

Perceptual knowledge and the 'activity' of belief

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Abstract

In this chapter I discuss a challenge to the influential view that believing something belongs to the 'active side' of the human mind insofar as it implicates capacities for 'rational agency' or 'rational self-determination'. Advocates of the Activity thesis (as I call it) set great store by our practice of holding each other accountable for what we believe. My question is whether they have distorted that practice by ignoring the role knowledge can play in providing credentials for belief. I articulate the challenge and then consider various lines of response to it. I conclude by suggesting that there may be no single illuminating distinction to be drawn between activity and passivity in the mind (but rather a number of sundry distinctions).

For as the Philosopher says, it is a weakness of intellect to search for reason in cases where we have sensation, since one should not search for a reason for the thing we possess that is more valuable (*dignius*) than reason. — Henry of Ghent, *Summa quaestionum ordinarium*, art. 1, q. 1

Recent work on the nature of our responsibility for what we believe is marked by a broad consensus on a basic question and a variety of opinions on how to develop the consensus view. It is widely agreed that since we can appropriately be held answerable for what we believe, there must be a sense in which we are 'active' in relation to our current beliefs. Believing something, according to the consensus view, involves an exercise of 'rational agency' or 'self-determination'. I will call this the Activity thesis (AT). A multitude of different suggestions have been aired about how to understand the operative sense of 'activity' or 'self-determination'. For some, the essence of the matter lies in the relation between belief and active deliberation, or in the 'deliberative stance' we are said to occupy *vis-à-vis* our own current beliefs. (Moran 2001) Others focus on what they see as the central role of acts of judging in the formation of beliefs, with different accounts having been proposed of the nature of such acts. (McDowell 1994, 1998a; McHugh 2013) Yet

others suggest that there is a sense in which believing itself — a state, not an event or process — amounts to a rational activity. (Boyle 2009a, 2011)

In what follows I want to connect the question of the sense (if any) in which believing may be said to be ‘active’ with a topic that has been conspicuous by its absence from recent discussions of that question: the relationship between belief and propositional knowledge. Two major contributions to the two areas — Timothy Williamson’s *Knowledge and its Limits* and Richard Moran’s *Authority and Estrangement* — were published within a year of each other, but despite the temporal proximity, there has been little interaction between the debates generated by these works. One might find this surprising, simply insofar as both debates are concerned with the nature of belief. Still, it is a good question whether there are any substantive connections between the two debates. Might they simply be orthogonal to each other? I want to suggest that they are not. Current work on AT, so I will try to show, is informed by a contentious conception of the relation between two kinds of questions: ‘Why do you believe that p?’ and ‘How do you know that p?’ Roughly speaking, the unspoken assumption in this work is that the former question enjoys a certain explanatory priority. Focusing on the case of perceptual knowledge/perceptual belief¹, and drawing on work by Williamson, Alan Millar and Barry Stroud, I will argue that the ‘belief-first’ approach taken for granted by proponents of AT distorts a central area of our ordinary practice of questioning and vindicating beliefs.

Friends of AT, I think, have always tended to feel some unease about perceptual beliefs. The way we come to believe, or the way we judge, that something is so when we non-inferentially perceive that it is so is not, intuitively, a shining example of our occupation of a ‘deliberative stance’ or of exercising the power of making up one’s mind about some question. If the argument of this chapter is on the right lines, the sense of unease is apt but has been widely misconstrued. The problem is not that

¹ I think the case of perceptual knowledge and belief most clearly illustrates the issue I want to raise, but the issue may not be peculiar to that case. For example, beliefs and knowledge reflecting the operation of memory, and perhaps testimony, may raise analogous issues.

perception yields reasons for belief that are so compelling as to make explicit deliberation superfluous, or (differently) that perceptual beliefs are caused by non-rational mechanisms. Rather, the case of perceptual beliefs looks awkward because such beliefs are in a sense derivative or secondary. In the words of Henry of Ghent quoted at the beginning, we ordinarily take it that, in the best cases, perceptual experience gives us something ‘more valuable’ (2002: 98) than beliefs or even reasons for belief: it gives us (direct) knowledge. Of course, by giving us knowledge, perception *also* gives us belief. But the ground of such beliefs does not lie in our free responsiveness to reasons. It lies in our ability to perceive and thus know what objects around us are like.

The bulk of the chapter (sections 2-4) is devoted to developing Henry’s challenge (as I will call it) and examining two lines of response. I start with a brief review of the target of the challenge. I conclude by considering (all too briefly) where the challenge leaves us.

1. The Activity Thesis

David Owens writes: ‘(i)n the end, it is *the world* which determines what (and whether) I believe, not *me*. When I reach a conclusion by means of evidence, one external fact is convincing me of another (..). Where is *my* input at this final stage?’ (2000: 12) It seems right that when ‘one external fact is convincing me of another’, there is a sense in which I submit to the force of the evidence and so might be said to be passive. Advocates of AT, I take it, will be happy to grant this.² They will acknowledge that if all goes well, it is indeed the world that determines what I believe. Their point is that the world does not, in such cases, act on its own, but jointly with my assessment or recognition of the probative value of the evidence. My coming to believe what I do reflects my *judgement* as to what I have reason to believe. This is so even in cases in which, as I recognize, my evidence is conclusive. And there is a sense — compatible with the element of passivity just alluded to — in which in exercising my judgement, I myself determine what I believe. As Boyle puts

² See for example Gary Watson’s discussion of Owens’s view, in Watson 2004: 144.

it, a believer's 'condition is thus active or self-determined in an intelligible sense: its ground lies in her accepting the rational correctness of this very condition.' (2011: 22)

What is the relationship between the claim that there is this distinctive explanatory structure — that the 'grounds' of our beliefs lie in our appraisal of our reasons for belief — and the claim that beliefs are (sometimes? typically? potentially?) acquired by performing certain kinds of acts or carrying out certain activities? As indicated earlier, the literature presents a variety of perspectives on this question. For current purposes, we need not try to resolve the matter, but I would like to highlight two points which, I think, are common ground among most recent adherents of AT. One is that the sense of 'activity' germane to beliefs is to be distinguished from the notion of *voluntary* activity. A helpful framework for marking this is to draw a distinction between a genus and several species of the notion of activity. (See Boyle 2009a for this way of framing AT.) The sense in which we are active in relation to our beliefs is in some ways analogous to the case of voluntary activity, and reflection on the analogies enables us to see the two cases as instantiating a common genus. That is compatible, however, with acknowledging significant 'specific differences'. For example, it would be a mistake to characterize the genus by reference to the notion of the will or by reference to our responsiveness to practical reasons.³ And perhaps we should allow that not all ways of being 'active' share the same temporal profile (for example, they may not always involve the occurrence of events or the unfolding of processes).

A second area of common ground concerns the rationale for AT. The most promising way to support the thesis, many would agree, develops, not from introspective scrutiny of what tends to happen when we come to believe something, but from

³ Advocates of AT have a tendency (in my view) to sail close to the wind by characterizing the 'activity' of belief in terms that have their home in the sphere of choice and voluntary control. For example, what we believe is said to be 'up to us', we are said to be able 'take charge' (or 'control') of our beliefs, even to enjoy 'discretion' over them. Possibly such phrases can be heard in a 'generic' sense, implying not decision or voluntary control but merely responsibility and rational self-determination. In any case, I take it their use is not mandatory.

reflection on the way we engage with each other's beliefs in our ordinary dialectical practice.⁴ The point is often put by saying that we are 'answerable' (or appropriately 'held answerable') for our beliefs. As I argue in the next section, just what this means is a less straightforward matter than is sometimes assumed. But the basic idea is highly intuitive. Beliefs are akin to intentional actions — and quite *unlike* sensations — in that they are familiar, intelligible targets of questions that have a distinctive normative import. 'What makes you think there are rabbits in the garden?' is not asking for a detached, neutral record of the etiology of your belief. A good answer would show why you are *right* to believe what you do. If you can give no such answer (say, it turns out you mistook a squirrel for a rabbit), you would be expected to revise your first-order belief, demonstrating that the 'ground' of your belief lies in your normative judgement about its 'rational correctness'. The standard route to AT, then, consists of two moves. First, the observation that we hold each other answerable for our beliefs is spelled out in terms of the idea that we believe what we do for normative reasons as we see them. In turn, that kind of intelligibility is said to implicate a form of self-determination (hence a species of 'activity'). Put schematically:

Answerability → reasons → self-determination

McDowell puts the latter move as follows:

We should make sense of the idea of believing for reasons, like the idea of acting for reasons, in the context of the idea of a subject who can take charge of her beliefs and actions — hence, a subject who can step back from candidate reasons and acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge their cogency. (McDowell 2001: 183)

⁴ This has an obvious bearing on the status of AT. Typically, in contemporary work, the thesis is intended not as a (possibly revisionary) philosophical theory but as an articulation and affirmation of our pre-theoretical view of belief, as a state intelligible 'at the personal level'.

One might object that ‘stepping back’ from a ‘candidate reason’ is not something we routinely do. Doing so is time-consuming and can divert attention from more pressing concerns.⁵ We usually seem to respond to reasons without any such critical reflection. AT, in the familiar ugly phrase, might be said to ‘overintellectualize’ the way we ordinarily come to believe what we do. McDowell’s response, I take it, would be that while we only ‘freely’ adopt a belief when we engage in the occurrent activity of ‘making up our minds what to think’⁶, our *capacity* to do so has a wider significance. For believing something is an ‘actualization of capacities of a kind (..) whose paradigmatic mode of actualization is in the exercise of freedom that judging is’. (McDowell 1998a: 434) An alternative response would be to invoke Boyle’s neo-Aristotelian account of ‘activity’. We might insist that even when we exploit reasons unthinkingly and automatically, and indeed even just in *holding* a belief for a reason, we count as practicing a form of self-determination, insofar as we exercise judgement, conceived as a *capacity* (the ‘power of judgement’), not as an act of judging that something is so. (Boyle 2011).

Either way, adapting a well-known remark of Elizabeth Anscombe’s, we might say that AT is not primarily a claim about ‘mental processes’ involved in acquiring beliefs; it is a claim about an ‘order that is there’ when we hold a belief for a reason.⁷ My question is: do perceptual beliefs exhibit that order?

2. Henry’s challenge

⁵ It can also be hard. Compare Montaigne’s observation that ‘the principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances.’ (2003: 100)

⁶ ‘(J)udging, making up our minds what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible—something we freely do as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives.’ (1998a: 434) In other places McDowell seems to come close to the view elaborated by Boyle. Compare his remark that ‘(r)ationality, in the demanding sense, (..) can be operative in quite unreflective belief formation.’ (McDowell 2010: 8)

⁷ See Anscombe 1957: 80.

To see why the question can look pressing, consider Austin's distinction between evidence and perception. When you believe that there is a pig around because you interpret various observable facts as evidence of the presence of a pig, your resulting belief looks like a good illustration of the idea of 'doxastic self-determination'. You hold a belief because you take it that there is a good reason for that belief. But suppose the pig emerges and now stands there right in front of you, 'plainly in view'. In that case, Austin insists, you have no need for evidence as to whether there is a pig around. You can 'just see' that there is a pig in front of you, so the question 'is settled.' (Austin 1962: 115) Your belief seems to be determined by 'the world', in a stronger sense than when one fact convinces you of another. Since you are not drawing an inference (not even unthinkingly or automatically) your belief does not implicate your capacity to assess the probative force of reasons. It is not just that you don't exercise your capacity to 'step back' from a candidate reason. There is, on the face of it, nothing for you to step back from.

Defenders of AT tend to assume that if they face a problem here it derives from the fact that, as Moran puts it, '(p)erceptual belief is a favored case for eliciting externalist intuitions' (2004: 459). In other words, those who doubt that we are 'active' in relation to perceptual beliefs must be attracted by the thought that such beliefs reflect the operation of the sort of non-rational 'belief-forming mechanism' familiar from purely reliabilist theories of perceptual knowledge. The question for friends of AT, on this construal of the challenge, is whether they should seek to *accommodate* such 'externalist intuitions' as may be elicited by perceptual beliefs (as does Moran) or *repudiate* them (as does McDowell). I will come back to these responses. But I first want to suggest that it is quite wrong to assume that the challenge must be fuelled by 'externalist intuitions'.

Consider Henry's dictum: 'it is a weakness of intellect to search for reason in cases where we have sensation'. (Henry of Ghent 2003: 98) Or consider Barry Stroud's more recent claim that 'there is no need for something to serve as our reason for believing that there is a red apple on a brown table' in a situation in which we can non-inferentially see that there is a red apple on a brown table. (Stroud 2015: 394)

Neither Henry nor Stroud subscribe to a ‘purely reliabilist’ or any other kind of ‘externalist’ analysis of perceptual knowledge. If we need an ‘ism’ to refer to their outlook we could do worse than calling them ‘primitivists’. They take it that the explanatory connection between perception and knowledge is basic: it is not to be analyzed by reference to some underlying explanatory link between perception and *belief*, whether conceived along internalist or externalist lines. In other words, an account of how you know that there is a pig before you makes no reference to either a reason for belief or a non-rational cause of your belief. It makes no reference to your *belief* at all.⁸ When you see a pig, you will, under favourable circumstances, be able to exercise relevant capacities for *visual knowledge*, and as a result will come to see (and thus know) that there is a pig in front of you. Occasionally, of course, things do not go well and you merely end up acquiring a perceptual belief. But that does not mean that even in a good case, perception yields, at least most immediately, mere beliefs, or that the way perception yields knowledge is to be understood by reference to its role in grounding beliefs.

On this analysis, if perceptual beliefs are troublesome for AT, this is not because they elicit ‘externalist intuitions’. Then what *is* the problem? Much here depends on how the idea of a ‘primitive’ connection between perception and knowledge is to be developed. Does the idea really exclude the possibility that we have reasons for our perceptual beliefs? Is it committed to a view on which perceptual beliefs belong to the ‘passive side’ of the human mind? Does it deny that rational capacities are implicated when a rational thinker holds a perceptual belief? I want to set these complicated questions to one side for now. I want to start with a fairly straightforward way in which a primitivist view of perceptual knowledge puts

⁸ For recent elaborations of this sort of view, see Stroud 2009, 2011; Millar 2008, 2010, 2011, 2019; Williamson 2009 (esp. his reply to Stephen Schiffer, pp. 357-363); Roessler 2009, 2019. On Henry’s epistemology and its Aristotelian background, see Perler 2006, §§4-5. On the role of the notion of ‘evidentness’ in medieval epistemology, see Pasnau 2017, esp. pp. 31ff and 188ff.

pressure on AT. In a nutshell: the view challenges the conception of what it means to be answerable for our beliefs that underpins the case for AT.⁹

As a particularly clear example of that conception, consider Pamela Hieronymi's use of what she sees as a basic parallel between our answerability for actions and beliefs. Hieronymi starts with a definition: 'One is *answerable* for an activity or a state of affairs just in case one can rightly be asked for the reasons, if any, for which one engaged (or engages) in the activity or brought about the state of affairs.' She connects this notion with Anscombe's suggestion that intentional actions are actions that are open to the question 'Why are you ϕ -ing?', used as a request for your reason for ϕ -ing. Hieronymi goes on to suggest that an analogous point holds for belief: 'whenever one believes that p (where p stands for a proposition, such as 'The butler did it' or 'It is going to rain'), one can rightly be asked, 'Why do you believe p ? (..)'. (2007: 359) On this picture, to be answerable for ϕ -ing or for believing that p *just is* to be open to a request for one's reason for ϕ -ing or believing that p .

The trouble with this account is that it builds into the definition of 'answerability' an assumption that is not only substantive but, arguably, dubious. Consider Austin's gloss on the question 'Why do you believe that p ?' When we use this as a 'pointed question' we insinuate, or at least raise the possibility, that *you oughtn't* believe that p . (Austin 1961: 78) We might put this by saying that the question invites an account of how you have come to believe that p that would simultaneously provide an effective defence of your believing that p or would show that it's OK for you to believe that p . We might also suggest an analogous gloss on the question 'Why are you ϕ -ing?' Armed with this broader definition, we can then ask how the request for (as we might put it) a vindicating explanation of your belief/action relates to the request for a *reason* for believing or acting. It seems clear that offering a good reason would amount to an effective vindicating explanation. Moreover, in the case

⁹ This might make it sound as if a primitivist account challenges merely an *argument for* AT, rather than AT itself. However, the conception of the practice of 'answering for' our beliefs that is at issue here is arguably internal to AT — at least to those versions of AT that present themselves as articulations of our ordinary conception of belief.

of intentional actions there may well be no alternative to this sort of account. To ask, pointedly, 'Why are you ϕ -ing?' is to ask about the point or the good or the justification of your ϕ -ing, and the matter, it seems, inevitably turns on your reason for ϕ -ing. In the case of beliefs, however, there does seem to be an alternative to provision of your reason for belief: you may instead explain *how you know that p*. Since coming to know that p entails coming to believe that p, the account will shed light on the origin of your belief. And since there can be nothing wrong with believing that p if one knows that p, the account amounts to an effective defence or vindication of your belief. It is hard to think of a better 'vindicating explanation' of believing that p than an account of how one knows that p.

We can now begin to see how a primitivist account of perceptual knowledge would spell trouble for AT. The idea that AT articulates our ordinary conception of belief turns on the assumption that 'answerability' is inextricably connected with the demand for reasons; specifically, that our answerability for what we believe shows beliefs to be under the sway of our capacity to assess the force of reasons (hence to exercise a form of self-determination). Yet, if the explanatory connection between perception and knowledge is primitive and immediate, we will be able effectively to 'answer for' a perceptual belief without invoking any reason for which we hold the belief. We could instead say things like 'I can just see that there is a pig in front of me' or 'I can tell a pig when I see one', where these statements should be taken to gesture towards an account of how seeing a pig, in concert with our visual-epistemic capacities, gives us knowledge that there is a pig in front of us — dispensing us from the task of exercising judgement as to the probative value of the evidence. This would mark a fundamental disanalogy between intentional action and belief. While exhibiting the point of an intentional action can only be a matter of setting out one's reason for it, one can establish the credentials of a belief that p by showing that, and how, one knows that p. Call this Henry's challenge.

How plausible is the primitivist picture that underwrites the challenge? At this stage, I just want to make three points that help to get the dialectical situation into focus.

First, a clarification. We should distinguish two projects: there is the project of articulating the way perception figures in our ordinary practice of explaining how we know what we know and (thereby) defending our claims to knowledge; and there is the project of constructing what philosophers may consider to be a satisfactory explanation of perceptual knowledge. Primitivism, as I understand it, is primarily a contribution to the first project. Accordingly, if appeal to perceptual-epistemic capacities is deemed to be question-begging relative to the philosophical problem of our knowledge of the external world, that will not necessarily be an objection to a primitivist analysis of our ordinary practice. Advocates of the latter may wish to grant that a solution to that problem would require an independent account of how perception warrants our beliefs about the objective world.¹⁰ They just insist that we ordinarily understand our knowledge in a more simple-minded way.

Second, 'primitive' does not mean 'unintelligible'.¹¹ We can distinguish two sorts of factors that render our possession of perceptual knowledge intelligible, on a primitivist account. On the one hand, the subject needs to have certain standing abilities, such as the ability visually to tell a pig.¹² On the other hand, circumstances must be such as to permit the subject to exercise the relevant abilities. To example, to exercise the capacity visually to tell that an animal is a pig, the animal must, from the subject's point of view, *look like* a pig: the sorts of features that go into the (or a) characteristic visual appearance of a pig need to be sufficiently clearly visible.¹³ What these various factors render intelligible is how seeing the pig reveals or discloses or

¹⁰ Stroud's view might be interpreted in that way, with a further important ingredient: scepticism about the prospects of achieving a philosophical understanding of perceptual knowledge. (See, for example, Stroud 2009.) The relationship between the two projects raises a number of complex questions that I cannot address here. For some preliminary discussion, see my 2019.

¹¹ As Alan Millar puts it, a perceptual-recognitional capacity is not a mere disposition to acquire knowledge (we know not how) but an 'ability that has a certain structure.' (2008: 336)

¹² Such abilities may be underpinned by a distinctive kind of knowledge: knowledge of what pigs (typically) look like.

¹³ That is not to say that one must be able to *describe* the features that go into the distinctive appearance of a pig. See Austin 1961: 84-5, and Millar 2010: 120ff. I am following Millar in insisting that we *exercise* (as distinct from *trying* to exercise) a perceptual-recognitional capacity only when it delivers what it is a capacity to acquire (*viz.* knowledge). On this, see Millar 2019, ch. 6.

makes it manifest to the subject that there is a pig in front of her. Note that these natural phrases all entail that she comes to *know* that there is a pig in front of her. The account makes no mention of her belief that there is a pig in front of her at all. But it is not clear why this should diminish its explanatory value.

Third, the case for a primitivist account of our ordinary practice may be organized around a dilemma facing the project of a 'belief-first' analysis. How are we supposed to understand the allegedly more basic explanatory connection between perception and beliefs (in virtue of which we are said to find perceptually grounded knowledge intelligible)? The options here seem to be limited. Perceptual beliefs may be explained by reference to reasons for which we hold them, or by reference to non-rational 'belief-forming mechanisms'. The trouble is that neither option looks particularly promising as an account of our ordinary practice. Austin is surely right that we would often deem the request for evidence off-key when the objects of our knowledge are 'plainly in view' (or clearly audible or tangible). It is not just that the request would be pedantic: we wouldn't really know how to answer it. If even our most basic perceptual beliefs were formed on the basis of reasons, we should be familiar with such requests. On the other hand, if perceptual beliefs are the effects of the operation of non-rational mechanisms, their etiology will not be transparent to us. We should be expected simply to find ourselves believing such things as that there is a pig in front of us, with the question of why we have these sorts of belief being at best a matter of theoretical speculation. That does not seem quite right as a description of what it is like to find oneself confronted by a pig. Furthermore, it would make it hard to see why the request for evidence should be deemed off-key. That a belief is the effect of a non-rational cause is hardly a reason to regard evidence as irrelevant. If anything, the demand for evidence should be particularly to the fore in such cases.¹⁴

¹⁴ Moran aims to reconcile AT with our 'externalist intuitions' about perceptual beliefs by distinguishing two ways in which such beliefs may be held. He grants that 'perceptual presentations (...) normally compel belief in an automatic and unreflective manner' (2004: 459), yet insists that reflection brings perceptual beliefs under the control of reason. On reflection, I may either 'accede to the habit of belief', in the light of such considerations as that 'my senses are in good working order, nothing

In brief, while the first (broadly ‘internalist’) option is hard to square with the *immediacy* of perceptual knowledge, the second (broadly ‘externalist’) option is incompatible with the *intelligibility* of perceptual beliefs. A primitivist analysis promises to accommodate both. It does so by the simple expedient of reversing the direction of explanation that has been treated as sacrosanct in modern epistemology. In good cases, perception reveals to us (= gives us *knowledge* of) what the world is like, and it does so in a way that is typically intelligible to the perceiver herself. In such cases, the intelligibility of perceptual belief *follows* from that of perceptual knowledge. And the request for evidence is off-key precisely because perception, manifestly, gives us something better than evidence (let alone mere belief).

So much for my initial presentation of Henry’s challenge. In essence, the idea is that the natural way to ‘answer for’ our perceptual beliefs is to explain how we know what we believe to be the case, undermining the assumption that we can only be ‘answerable for’ actions and attitudes that are open to a reason-giving explanation. In the following two sections I want to strengthen and develop the challenge by considering two lines of response. The first says we should resist the primitivist analysis, since the immediacy of perceptual knowledge can be accommodated by a version of internalism. The second line of response is more concessive. It grants the ‘primitivist’ analysis of our ordinary practice but insists that on closer inspection AT is consistent with that analysis.

3. Non-inferential internalism

seems awry, what they appear to present to me does not conflict with anything else I believe or am attending to at the moment’ or, in the presence of countervailing evidence, I may ‘well not accede’ to that habit. (2004: 459-60) One problem with this picture is that it would make reflective perceptual knowledge thoroughly inferential. That seems implausible. There is in any case familiar room for doubt as to whether the sorts of considerations Moran canvasses would provide us with adequate reasons for perceptual beliefs. But more to the point, it seems far-fetched to suggest that those considerations are *the reasons for which* ordinary perceivers, even on reflection, believe what they do about the world around them.

Many will have been itching for some time to protest that the quote from Henry works with a false dichotomy. According to a widely held view in contemporary epistemology, perception gives us knowledge *by* giving us a distinctive sort of reason for belief. On that view, the reasons perception affords are surely as valuable as the knowledge they make possible. The view is not always framed in terms of reasons, but this may just be a terminological matter. Consider a series of claims McDowell makes in *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge*: ‘perceptual states warrant perceptual beliefs’; perceptual beliefs count ‘as knowledgeable in virtue of being warranted in that way’; ‘the grounds on which the belief counts as knowledgeable’ in such cases are distinctive in being non-inferential. (See 2011: 22-25) While our ‘warrant’ for perceptual beliefs (in virtue of which such beliefs ‘count as knowledgeable’) does not take the form of an inference, it is nevertheless ‘accessible to the knower’ (17) Accordingly, McDowell characterizes his view as ‘internalist’.¹⁵ Connectedly, he often emphasizes that our responsiveness to the non-inferential sort of warrant afforded by ‘perceptual states’ constitutes an exercise of rationality.

This picture would stop Henry’s challenge in its tracks. It would enable us to acknowledge the immediacy of perceptual knowledge Austin highlights without reversing the direction of explanation dear to traditional epistemology. Correlatively, if the case of perceptual belief *appears* to pose a challenge to AT, that could only reflect a confused reaction to the distinctive cogency of the reasons or ‘warrant’ we get from perception. The following passage elaborates this diagnosis:

We might put this [that one does not choose to accept that p when one’s experience plainly reveals to one that p] by saying there is a sense in which perceptual experience can compel belief. But because capacities for rational self-determination are at work in one’s being subject to this compulsion, it does not detract from one’s being in rational control of one’s life. Compare the sense in which one can be compelled to accept the conclusion of a cogent

¹⁵ An interesting complication (exploration of which would take us too far afield) is that some of McDowell’s remarks, in some of his writings, are naturally read as recommending a primitivist account. See in particular McDowell 1998b and 2009.

argument whose premises one is unshakeably committed to. One does not sacrifice one's freedom if one acquiesces in the authority of what one recognizes as compelling reasons. (McDowell 2009: 139)

Suppose McDowell is right that being compelled to believe something by a conclusive argument is compatible with (indeed entails) the exercise of 'rational self-determination'. Does that point, or an analogue of it, apply to the case of *non-inferential* perceptual beliefs? Some critics have expressed misgivings or puzzlement about the suggestion that a belief can be rationally intelligible in the light of a perceptual experience. Barry Stroud has insisted that the content of one's experience can only provide one with a reason to believe something if one *accepts* the content. (Stroud 2002: 89) Hannah Ginsborg has argued that McDowell's picture rests on a failure to distinguish between two senses of 'reason' (roughly: normative reasons vs mental states invoked in 'rationalizing explanations'). (Ginsborg 2006) McDowell himself has been notably — almost ostentatiously — unconcerned about these worries, dismissing them as amounting to no more than a re-statement — by 'Berkeley colleagues of Davidson's' — of Davidson's notorious insistence that 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.' (See McDowell 2009: 269 n.) To my mind, the 'Berkeley objection' is much more serious than McDowell allows (and it has no truck with Davidson's view of what counts as a reason for belief). But I think the force of the objection is best appreciated in the context of a wider question about McDowell's account that has not received the attention it deserves. We can distinguish two perspectives that are in play in McDowell's picture. Perceptual knowledge is supposed to be intelligible to two audiences, as it were: on the one hand, to philosophers; on the other hand, to reflective perceivers in general. The question that I think has been neglected is how the two kinds of intelligibility are related to one another, and whether they are mutually consistent.

McDowell's *philosophical* explanation of perceptual knowledge centres on his account of how 'perceptual states warrant perceptual beliefs', an account that is intended to enable us (philosophers) to see how it is that perceptual beliefs 'count

as knowledge'. McDowell does not, of course, expect ordinary members of the public to make their knowledge intelligible, and to defend their claims to knowledge, by talking about 'warrant' or 'counting as knowledge' or 'perceptual states'. At the same time, it is a key commitment of McDowell's ('internalist') theory of perceptual warrant that perceptual knowledge *is* intelligible to reflective perceivers. How? What would a *reflective* explanation (as I shall call it) look like? What should an 'ordinary perceiver' be expected to say if we ask her: 'How do you know that p?'

Some terminology will be useful. Let's call the question 'How do you know that p?' HK, and the question 'Why do you believe that p?' WB. And let's call an answer to HK that works *by* answering WB a *belief-centred* account of your knowledge. It seems clear enough that in the case of inferential knowledge a good answer to HK will be belief-centred in that sense. The premises of a good inference to the conclusion that p provide a reason for believing that p, and if someone comes to know that p by exploiting the inference this means they must have been appropriately responsive to that reason. Thus 'her car is in the drive' can be a good account of how you know your neighbour is at home. It explains your knowledge by stating the fact that constitutes your reason for believing she is at home. Call this a *reason-giving* account of your knowledge.

Does a reflective explanation of perceptual knowledge, as McDowell conceives it, take the form of a reason-giving account? For the moment let us assume the answer is 'yes'. This seems plausible since perceptual beliefs are supposed to be open to 'rationalizing' explanations. We are supposed to make sense of such a belief by 'displaying [it] as a result of [an] operation of rationality' (2009: 132) And a rationalizing explanation without a reason (or at least a putative reason) would surely be Hamlet without the Prince. Then what would a reason-giving account look like? Some of McDowell's readers have assumed that when perception yields non-inferential knowledge that p, one's reason for believing that p must be *that p* (a fact that is made 'available' to one, as it were, by the representational content of one's

experience).¹⁶ As we'll see in a moment, McDowell has rejected this reading, instead proposing that one's reason is 'I see that p.' So there are two possible answers to HK that might be thought to articulate a reason-giving account of one's perceptual knowledge that p:

- (1) p.
- (2) I see that p.

It is worth spelling out first why (1) can look like the natural candidate for a reflective explanation as McDowell conceives it, dovetailing with McDowell's philosophical explanation of perceptual knowledge. Consider this formulation of the philosophical explanation: '(w)hen one sees how things are (...) a warrant (...) for one's belief that things are that way is visibly *there* for one in the bit of reality that is within one's view.' (2002: 280) Add to this that the warrant in virtue of which perceptual beliefs count as knowledge is supposed to be 'accessible to the knower'. (2011: 17) Now suppose that, accessing that warrant, a knower tries to account for her belief (and in turn her knowledge) that p. It seems that (1) would be the obvious thing to say. What is labelled 'warrant' in McDowell's philosophical explanation, on this reading, is what ordinary knowers think of as a reason. As McDowell put it in *Mind and World*, perception makes it possible for the layout of reality to exert a rational influence over our thinking. (1994: 26) Thus, it seems natural to suggest, we should cite the relevant piece of reality as our reason for a perceptual belief.

Yet, (1) does not ring true as a description of the way we ordinarily make our perceptual knowledge intelligible to ourselves and others. One problem is that it would fail to meet our expectations for a good answer to HK. First note that HK is routinely asked as a 'pointed question' in its own right. The possibility HK may bring into play is that you do *not* know that p, but merely believe or conjecture it. (Austin 1961: 78) When it is used in this way, the question invites reassurance that what you have — what your assertion that p would express — is indeed knowledge. A good

¹⁶ For accounts of perceptual knowledge that pursue this programme, see Brewer 1998 and Schnee 2016.

answer is expected to explain your knowledge in a way that simultaneously validates your *claim* to knowledge. Now, the fact that p may well be (or even *have to be*) part of a reassuring explanation of how you know that p. Nevertheless, the bare affirmation that p seems unsatisfactory. (1) merely reiterates the claim to knowledge it is expected to make good. There is also another worry: it is not clear that in believing that p for the reason that p we could be seen to exercise our capacity for rational self-determination.¹⁷

Perhaps the relationship between the philosophical explanation (in terms of ‘warrant’) and the reflective explanation (invoking the subject’s reason), then, is less close and less straightforward than that initial reading assumes. Even if the warrant is provided by the perceived ‘bit of reality’, it is the *fact that we perceive the relevant bit of reality* that constitutes our reason for belief. That would appear to be McDowell’s considered view. He writes: ‘(i)f my experience is a case of seeing how things are, the fact itself exerts a rational influence on me, but only by being experienced, and a sheer statement of the fact makes no sense as a specification of my reason for my belief.’ (2006: 134)

Clearly the distinction between ‘warrant’ (featuring in the philosophical explanation) and ‘reasons’ (featuring in the reflective explanation) raises a number of questions. Here I just want to press one of them. Is a reflective explanation along the lines of (2) *compatible* with McDowell’s philosophical explanation? One concern might be that (2) does not look like a *belief-centred* explanation of your knowledge. (2) simply tells us about the way in which you know that p (viz. through vision), without so much as touching on the question of the basis of your belief that p. Thus construed, (2) would seem to be more hospitable to a primitivist analysis of our ordinary view of perceptual knowledge. But I want to set that concern to one side. McDowell protects his account from collapsing into primitivism by insisting that verbs of propositional perception express belief-independent ‘perceptual states’, rather than ways of knowing. ‘S sees that p’, on this view, does not entail that S knows or believes that p.

¹⁷ For discussion of this latter problem, see Roessler 2009; Giananti 2019.

It can therefore figure in a rationalizing explanation of why S believes that p, and so provide a belief-centred account of her knowledge that p. Suppose McDowell is right about this. Even so, it is not clear that (2) expresses a reflective explanation that coheres with McDowell's philosophical explanation. If you take the fact that you see that p (in McDowell's sense) as a good reason for believing that p, you somehow need to recognize that that fact *counts in favour* of believing that p. How? The natural answer is: by recognizing that *S sees that p* entails *p*. So while (2) (on McDowell's construal) looks like a good candidate for a reason-giving explanation of your knowledge that p, that explanation will show your knowledge to be inferential, contrary to McDowell's protestations. Your understanding of the reason turns on your grasp of the soundness of a certain inference. Note that for the premise of that inference to be available to you, it is not enough that you are in a certain 'perceptual state'; you need to have reflective *knowledge* that you are in that state.

This completes my version of the 'Berkeley objection' to non-inferential internalism. To summarize, there are two conditions a reflective explanation à la McDowell would need to satisfy: it would need to (a) cohere with McDowell's philosophical explanation, and (b) provide a credible articulation of the way ordinary knowers make their knowledge intelligible. (1) meets (a) but not (b). (2) looks promising in relation to (b) but not in relation to (a), threatening to make the account collapse into either primitivism or inferential internalism. Several lines of response would be worth considering. Might it be possible to rescue (2) by drawing a distinction between a reason and the 'mode' in which a reason is available to us? That is to say, could (2) be interpreted as an *indirect* indication of your reason, one that works by self-ascribing the attitude in virtue of which you are able to respond to the reason?¹⁸ Alternatively, should we rethink the assumption that a rationalizing explanation without a reason (or presumed reason) would be Hamlet without the Prince? Could

¹⁸ Compare the quote from McDowell given earlier: 'the fact itself exerts a rational influence on me, but only by being experienced.'. Compare also Jonathan Kvanvig's suggestion that our reason for a perceptual belief is a 'content under a certain modality', viz. 'the content-as-experienced' (as distinct from the 'content-as-believed'). (Kvanvig 2009: 159)

(2) count as a rationalizing explanation even if no reason for your belief is in the offing?

While I cannot pursue these questions here, I think it is clear that there are grounds for pessimism, at least insofar as the answer is supposed to help sustain AT. Since doxastic self-determination is a matter of being able to assess the probative force of our reasons for belief, perceptual beliefs will continue to look like counterexamples to AT so long as we cannot say what are the reasons for which we hold such beliefs. Furthermore, assessing the force of a reason involves reflecting on the reason. So the reason-giving fact, it seems, will not be properly 'available' to us, in the sense required for the exercise of self-determination, just in virtue of being the content of a perceptual experience. Only if you know or believe that *p* can you ponder the rational significance of the fact that *p*.

In the light of the objection, it seems worth considering a more concessive response to Henry's challenge. Might AT be shown to be compatible with a primitivist view of perceptual knowledge?

4. Knowing that *p* as a reason for believing that *p*?

Let me start with a question. If the explanatory connection between perception and knowledge is basic and irreducible — if a good answer to 'How do you know?' will not, in the case of non-inferential perceptual knowledge, invoke any grounds for belief — what should be said about the request for a reason, in the case of a perceptual beliefs? Clearly, our reasons will not figure in the explanation of how we know what we know through perception. Furthermore, it will be possible to reverse the direction of explanation traditionally favoured by epistemologists: we will be able to shed light on why you believe that *p* simply by pointing out that (and how) you are able to know that *p*, without mentioning any reason for belief. Nevertheless, it's not clear that a request for a reason would be nonsensical or inappropriate. This observation might encourage an even more radical reversal of the traditional view. When you non-inferentially see that there is pig in front of you, you will normally be aware that you see there is a pig in front of you. Furthermore, the content of that

awareness — ‘I can just see that there is a pig in front of me’ — would be a good reason for believing that there is a pig in front of you (since it entails the truth of that belief). Then why should you not cite that reason, were someone to pose a reason-seeking question, say ‘What makes you think there is a pig in front of you?’ We might go even further: why should the fact that you see and know that there is a pig in front of you not be *your reason for believing* that there is a pig in front of you?

These questions raise difficult issues. Among leading advocates of the primitivist view, opinion over them is divided. Alan Millar has proposed a view along the lines indicated by my questions. On his view, that you see and so know that p can be a reason that helps to ‘sustain’ your belief that p, even if it is not a consideration that leads you to *form* the belief that p.¹⁹ (How could you rationally form the belief that p in the light of a consideration that manifestly entails that you believe that p?) By contrast, according to Stroud, when we can see or otherwise perceive things to be so, ‘there is no need for something to serve as our reason for believing’ them to be so; indeed there is ‘not even any room’ for such a reason. (Stroud 2015: 394). Millar and Stroud are agreed, of course, that perceptual knowledge is not open to a reason-giving account. They disagree on how to deal with a reason-seeking question in cases where we have direct perceptual knowledge. For Millar, ‘I can see that p’ would deliver just what the question is asking for, your reason (albeit a merely ‘sustaining’ reason) for believing that p (though of course it would also, simultaneously, deliver a different explanation: an explanation of how you acquired the belief that p by reference, not to your reason for the belief, but to your exercising your capacity visually to tell whether p). For Stroud, the statement ‘I can just see that p’ would suggest that the reason-seeking question is off-key: it is simply the wrong question to ask if we are interested in your belief’s credentials.

Fortunately, for my purposes here, there is no need to try to adjudicate the disagreement between Millar and Stroud. Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that the primitivist approach is best developed in the way Millar

¹⁹ See Millar 2011: 332, 342.

recommends. Suppose, in other words, that there is nothing incoherent or otherwise objectionable about the idea that the reason for which S believes that p may be the fact that S knows (more specifically, sees or hears or feels) that p. Would this enable us to reconcile primitivism about perceptual knowledge with the claim that we are active in relation to our non-inferential perceptual beliefs? I think it's true that Millar's picture would provide a *partial* response to Henry's challenge. As I presented the challenge, the idea was that the primitivist approach calls into question the connection between answerability and reasons on which the case for AT turns. In other words, primitivism was supposed to put pressure on the first arrow in my schematic representation of the route to AT:

Answerability → reasons → self-determination

If Millar's account of 'sustaining' reasons is correct, that concern turns out to be baseless. Perceptual beliefs are open to two different (yet complementary) explanations, corresponding to two different (yet complementary) ways of establishing their credentials: one invoking the exercise of perceptual-recognitional capacities, the other invoking the subject's reason for her belief. Reasons turn out, after all, to have an important part to play in our practice of holding each other answerable for perceptual beliefs.

The trouble is that if we interpret and reinstate the first arrow in this way, it becomes difficult to uphold the second arrow. Suppose you believe that p for the reason that you see and so know that p. In being responsive to that reason you are responsive to a consideration that certainly counts in favour of believing that p but also transparently implies that you do believe that p. It is not a consideration on the basis of which you could coherently make up your mind as to whether p. It displays a mind that is already made up. That is not to say that you could not (in a sense) subject that reason to critical scrutiny or that it would have to be wrong to think of it as a reason for which you believe that p. You could certainly 'step back' from it in the sense that you could ask whether it is in fact true that you see that p. If, on reflection, you judge that you are not able to see whether p after all, you may, as a

result, discard your belief that *p*. Perhaps that helps to secure a sense in which your reason ‘makes a difference’ and so may count as a reason for which you believe that *p*. What you could not (coherently) do is *determine* what you believe about the question whether *p* on the basis of that sort of reason. To recognize that reason is to be aware of the fact that your view as to whether *p* has already been determined, by the operation of your visual-epistemic capacities. In the case of Millar’s ‘sustaining’ reasons, therefore, the notion of doxastic self-determination gets no purchase. Such reasons cannot provide input to the activity of making up one’s mind. They do not nourish but pre-empt deliberation.

The difficulty this creates for AT is not a phenomenological but a structural one. The point is not just that there is no experienced transition from reflecting ‘I see that *p*’ to forming the belief that *p* but that there can be no such transition at all, at least not a rational transition. If you are right — if you do see that *p* — then you already believe that *p*. If not, you at least take yourself to be in a state of mind that involves believing that *p*, so you could not coherently try to determine what you believe about *p* by ‘acknowledging or refusing to acknowledge’ the cogency of your reason. The ground of your belief is not your assessment of the probative force of your reasons for belief but your exercising relevant capacities for perceptual knowledge.

Appealing to ‘sustaining’ reasons, then, does not provide a fully successful answer to Henry’s challenge. True, contra Henry, it would be acceptable (and not a ‘weakness of intellect’) to request a reason in cases in which perceptual experience reveals to us what objects are like. However, the reasons that would be relevant in such cases have a peculiar character. For one thing, our responsiveness to such reasons would not explain how we know what we know. (What gives us a reason is precisely our possession of perceptually grounded knowledge.) Connectedly, since ‘sustaining’ reasons entail that we have the belief they recommend, we could not coherently take our assessment of their force to determine what we believe.

5. Conclusion: fractionating ‘activity’

Henry's challenge turns on a certain interpretation of the way in which we ordinarily make our perceptual knowledge intelligible to ourselves and others. On that interpretation, the distinctive immediacy of perceptual knowledge entails the explanatory priority of knowledge over belief: we routinely acquire beliefs about things around us *because* perception yields knowledge of what they are like (rather than because we take ourselves to have adequate reasons for them). I have considered, and presented grounds for dissatisfaction with, two ways in which defenders of AT may respond to this challenge. One argues that, contra Henry, the immediacy of perceptual knowledge is best understood as reflecting the distinctive way in which perceptual experience makes beliefs rationally intelligible. The other tries to hijack Henry's view by insisting that, even on a 'perceptual knowledge first' view, perceptual beliefs are held for reasons. Both lines of response would deserve more extended scrutiny, but I want end by asking where the argument of this paper leaves us.

One might wonder whether Henry's challenge really affects what advocates of AT most deeply care about. Recall Boyle's formulation quoted earlier: a person's believing something is a condition that is 'self-determined in an intelligible way: its ground lies in her accepting the rational correctness of this very condition.' (Boyle 2011: 22) It might be said that this structure holds even in the case of perceptual beliefs, as pictured by primitivists. Millar's account of 'sustaining reasons' might be read as a way of filling out what, in the perceptual case, 'accepting the rational correctness' of a belief comes to. Even on Stroud's view, the structure may be in place. For even if your seeing that *p* is not your reason for believing that *p*, it remains the case that if you didn't think you could see that *p*, you would (other things being equal) abandon your belief that *p*. The relevant counterfactuals may be all we need to substantiate the sense in which your understanding of your belief's credentials constitute the 'ground' of your belief. Or at least: *a* ground. (The primary ground being your ability to perceive what is so.) The upshot of Henry's challenge may thus seem to be a relatively modest point: it is just that we should replace the definite with the indefinite article in our formulation of AT.

But I think that diagnosis is not quite right. What Henry's challenge enables us to see is that there are two distinguishable (and dissociable) things advocates of AT care about: a stronger and a weaker thesis. The weaker thesis says that, in the case of rational believers, the subject's view about the credentials of a belief she holds plays a role in sustaining the belief. Roughly speaking, she wouldn't believe what she does if she didn't take her belief to be justified or well-founded or OK. Call this *Reflective Endorsement*. The stronger claim says that the subject's view of the merits of her belief consists of her assessment of the force of the reasons in the light of which she has made up her mind about the relevant question (or at least would be able to do so if she gave the matter some attention.) Call this *Self-determination*. We can see that advocates of AT care about the stronger claim by noting that it is *Self-determination*, not merely *Reflective Endorsement*, that is doing crucial work in two explanatory projects in which the 'activity' of belief has figured prominently in recent years. An influential suggestion that goes back to Hampshire and has been elaborated by Moran and others is that the way we *know* our current beliefs is intimately connected to our role in *determining* what we believe through the activity of deliberation or otherwise exercising capacities for doxastic self-determination.²⁰ Again, doxastic self-determination has been appealed to as a solution to a putative puzzle over the possibility of doxastic responsibility (how can we aptly be held responsible for attitudes that are not under our voluntary control?)²¹

While primitivism is certainly compatible with *Reflective Endorsement*, it arguably challenges *Self-determination*. It undermines the assumption that the credentials we are able to produce for our beliefs are invariably reasons our responsiveness to which is a matter of freely exercising our power of judgement. It suggests that our credentials may instead be provided by considerations that pre-empt deliberation. Where does this leave the project of articulating a generic notion of 'activity', of

²⁰ See Hampshire 1965, Moran 2001, Boyle 2009b. For a response to this approach that is congenial to Henry's challenge, compare Jane Heal's observation (in her comments on Moran's *Authority and Estrangement*) that 'in many cases reflecting on my view of the world takes the form of my asking myself what I know, not what I believe.' (Heal 2004: 429) See also Campbell 2018 for critical discussion of the 'agentalist' approach.

²¹ See for example Hieronymi 2008, Moran 2012, McHugh 2013.

which intentional action and belief could be seen to represent different species? One option would be to define the generic notion in terms of the exercise of reflective endorsement, rather than self-determination. Yet, it would be hard to motivate the claim that this is the only notion we need in thinking about what belongs to the ‘active side’ of the human mind. It seems no longer clear that there is a single line of partition between the ‘active’ and the ‘passive’. There may be a variety of lines, corresponding to different notions of ‘activity’. We may distinguish between conditions that do or do not involve the exercise of reflective endorsement; that do or do not implicate a form of self-determination; and (it seems natural to add) that are or are not voluntary. And there may be further such distinctions to draw. The blanket contrast between activity and passivity fractionates. The lesson I would draw from Henry’s challenge, then, is that the geography of the human mind than is more complex than has generally been allowed by philosophers engaged in the project of partitioning the mind into active and passive sides.²² It may be more illuminating to distinguish between different senses in which a given sort of mental condition may involve activity or passivity. For example, seeing that there is a pig in front of one may involve reflectively endorsed belief, but not an exercise of self-determination; and while it is not a voluntary activity, it is typically *informed* by the voluntary activity of paying selective attention to the pig. Perceptual belief, as so many other psychological states, may involve a characteristic mix of activity and passivity, in various senses.²³

²² It is a good question how to understand Kant’s place in that tradition. Advocates of AT sometimes invoke him as something of a founding father, and there are certainly passages that encourage this reading. Compare his reference to the ‘freedom to think, without which reason does not exist.’ (1923: 14) Yet, as so often, his view turns out to be nuanced to the point of making it hard to place. Consideration of this issue would need to start from two relevant Kantian distinctions: between the understanding and theoretical reason; and between theoretical and practical reason. Exercises of all these faculties have some kind of claim to belong to the ‘active side’ of the human mind. What is less obvious is that the same notion of ‘activity’ used in making good these claims. For one thing, Kant holds that theoretical reason shows a ‘purer spontaneity’ than the understanding, bound as the latter is by the deliverances of sensibility. For another, it is only ‘the causality of our own will’ (or *practical* reason — not theoretical reason, let alone the understanding) that we ‘cannot think otherwise than under the idea of freedom.’ (1997: 57)

²³ I borrow this formulation from Eilan 1998. For illuminating comments on previous drafts and helpful suggestions for improvements, I am grateful to Lucy Campbell,

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