. Your use of "this" and "that" could reflect no grasp of the inferential role of such a demonstra- tive, given that you don't regard the relevant inferences as valid as they stand.

The upshot is that by undermining your belief in the existence of a single object, your scepticism simultaneously precludes you from grasping a "dynamic" perceptual demonstrative identification of it. Insofar as the conceptual content of experience involves perceptual demonstratives, it cannot be wholly divorced from cognitive commitments concerning per- ceived objects. This point reinforces doubts expressed by others about McDowell's account of the passivity of experience. It suggests that, in Barry Stroud's words, "in being 'saddled' with content one is 'saddled' with assent to or affirmation of that content, or at least of some content of other" (Stroud, 2002, p. 87). What Kant perhaps saw (and I think McDow- ell missed) is that if we allow that "combination," in the form of concep- tual content involving perceptual demonstratives, "comes to us through the senses," we cannot simultaneously insist that cognitive commitments, such as perceptual beliefs, can not come to us through the senses (alone) but must be the result of the subject's exercise of rational self-determination. On the other hand, I think McDowell is right that conceptual content does "come to us through the senses" alone (something Kant is arguably committed to denying). So we have to accept the consequence, that per- ception directly affects our cognitive commitments about the world, bypassing the power of rational self-determination. It's not that the

latter has no role to play. We can discard a perceptual belief on the basis of suit- able evidence. But appeal to that minimal point alone is not much help in understanding the epistemic role of perceptual experience.

3. THE EPISTEMIC ROLE OF PERCEPTUAL ATTENTION

I have argued that there is an inextricable link between two aspects of the way attention changes the functional role of experience: attending to experienced objects simultaneously yields demonstrative thought and propositional knowledge. This is what makes it hard to see how the con- ceptual content of experience can play the role assigned to it in McDow- ell's account of perceptual knowledge. I now want to suggest that the link also holds a more constructive lesson. It suggests an alternative way to think about the epistemic role of experience, including its role in making the source of perceptual knowledge transparent to us.

Here is one difference between sight and blindsight. In both cases, sub- jects are able to answer questions about their environment; and in both cases, they have to do something to produce the answer. Blindseers hazard a guess, ordinarily sighted subjects attend to experienced objects.10 These are both intentional activities, and both involve the kind of knowledge we

usually have of our own intentional actions. But there is a key difference. Visually attending enables the subject to identify the experienced object demonstratively, and this ability is in turn naturally used in articulating what she is doing: a subject of visual experience may reflect "I'm attending to (or watching or observing) this." And of course she'll be able to produce detailed descriptions of the objects of her perceptual attention ("I'm observing this yellow lemon" or "I am watching those deer grazing on the green grass"), corresponding to the detailed knowledge of the world around her provided by her experience. I suggest this provides the begin- nings of an explanation of how experience makes the source of perceptual knowledge transparent to us.11 The subject's awareness of observing "this" yellow lemon makes it evident to her how she is in a position to see (and hence, know) that the lemon is yellow. For it involves an awareness that the subject enjoys a visual experience of the lemon. And we normally take it that seeing a yellow object may enable us to see (and hence, know) that the object is yellow. Certainly a blindseer will be aware of guessing that something is yellow. But that awareness leaves it quite unclear what made her guess "yellow" rather than, say, "red"; and it fails to make it intelligible to her how she knows that the thing is yellow.

To develop this further, more needs to be said about the way seeing objects can put one in a position to see that objects are a certain way. The first point to note here is that there are a variety of ways in which percep- tual experience can help to make knowledge intelligible. Spotting your neighbour's car may enable you to see that she is at home. Contemplating the piano may enable you to see that it will not fit through the door. In the first case, a full account of the source of your knowledge will mention inference. In the second case, it may have to mention a certain kind of imaginative exercise. But arguably the most basic case is this. Seeing an object may enable you to see that it has a certain feature or falls under some general type, provided you have a suitable recognitional capacity (and certain sorts of background conditions are met, e.g., you have no evidence that you are misperceiving). A crucial feature of this basic case is that the exercise of the recognitional capacity is intelligible to the sub- ject herself, in the light of her experience. Compare and contrast a case where this latter condition is not met. Someone with a rudimentary form of perfect pitch may be able to recognize an F# when he hears it, but deny that the tone sounds to him like an F#. His recognitional ability presents itself to him as a matter of reliable hunches. While the case differs from blindsight in one way—the subject's experience of the tone plays a role in grounding his ability to answer questions about it—it is akin to blindsight in that the subject is unable to account for that ability. Correlatively, his reflective knowledge that his hunches are reliable will tend to make his knowledge of pitches inferential. In contrast, when you see a lemon, your experience of the lemon makes your ability to recognize its colour and its kind intelligible to you. As you may put it, the thing looks yellow, and it looks like a

lemon. Once again, though, we should allow that there is

more than one kind of case. The colour of an object makes an immediate difference to the character of your visual experience of the object. So there is an immediate connection between the property and the nature of the experience that makes your ability to recognize the property intelligible. In the case of seeing something to be a lemon, the connection is less imme- diate. That the object is a lemon is arguably not part of what constitutes the character of your visual experience of it. Nevertheless, your recogni- tional capacity can be intelligible to you through its dependence on certain lower-level features of the object that do make an immediate difference to your experience—for example, its characteristic lemony colour and shape.

These sketchy remarks will have to do for current purposes.12 I now want to look at an objection that suggests the whole idea of making knowledge intelligible in terms of experience of objects alone must be hopeless. As mentioned earlier, McDowell is sceptical about the idea that a "bare pointing" could display the source of perceptual knowledge. In his view, appeal to "thinkable content" is indispensable: experience of mere objects would provide "exculpations where we need justifications."

4. PERSPICUITY AND RATIONALITY

Recall McDowell's "stepwise" explanation of the perspicuity of percep- tual knowledge. A justifying reason provided by someone's perceptual experience can be the reason for which she believes that p. What the reason makes intelligible is primarily her belief that p. If the belief qualifies as knowledge, appeal to the justifying reason will also serve to answer the question "How does she know that p?" The explanation sketched in the last section is not "stepwise" in this way. Someone's visual experience of a yellow object, I suggested, may enable her to see (and hence, know) that the object is yellow. What we make intelligible by invoking her experi- ence, on this analysis, is not her holding a certain belief but her perceiving that something is the case (which entails that she knows it to be the case). Now McDowell's claim that "we need justifications" may be construed as an insistence on a stepwise explanation. In a moment, I will argue that understood in this way, the requirement is less plausible (and more revi- sionist) than McDowell makes out. But first I want to set out what I think is a natural alternative construal of the justification requirement. Under that construal, I want to suggest, perceptual experience of objects can after all be seen to provide justifications.

Suppose you see a lemon and in that way come to see that it is yellow. And suppose you find your knowledge of the lemon's colour intelligible in terms of the fact that you are visually attending to the lemon. Suppose, finally, that you assert "that lemon is yellow," and, challenged how you know this, reply "I can see the lemon—it's right there before my eyes, and lighting conditions couldn't be better." Now a request for an account of how you know something you have asserted is, in one sense, a request for

a justification. Part of the background to the request may be that we would like to be reassured that it is knowledge you are expressing rather than conjecture. A satisfactory answer to the question of how you know would give us a good reason to believe that you do know. In other words, "I see it" can provide a justification for your claim to knowledge. Sup- posing that assertions normally aim to express knowledge, there is a sense in which "I can see it" would provide a justification for your assertion. This suggests a natural way to fill out Sellars's idea that attributions of knowl- edge "place episodes or states 'in the logical space of reasons,'" the space "of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (McDowell, 2009, p. 256). Appeal to experience of objects may enable one to justify what one says, by justifying one's claim to knowledge. Of course, this is not quite what McDowell means when he insists that "we need justifications." He is interested in the justification of perceptual beliefs, not merely in the justification of claims to perceptual knowledge. But the latter may bear on the former. Beliefs can be intelligible in terms of more than one sort of causal factor. Your belief that the lemon is yellow is explained by your experience of the lemon. (For the

latter enables you to see that the lemon is yellow, which involves believing it to be yellow.) This explanation does not mention justifying reasons. But the following may also be a significant causal factor. Given your reflective awareness of the source of your knowledge, you think that you see, and know, that the lemon is yellow—which, in turn, gives you a reason to believe that the lemon is yellow. This "top-down" rational explanation cannot provide an illuminating independent account of how you know that the lemon is yellow. After all, it draws precisely on your understanding of the source of your knowledge. But this does not diminish its significance. One context in which the causal relevance of this factor becomes apparent is when we try to talk someone out of a first-order belief. If we want to stop you believing that the lemon is yellow, it's no use simply telling you that it is not yellow. We won't be making any progress until we somehow manage to shake your confidence that you see it to be yellow.

This kind of top-down rational influence suggests one way to read, and vindicate, McDowell's suggestion that "our perceptual based beliefs are intelligible as manifestations of rationality" (2009, p. 127). McDowell favours an alternative construal. He assumes that an account of the ratio- nal basis of a perceptual belief has to focus on the way perception explains the "epistemic status" of perceptual beliefs, as the stepwise account does. It has to make intelligible the nature of "perceptual warrant." A detailed examination of this assumption is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. Although the assumption is widespread, I think its sources are not particularly well understood. One reason for its popularity may sim- ply be the (I think mistaken) impression that there is no alternative. A more interesting source, relevant in McDowell's case, may be the post- Kantian conviction that knowledge is a "status" that has to be actively earned by complying with the norms of rationality.

But the source I want to consider here is simply a resistance to dogma- tism. There seems to be something suspect about relying on sources of knowledge that can't be vindicated and rendered intelligible in terms of the way beliefs flowing from it meet the general conditions for knowl- edge. Of course, it follows trivially that if X is a source of propositional knowledge and Y is a necessary condition of beliefs counting as knowl- edge, then X is a source of beliefs that meet Y. But if our reliance on some putative source of knowledge is to be intellectually responsible, it might be said, we need to understand the link between X and Y, and we need understand it in a way that does not simply help itself to the assumption that X is a source of knowledge. This secures a certain explanatory pri- ority for the notion of belief: if X counts as a source of knowledge this will always be in virtue of the independently ascertainable fact that X is a source of beliefs meeting Y. If the notion of belief is to enjoy this sort of explanatory priority, attributions of belief must enjoy a similar priority. If we want to determine whether any of our beliefs in some domain consti- tute knowledge, we first have to identify the beliefs in question. Attribu- tions of belief are merely a psychological matter. The epistemological question of whether any of the beliefs in question constitute knowledge is a separate, substantive issue, to be addressed by determining whether they meet the relevant conditions for knowledge.

I want to suggest that the dual role of attention in grounding percep- tual demonstrative beliefs and providing for direct perceptual knowledge casts doubt on the feasibility of this project. We can put the point in terms of the commitments incurred by an interpreter. In thinking of someone as having a perceptual demonstrative belief about a particular material object, we are committed to thinking of her as being able to identify the object demonstratively, and as having this ability by virtue of her experi- ential encounter with the object. We also have to attribute to her the ability to attend perceptually to the object. If the belief in question involves temporally extended demonstrative thought, we have to think of the subject as being able to keep attention focused on the object over a period of time. The rationale for these commitments is that perceptual attention is what enables us to understand perceptual demonstratives. But it's not clear that this commitment can be completely separated from the idea that perceptual experience is a source of propositional knowledge, too. One reason to think it cannot is

this: we think of experience as the source of the right to trade on identity, and therefore as a source of knowl- edge of the numerical identity of an object over a stretch of time. Of course, one's experience may be illusory in numerous ways, but if it is to sustain perceptual demonstrative identification at all, it has to single out the object and make it possible to keep track of it. So it must yield at least some bits of propositional knowledge.

This analysis of the relation between knowledge of reference and prop- ositional knowledge would require much further development and defence. But suppose it can be developed and defended. This would not

mean that it's impossible to meet the demand to vindicate and explain the epistemic role of experience in terms of its role in yielding beliefs that meet certain general conditions for knowledge. But I think it would sug- gest that the demand is not quite as significant as is often assumed. For if the analysis is right, it would turn out that we could not consistently hold that we have perceptual demonstrative beliefs, but return a negative ver- dict on whether perceptual experience enables us to know that at least some of these beliefs are true. That's not to say that we have to conclude that perceptual experience is in fact a source of knowledge. But it means that a negative verdict would take with it much more than we bargained for. It would disable us from seeing ourselves as having even perceptual demonstrative beliefs. This would in a way dispel the worry about dogma- tism, though not by vindicating the epistemic role of experience through an analysis of "perceptual warrant," but by suggesting that the charge of dogmatism could not get off the ground. The problem is supposed to be that while experience is undoubtedly a source of certain sorts of belief, it may be intellectually irresponsible to treat it as a source of knowledge. But if the present argument can be made good, one could not rationally acknowledge the "psychological" role of experience without also endorsing its epistemological role.13

5. ATTENTION AND PERCEPTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

I want to conclude by relating my main suggestion to a fascinating ques- tion sometimes discussed in the literature on attention: the question what kind of sense, if any, we can make of the possibility of a perceptual con- sciousness not structured by attention. What if anything would be wrong with an "attention-free consciousness"?14 One traditional response to this has been that the condition would be maladaptive. As the psychologist T. Ribot put it, "(a)ny animal so organized that the impressions of the exter- nal world were all of equal significance to it, in whose consciousness all impressions stood upon the same level, without any single one predomi- nating or inducing any single one motory adaptation, would be exceedingly ill-equipped for its own preservation" (quoted in Evans, 1970, p. 81). According to this response, experience without perceptual attention— without the "predominance of useful sensations" (p. 82)—would be some- thing of a hindrance, but there is no deep reason to think it would not be an intelligible form of experience, or could not "put us in touch" with the world around us.

Russell claimed there was such a reason. In a discussion of "neutral monism," he argued that if perceptual consciousness involved "an evenly diffused light, not the central illumination fading away into outer darkness" (1956, p. 169), acquaintance with objects would be impossible. As a con- sequence, "emphatic particulars"—such as "this"—would not be available: perceptual demonstrative identification would be impossible "without the

selectiveness of mind" (p. 169). Under Russell's analysis, the idea of an "attention- free" perceptual consciousness bears, in one respect, a striking resemblance to blindsight. Subjects of such consciousness might still, in some sense, be said to perceive the world around them. For example, they might still exploit perception in answering questions about nearby objects. But their experience would not present them with objects in such a way as to make demonstrative thought possible.

Russell's diagnosis has considerable intuitive force. It's hard to see how experience

without attention could enable us to discriminate objects from their surroundings, or single them out, in the way needed for demon- strative reference. Intuitively, perceptual attention plays an indispensable role in providing us with a grasp of which object we are referring to. Fur- thermore, as we have seen, without the ability to keep attention focused on an object over a period of time, on the face of it, temporally extended demonstrative thought would be impossible. These intuitions have been developed, in different ways, by Evans and Campbell. Suppose that they can be defended. Now if attention-free experience would be akin to blindsight in one respect—in that it could not ground demonstrative thought—it's natural to ask whether it would be like blindsight in another respect, too—viz., whether it could be a source of "perspicuous" percep- tual knowledge.

On McDowell's view, it's not easy to see why not. An attention-free perceptual consciousness could still represent the world as being a certain way, and thus provide the subject with justifying reasons for taking the world to be that way. Knowledge acquired on this basis would be perspic- uous in virtue of the rational intelligibility of the subject's perceptual beliefs. This knowledge would not involve perceptual demonstratives. But perhaps that just goes to show that there can be dissociations between the two key aspects of the explanatory role of perceptual experience—its role in grounding demonstrative thought and its role in yielding "perspicuous" perceptual knowledge. The two aspects are in principle independent of each other.

I have argued against this view and in favour of the idea that the two aspects are essentially interdependent. I've made two main points. First, if perceptual experience is to ground temporally extended demonstrative thought, it must be a source of (at least some) propositional knowledge. Second, I have suggested that it's our awareness of attending to demon- stratively identifiably objects that makes the source of perceptual knowl- edge transparent to us. If this is right, then a subject of an attention-free perceptual consciousness should not be able not enjoy ordinary "perspic- uous" perceptual knowledge. But why not? Suppose her perceptual expe- rience enables her, straight away, to answer questions about her environment, without any need to "change the functional role" of her ex- perience by attending. Why should it be impossible for her to be aware of how she knows what she knows? It's of course not easy to imagine what it would be like for her to answer questions on the basis of perception.

If James is right, her consciousness would be "a gray chaotic indiscrimi- nateness, impossible for us even to conceive" (1890/1981, p. 403). What seems clear is that whatever sort of activity would be involved in de- scribing a perceived scene, it would not include attending to any of the perceived items. So the descriptions of the perceived scene the subject would be producing would not be intelligible to her as resulting from that activity. And this, in turn, means that the connection between the descrip- tions and her perceptual experience would not be apparent to her, either. She may have reason to think that it's probably her experience that enables her to answer questions correctly. But whether this is so would be a further question, not settled simply by virtue of the way she goes about answering them. It is here that I think we find another point of compar- ison between an attention-free perceptual consciousness and blindsight. In James's words, selective interest alone gives "intelligible perspective" (1890/1981, p. 402).

Notes

A draft of this chapter was presented at a workshop on attention in Dubrovnik in May 2009. I'm grateful to the participants for helpful discussion, and to the edi- tors for detailed and extremely useful comments on a later draft.

1. CompareMcDowell'scharacterizationof"spontaneity"as'potentiallyreflec- tive responsiveness to putative norms of reason' (1994, p. 182).

2. This is not to say that it is only through such inferences that super-blind- sight can yield knowledge. An unreflective super-blindseer may be said to be able to acquire knowledge simply by virtue of her sheer reliability. This would not af- fect the point I am making, which concerns a super-blindseer capable of making sense of her

guesswork: my point is that her understanding of the situation would affect the source of her knowledge.
3. Of course, you'll normally be able to formulate numerous relevant infer- ences. You might mention the fact that the object is a lemon and that most lemons are yellow, or that it looks yellow and that things tend to be the colour they look. It might have been on the basis of either, or both, of these inferences that you came to know about the colour of the lemon, but this would be an unusual case. In an ordinary case, it would be incorrect to appeal to any of these inferences in an account of how you know that the lemon is yellow.
4. I should make it explicit that the argument will only apply to a "conceptu- alist" version of the two-step account of perspicuity. The rest of the chapter, though, is relevant to "nonconceptualist" versions too, as it seeks to undermine the general motivation for a two-step account.
5. Compare James's influential discussion of "passive sensorial attention" (1890/1981, p. 416).
6. That you may not want to attend to the stimulus in question would be no decisive objection to this account. Not wanting to whistle a certain tune need not prevent you from doing so incessantly and intentionally. It would be a more se- rious objection if there were evidence that involuntary shifts of attention are "truly automatic, in the sense of being completely unsuppressible." (Pashler, 1998, p. 244) If this were so, it might suggest that involuntary attention is a non-active phenomenon rather than a non-deliberate activity. The point would deserve a

more detailed discussion. But in any case, Pashler's review suggests that there is, in fact, no evidence to support the view of involuntary shifts of attention as "truly automatic".
7. For a graphic statement of this double aspect, compare Daniel Kahne- mann's and Avishai Henik's suggestion that the "enduring fascination with the problem of attention can perhaps be traced to the Jamesian account of the nature of selective attention as a pure act of will which controls experience." (1981, p. 201; I owe the quote to Eilan, 1998, p. 192).
8. The link between attention and perceptual demonstrative reference has been emphasized by Gareth Evans (1982, esp. pp. 174–75) and John Campbell (2002, passim).
9. There is obviously room for a "mixed view," on which conceptual content is partly pre-attentive and partly (insofar as it involves demonstratives) requires attention. But this makes no difference to the current argument, which is con- cerned specifically with perceptual demonstrative content.
10. See Eilan (1998) for illuminating discussion of perceptual attention as a distinctive means of answering questions about the environment. See also the discussion of "interrogative attention" in Evans (1970, chap. 3).
11. The suggestion here is that the absence of "perspicuous" knowledge in blindsight is closely linked to the unavailability in blindsight of perceptual demon- strative identification. Sean Kelly has recently questioned the latter. He argues that is not "patently absurd" to think that a super-blindseer could be in a position to know "which object he [was] non-consciously detecting," and concludes that conscious awareness is not necessary for demonstrative reference. (2004, p. 284) The conclusion only follows, though, if the super-blindseer's knowledge of which object he is detecting provides her with more than a descriptive identification of the object. But intuitively, it's hard to see how the identifications available to him could fail to be descriptive. I think the rationale for this intuition, in a nutshell, is that the sort of identification available to him would be meaningful independently of the presence and existence of the identified object. In a "hallucinatory" opera- tion of super-blindsight, the subject would still be able to grasp the relevant iden- tification, even if nothing answers to it. In contrast, perceptual demonstrative identification is "existence-dependent." (I'm grateful to Declan Smithies for pressing this point.)
12. See Roessler (in press) for slightly more detailed discussion, and Campbell (chap.

14, this volume) for an opposing view. See also Stroud (in press) for related discussion.
13. For further discussion, see Roessler (2009). As will be obvious to anyone familiar with Barry Stroud's pioneering work on transcendental arguments, the structure of the argument, and the dialectical role envisaged for it, are closely modelled on Stroud's conception of modest transcendental arguments (see Stroud, 2000, esp. chap. 11 and 13).
14. For illuminating discussion of the notion of an "attention-free conscious- ness", see Evans (1970, chap. 3)

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