

## McDowell and the Propositionality of Perceptual Content Thesis

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In *Mind and World* and subsequent writings up to an essay first published in 2008 entitled “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”,<sup>1</sup> John McDowell had insisted not only on the *conceptuality* of what is often discussed as “perceptual content” but also on the *propositionality* of that content. Many might find this puzzling. At the most intuitive level, one might think of the “content” of perception, *what* one perceives, as *things*—things with particular properties, and things arranged in particular relations. I look around my room and see my desk, see its colour, the variety of things on it, and so on. But, following the *tractarian* Wittgenstein, in *Mind and World* McDowell portrays the world to which one is open in perceptual experience *not* as a world of “things” but as a world of “facts”, and that *facts* rather than *things* is what one *sees* can strike one as counterintuitive. True, I can think of myself as seeing *that* my desk has a particular color, *that* it stands between the bookshelf and the window, but that I can see *that* such facts “obtain” (in the rather odd locution of philosophy) can seem to be, in some sense, secondary to or explainable by the fact that I see *the desk*. And I can see the desk only because I am in my study facing it with an unimpeded view.<sup>2</sup> Proximity to and having an unimpeded view of as conditions for *seeing* seem to be an important part of what we mean by “seeing”, and “facts” can seem neither to be the sorts of things one can be close to or far from, nor things one can have unimpeded or impeded views of.

When thought of from the “subjective” side, McDowell’s insistence on the propositionality of experiential content has given rise to the type of criticism found in Michael Ayers and Arthur Collins, that McDowell portrays perceptual experience as

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<sup>1</sup> John McDowell, “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”, in Jakob Lindgaard (ed.), *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), republished in John McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). All page numbers are to the later volume.

<sup>2</sup> And there are locutions in which I see *that* a is F, without seeing a, such as when I say that I see the neighbours are away, when I see their letter box is stuffed with mail and the front lawn strewn with rolled, glad-wrapped copies of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

somehow “quasi-linguistic” or as coming with “subtitles”.<sup>3</sup> In the essay, “Conceptual Capacities in Perception” from 2006,<sup>4</sup> McDowell’s responds to these charges, dismissing the idea that his propositionality thesis implies any such contrary-to-common-sense view. McDowell is perfectly happy with the sort of common-sense view of the *content* of perceptual experience that Ayers takes from the empiricist tradition and which he opposes to McDowell’s allegedly quasi-linguistic view.<sup>5</sup> McDowell’s Kantian rejoinder is that conceptual capacities are required for the having of such sensory presentations and that Ayers simply presupposes a dualism of intellect and senses that in is question. “Actualizations of conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to their subject’s rationality, can present things in a sensory way, and that gives the lie to the dualism”.<sup>6</sup>

Stressing the role of concepts in perception in terms of the actualization or exercise of *capacities* allows McDowell to avoid the talk of concepts “in” experience that can be misconstrued in the fashion of Ayers and Collins, and this way of talking is continued in the essay “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”. But in this essay McDowell could be taken as *conceding* something to Ayers’s earlier criticism when he there explicitly *retracts* the “propositionality-of-content” claim. Perhaps McDowell does not mean to suggest that Ayers had been correct in draw the “quasi-linguistic” inference from the now retracted thesis; he might be withdrawing a misleading form of words that by itself had added nothing to his position and that had led to these sorts of mis-takings of it.<sup>7</sup> Certainly McDowell continues to put his view in ways that are continuous with certain formulations from *Mind and World*—the idea of intuitions as conceptual shapings of sensory consciousness that presuppose the possession of capacities that can be exercised in relation to those shapings—formulations that don’t seem to invite the Ayers-Collins type of “experience with subtitles” criticism. Perhaps these are all that is needed.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Ayers, “Sense Experience, Concepts and Content—Objections to Davidson and McDowell” in Ralph Schumacher (ed.), *Perception and Reality: From Descartes to the Present* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2004); Arthur W Collins, “Beastly Experience”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58 (1998).

<sup>4</sup> John McDowell, “Conceptual Capacities of Perception”, in Günter Abel, ed., *Kreativität* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2006), republished McDowell, *Having the World in View*. All page numbers are to the later volume.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it can be read as McDowell’s now conceding to the force of Ayers’s apparent *reductio*, and so as abandoning the idea of propositional content, or it might perhaps just be seen as a way of avoiding a formulation of McDowell’s consistent account which is easily misconstrued.

Nevertheless, McDowell does go further than simply dropping what might be misleading form of words. Perhaps wanting to nip the experience-with-subtitles charge in the bud, he points to the contrast between discursive content and the content of intuition. While *discursive content* is usefully modelled on linguistic utterance and can thereby be considered “articulated”, intuitional content is not to be thought of in that way.<sup>8</sup> “Discursive content is articulated”, he says, “intuitional content is not.” In discursive activity “one puts contents together, in a way that can be modelled on stringing meaningful expressions together in discourse literally so called. ... That is not how it is with intuitional content. The unity of intuitional content is *given*, not a result of our putting significances together”.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen here, McDowell is not worried about talking about contents being “given” with lower case “g” in experience. There is an unproblematic way of talking about what is given to perception without falling into the talk of the mythical an upper-case “G” “Givens”.<sup>10</sup> But in “Avoiding the Myth of the Given” he says that what is given in intuition *not only* is not a result of “our putting significances together”, he says that what is given is not “articulated” at all. But while this might help in deflecting the experience-with-subtitles charge, it seems to be at variance with one of the basic features of his position in *Mind and World*, the idea that “in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts”,<sup>11</sup> as surely the “facts” onto which experience is open suggests articulation—just that propositional articulation that had given rise to the Ayers-Collins complaint.

But these ideas are surely central to the solution offered in the first chapters of *Mind and World* to the problem being wrestled with there, that of accepting the Sellarsian critique of the myth of the Given without rebounding into a position that one finds in the likes of Davidson, Rorty and Brandom. Furthermore, it also seems central to his fascinating picture of Hegelian idealism that is where his solution to the problematic consequence of the critique of the myth of the given takes him. In the following section I want to remind you of McDowell's path to the Kant-Hegel position in *Mind and World*, after which I will return to the stance in “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”.

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<sup>8</sup> McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 262.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> From the preface to the paperback edition of *Mind and World* McDowell had been explicit about the role of his adherence to a “minimal” empiricism, an empiricism that must be stronger than what Brandom appeals to, for example, when he talks of accepting a *platitudinous* empiricism.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

## The Role of Kant in *Mind and World*

In *Mind and World* McDowell had appealed to Kant as a key thinker in the modern philosophical tradition for understanding how *experience itself* can be thought of as conceptually shaped, and so capable of standing in the right *rational* relation to the contents of judgments *based on* experience. Kant's insight was to see that his equivalent of the empiricists' "givens"—those "bits of experiential intake" that he calls "intuitions"<sup>12</sup>—could play no cognitively relevant role in experience without the involvement of the *conceptual* capacities that are prototypically exercised in judgment. In the oft-repeated formula from Kant: "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind"<sup>13</sup>.

For Kant, intuitions and concepts must be understood as somehow inseparably knitted together in perceptual experience because such experience needs to be understood, as McDowell puts it, as "awareness, or at least seeming awareness, of a reality independent of experience".<sup>14</sup> In that we take rationality to include the "continuing activity of adjusting [one's] world-view" on the *basis* of experience, the involvement of concepts in judgments is crucial because it is only on the basis of the conceptually mediated relations *between* judgments that one's world-view would be able to "pass a scrutiny of its rational credentials"—that is, possess the logical coherence demanded by the fact that the world-view *purports to be* a "view" of a single, objective world.<sup>15</sup> But Kant's philosophy had faced a classic problem that seems to undercut the idea of the world we strive to have in view as a "reality independent of experience". This comes from interpreting our conceptually shaped experience in a *subjectivistic* fashion, such that the contents of our experience and knowledge are merely projections of "facts about us"—facts about the way *we* fashion our representations. McDowell thus tries to tease out an interpretation freeing the *spirit* of Kant's idealism from this crippling problem, and he finds the resources for such a non-subjectivistic reading of Kantian idealism in the work of Hegel.

And so, having *started* from Kant's conception of the conceptual shaping of perceptual experience, in Lecture 2, McDowell takes the further, purported *Hegelian*,

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<sup>12</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A51/B75.

<sup>14</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> It is such an idea of a world-view subject to "scrutiny of its rational credentials" that is at the core of Kant's notion of a transcendental *unity* of apperception.

step of construing the *conceptuality* structuring experience as an aspect or feature of *the experienced world itself*, not just our *representations* of it. McDowell wants to take the Kant–Hegel relation in a way that is far from the standard way it is understood within the analytic tradition. In traditional analytic readings, Kant is understood to have at least saved transcendental idealism from the absurdity of thinking of the world as a *creation* of the mind by the move of limiting knowledge to a realm of “appearances” beyond which lay an unknowable world “in itself”.<sup>16</sup> And on the basis of such reading of Kant, Hegel is typically seen as having extended Kant’s idea of the mind’s active constituting of the world of *appearance* to the absurdity that had been *blocked* by the phenomena-noumena distinction—the absurdity of its constituting *the world itself*. On this reading, Hegel’s philosophy is no more than disguised *theology*. McDowell’s challenge to this standard interpretation of Kant, however, allows Hegel’s “absolute idealism” to be taken, and taken on, in a very different light.<sup>17</sup>

McDowell’s non-standard reading of *Kant* here has, of course, not passed unnoticed. While it is the “conceptuality” of experience that is at the centre of McDowell’s initial “Kantian” way of relating mind to world, Robert Hanna has pointed to the peculiarity of McDowell’s characterization of his own “conceptualist” position as *Kantian*. In the conceptualism thesis, McDowell is not simply arguing for the *necessity* of a role for concepts in perception; rather, he denies a role to any representational content considered *non-conceptual*. But, Hanna objects, with his concept–intuition distinction surely Kant is more naturally allied with the *non-conceptualist* side of this contemporary debate. Non-conceptualists need not deny a role for concepts; they simply insist that concepts work in perceptual experience in relation to something *non-conceptual*, and surely this looks like Kant’s own account of experience, with the dual roles played by concepts and intuitions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This interpretation has now commonly come to be referred to as the “two world” interpretation, with Peter Strawson and H. A. Prichard commonly considered as representative “two-world” theorists. See especially Henry Allison’s taxonomy in *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, revised and enlarged edition (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> and in this way McDowell finds himself on the terrain of a popular but controversial school of contemporary Hegel interpretation. Thus in the “post-Kantian” or “non-metaphysical” interpretation of Hegel, paradigmatically found in the work of Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard, one finds presented a picture of Hegel as having shown Kantian thought a *Kantian way out* of some of its traps, and one aspect of Kant that Hegel released Kant from, on this interpretation, was the rigid “dichotomy” of concepts and intuitions.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hanna, “Kant and Nonconceptual Content”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 13:2 (2005), pp. 247–290.

Hanna's comments draw attention to the way in which McDowell's understanding of Kant hangs on a particular and radical reinterpretation of the concept–intuition distinction, but this is dangerous terrain for McDowell, for while other Hegel-friendly Sellarsians, such as Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom, have been happy to *abandon* the idea of intuitive unities of experience entirely, McDowell sees it necessary to preserve the idea of intuitions as “bits of experiential intake” or “ostensible seeings”, presenting the mind with an objective world which can appropriately constrain thought in a rational way. In his own words, he wants to preserve a “minimal empiricism” because without this Sellarsianism finds itself on the path of the Davidsonian coherentist “rebound” from the given. But equally such notion of “intuition” has to be freed from any suggestion of the Myth of the Given, and only that line of thought taking us from Kant to Hegel in the way sketched out in the opening lectures of *Mind and World* will allow us to escape the oscillation between the two tendencies of contemporary analytic philosophy. And on McDowell's *Hegelianized* version of Kant found there, what experience *opened* one to was a world of *facts*, such that experiential content, being propositional, could provide a minimally empiricist way out of the modern “rebound” from the myth of the given. But the idea of experiential openness onto a world of *facts* seems to be just the type of formulation that had led to the Ayers-Collins charge. Once this central idea from *Mind and World* is given up, how is McDowell to maintain the required normative link between *perceptual* content and the content of our non-inferential perceptual judgments?

In “*Avoiding the Myth of the Given*”, the account of the achievement of this task involves talk of “exploiting” the unarticulated content of intuition by somehow “carving out” a certain determinate contents “from the intuition's unarticulated content” and then “put[ting] it together with other bit of content in discursive activity”.<sup>19</sup> Although not discursive, intuitional content can nevertheless still be considered *conceptual*, because “every aspect of the content of an intuition is present in a form in which it is already suitable to be the content associated with a discursive capacity. ... The content of an intuition is such that its subject can analyse it into significances for discursive capacities ... the subject of an intuition is in a position to put aspects of its content, the very content that is already there in the intuition, together in discursive performances”.<sup>20</sup> It had been much easier to appreciate how experience was meant to constrain judgment in the picture constructed in *Mind and World*. In the new version we now seem to have only an *assurance* that “aspects” of the unarticulated content of experience are present in a form that makes them

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<sup>19</sup> McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 263–4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

“suitable” to be carved up in certain ways, because conceptual capacities are presupposed in the very having of that experience. But an *assurance* that we can avoid the type of Davidsonian–Rortian rebound from the myth of the Given on the mere assertion of the *suitability* of intuition to be carved up in appropriate ways without saying anything further about what it is that *makes* intuitive content so suitable can seem, well, unassuring. When we consider the question as to whether the content of intuition is “articulated” or not we find ourselves in a trilemma. On the one hand, it cannot be *discursively* articulated as this leads to the Ayers–Collins complaint. But neither can we appeal to *some* other type of *non-discursive* articulation—for example, that characteristic of Kantian intuitions as standardly conceived as *non-conceptual* forms of representation—since that picture is subject to the problems of a *non-Hegelianised* Kantianism of which McDowell is critical in *Mind and World*. It must be then, unarticulated, but with this the problem of understanding how it is that experience normatively constrains judgment emerges. In the remainder of the paper I want to urge a return to McDowell’s earlier picture of “facts” as objects of perception but with a slight variation. The variation comes via an idea that McDowell plays with at various times but is reluctant to adopt—the treatment of intuitions offered by Wilfrid Sellars, for whom intuitions are to be thought of as equivalent to demonstrative phrases: “this such”es. Such a move is, I believe, in the Hegelian spirit of the position in *Mind and World*, as it involves an appeal to a feature of the way Hegel talks of the objects of perception, their fundamentally Aristotelian shape.

### **Sellars: Kantian “Intuition” as an Aristotelian “this such”**

In the opening pages of *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*,<sup>21</sup> Sellars alludes to what he takes to be the ambiguity, of Kant’s notion of “intuition”. Appealing first to the formal distinction, he notes that in Kant’s taxonomy it is the *generality* of concepts “whether sortal or attributive, a priori or empirical” that distinguishes them from intuitions, since “Kant thinks of intuitions as representations of individuals”. But this way of drawing the distinction, Sellars notes, opens up the possibility of thinking of intuitions, nevertheless, as *types* of concepts: that is, “as conceptual representations of individuals rather than conceptual representations of attributes or kinds”.

Not all conceptual ways of capturing an individual can be thought of as intuitional: the phrase “the individual which is perfectly round”, for example, doesn’t

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<sup>21</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgview, 1992), based on his Locke Lectures delivered at Oxford University, 1966.

capture what is for Kant the *other* defining feature of intuitions, their *immediacy*. But in turn, the appeal to immediacy itself, he thinks, involves the concept of intuition in an ambiguity, as the *immediate* nature of the relation of concept to object might be thought of in terms of the intuition as being *caused* by its object, *or* it may be construed phenomenologically as the type of *immediacy to consciousness* as thought of on the model of a demonstrative “this”. Although not rejecting the relevance of the former possibility in his reading of Kant, and noting that he will return to this theme later, Sellars takes the model of the demonstrative to be “on the whole, the correct interpretation” of Kant’s notion of an intuition.<sup>22</sup> In particular, it seems appropriate for *certain* contexts in which Kant employs the idea, and singles out passages in the B Deduction concerning the role of understanding and imagination in the shaping of intuition. There it seems clear that Kant is committed to a view in which some intuitions presuppose the activity of concepts,<sup>23</sup> and in such contexts intuition cannot be considered simply as analogous to a “this” but rather a “this-such”.

It is just this conception of intuition as a “this-such” that signals for Sellars the *Aristotelian* shape of Kant’s thinking: “we are at once struck by the kinship of Kant’s view that the basic *general* concepts which we apply to the object of experience are derived (by the analytic activity of the understanding) from the intuitions synthesized by the productive imagination, with classical Aristotelian abstractionism”.<sup>24</sup> That is, Aristotle had conceived of objects given in perception *as* instantiating some conceptualized kind—this is seen *as* a cube, that *as* a horse, and so on—such that the sortal concept could *then* be abstracted from the presentation and predicated of the thing in an explicit way that resulted in a judgment with propositional form: “This is a cube”, “That is a horse”. At the level of experience, the logical structure of the *this-such*, Sellars thinks, *does* capture the world of perception. “The strength of the position [the idea of an intuition as a this-such] lies in the fact that the individual represented in perception is never represent as a mere *this*, but always, to use the classical schema, a *this-such*.”<sup>25</sup> “Kant thesis”, he adds, “like the Aristotelian, clearly requires the existence of perceptual *this-suches* which are limited in their content to what is ‘perceptible’ in a very tough sense of this term (the ‘proper sensibles’)”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* But despite his starting point with Aristotelian formal logic, Kant was, on Sellars’s reading, far from *being* an Aristotelian. Sellars concedes that even if Kant’s notion of “intuition” suggests an agreement with Aristotle’s abstractionist account of concepts, there



In the second of the Woodbridge Lectures, “The Logical Form of an Intuition”, McDowell considers Sellars’s suggestion. On this reading, an intuition is conceptual while not being fully propositional, but it is such that it is in some way unpackable into something more like propositional content. On the face of it Sellars’s suggestion seems to present one possible response to Ayers’s “quasi-linguistic” charge. While a content presented as expressible in a whole sentence may suggest something like a “text” rather than an object, a content presented in the form expressible by the noun phrase “this cube” seems straightforwardly objectual—what is presented is simply articulated not in the way a sentence is articulated but in the way a *cube* is articulated, for example, the “articulation” between the cube itself and its properites. But for McDowell there is a fatal problem with Sellars’s “this such” analysis of the intuition. The conceptual aspect of the *this such* cannot be *properly* conceptual because the basic job of concepts is to be applied as predicates in judgments, and on the abstractionist view, they only *become* concepts in this sense *after* being abstracted from perceptual content. The “such” of the *this such* thus expresses only a *proto-concept*.<sup>27</sup> In this earlier position, the conceptual content of experience has to be fully propositional and a “this such” phrase is inadequate as it is only the fragment of a proposition. In “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”, however, where McDowell revisits Sellars’s analysis, he rejects it for a different reason. The answer to the criticism of the idea of discursive content is not to be met by putting forward the idea of *fragmentary* discursive content: “intuitional content is not discursive content at all”.<sup>28</sup>

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is a fundamental split between their respective *interpretations* of the *this-such*. For Aristotle, the nexus between the demonstrative and conceptual parts of the *this-such* belongs to the representation merely as it is taken in—it is present “in the representations of *sheer* receptivity”—while for Kant the nexus has, in some sense, been “put there” by the understanding (p. 5). It is Kant’s *distance* from classical Aristotelianism that is signaled by those *other* interpretations that the Janus-faced notion of intuition permits, interpretations that are more in line with the modern, analytic mode of thought, and Sellars sees his task of *disambiguating* the notion in order to clarify Kant’s actual position.

<sup>27</sup> The “this-such” account of the content of perception is, as Sellars notes, associated with an abstractionist account of concepts such that the *concept* of cube that can be used predicatively in a judgment “this is a cube” is supposed to be “derived by the analytic activity of the understanding, from something that is not yet a concept” (26), so on this view “*cube* in a representation of an object as *this cube* can be prior to *cube* in a judgment that something *is a cube*” (ibid).<sup>27</sup> Intuitions on the *this-such* analysis can thus only be *proto-conceptual*, and this, of course, violates “a basic Sellarsian conviction, that the capacity to experience things as ‘thus-and-so’ should be seen as coeval with the capacity to judge that they are thus-and-so” (p. 26, fn 7).

<sup>28</sup> 270.

## Seeing “Facts” Revisited

In *Mind and World*, McDowell had introduced the idea of perceptual openness to facts by way of an analogy with Wittgenstein’s discussion of *asserting*. “When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case”, says Wittgenstein, “we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this—is—so*”.<sup>29</sup> McDowell transposes this form of words to the context of perception to become “when we *see* that such-and-such is the case, we, *and our seeing*, do not stop anywhere short of the fact. What we *see* is: that such-and-such is the case”.<sup>30</sup> But how should we understand the *that clause* here? The concept of a proposition is, as they used to say, “theory laden”, and has undergone many changes between what Aristotle had seemed to mean by the word “*prótasis*” and modern accounts.<sup>31</sup> One way of reading it here is to see the propositionality at issue along the lines of Frege’s *anti-Aristotelian* understanding of judgment and its propositional content. “In Aristotle, as in Boole”, says Frege, “the logically primitive activity is the formation of concepts by abstraction, and judgment and inference enter in through an immediate or indirect comparison of concepts via their extensions ... I start out from judgments and their contents, and not from concepts ... I only allow the formation of concepts to proceed from judgments ... Instead of putting a judgment together out of an individual as subject and an already previously formed concept as predicate, we do the opposite and arrive at a concept by splitting up the content of a possible judgment”.<sup>32</sup> In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein himself seems to signal his opposition to any Aristotelian understanding of the logical structure of judgment when he describes the world as a “totality of facts [*Tatsachen*], not of things [*Dinge*]”.<sup>33</sup> But why should we be held to such an assumption? Perhaps we could read the “facts” that McDowell thinks of experience as open to in *Mind and World* more along traditional Aristotelian lines.

In *Aristotle’s Theory of Truth*, Paolo Crivelli points to the oddity that in the

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<sup>29</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 29 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> For a comprehensive history of the notion, see the three works of Gabriël Nuchelmans: *Theories of the Proposition. Ancient and Medieval Conception of the Bearers of Truth and Falsity*, (Amsterdam, North-Holland Pub. Co. 1973); *Late-scholastic and humanist theories of the proposition* (Amsterdam, North-Holland pub. Co. 1980); and *Judgment and proposition: from Descartes to Kant* (Amsterdam, North-Holland pub. Co. 1983).

<sup>32</sup> Gottlob Frege, “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Begriffsschrift”, in H. Hermes, F. Cambrel, and F. Kaulbah, eds. *Gottlob Frege: Posthumous Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), trans. P. Long and R. White, pp. 16–7, quoted in Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1.1.

*Metaphysics* book V, Aristotle talks of certain *objects* (*pragmata*) that can be *true* or *false*, “objects” that Crivelli also describes as “states of affairs”. “A state of affairs, which is an object, is composed of two further objects: one of the objects of which it is composed is a universal, the other is either a universal or an individual. A state of affairs is true when and only when the objects of which it is composed are reciprocally combined in the relevant way; it is false when and only when the objects of which it is composed are reciprocally divided in the relevant way”.<sup>34</sup> The two examples that Aristotle gives are “the diagonal [of a square] being commensurable [with the side of the square]” and “your being seated”.<sup>35</sup> The idea that states of affairs as *objects* can be *false*, seems surely to differentiate them from Wittgenstein’s “*Tatsache*” or other equivalent modern versions of “facts”, and along with this modern “facts” and ancient “states of affairs” clearly have different *logical* forms—different logical togethernesses, in McDowell’s way of putting it.<sup>36</sup> Just as Wittgensteinian “*Tatsache*” appear to be ontological cognates of thoughts conceived in Fregean terms, Aristotelian “states of affairs” appear to be the ontological cognates of Aristotle’s term *logic*, in which assertion is thought of as a joining of subject and predicate terms and denial their separation. Aristotle conceives of these peculiar items as *objects*, they are clearly not the ontological correlates of “this-such”es because “this-such”es are *subject terms* of predications, but neither do Aristotelian “states of affairs” seem to correspond to the contents of affirmative judgments thought of in the modern sense, just as the syntax of “your being seated” differs from that of “you are seated”.

Aristotle’s states of affairs are clearly conceived as articulated or “jointed”, but they have a type of jointedness that seems appropriate to objects as we typically perceive them, as the relevant “joint” here holds between the object and its properties. This, in fact, is the basic structural character of the object of “perception” as Hegel treats it in the chapter “Perception”, in the section “Consciousness” in the

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<sup>34</sup> Paolo Crivelli, *Aristotle on Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk V, xxix, 1024b19–20. I follow Crivelli’s quite literal translation here, Crivelli, *Aristotle on Truth*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Crivelli draws a parallel distinction with Russellian “facts”. Ibid. And there are other structural features separating Aristotle’s ontology here from any modern equivalents. For Aristotle there are no “negative” states of affairs such as “your not being sitting”. For Aristotle such a negative judgment would effectively be inferred from the perceptual content such as, for example, “your being standing”. Of course error is possible. In mistaken perception (for example) when seeing from a distance, I misperceive the “division” between you and the universal “sitting” as a connection. Or otherwise put, I perceive the *false object* of your being sitting.

*Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>37</sup> An object of perception *qua* “thing with many properties”<sup>38</sup> contrasts to those purported “objects” considered in the prior chapter on “Sense-Certainty”, which were more like the unjointed “givens” targeted by Sellars’s critique of the “Myth of the Given”—Russellian “sense-data”, for example.<sup>39</sup> The objects of Sense-Certainty had been taken as bare “this”es,<sup>40</sup> but the givens of “Perception” seem closer to *necessarily propertied* “this such”es—underlying *essences* which express themselves in observable properties.<sup>41</sup> Hegel is alert to the significance of the German word for “perception”, “*Wahrnehmen*”, effectively meaning taking (*nehmen*) something to be true (*wahr*). Thus perception, for Hegel, is understood as a type of epistemic attitude (“shape of consciousness”) in which the perceived object is conceived as a taken-in *true* state of affairs—some individual thing instantiating various determinate properties. For Hegel this is, importantly, a different attitude to that in which the “object” is posited as that which *explains* why

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<sup>37</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), section A, chapter II.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, § 112.

<sup>39</sup> I call these “unjointed” in the sense that Russellian sense data are not conceived as intuitable things *with* properties. They are, as it were, meant to be simply *the properties themselves*. Ontologically they are akin to “tropes” or “abstract particulars”.

<sup>40</sup> In Sense-Certainty, “the singular consciousness knows a pure ‘This’, or the single item”. *Ibid.*, § 92.

<sup>41</sup> I have argued for this account of Hegel’s treatment of perception in *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 3.4. For a similarly Aristotelian reading, see John Russon, *Reading Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Bloomington Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), ch. 2. Hegel’s approximation to Aristotle in the treatment of perception in the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit* is carefully traced in Alfredo Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Ch 8, §6.

Hegel, in his treatment of the perceptible “thing with many properties”, makes the same contrasts that Sellars notes between Plato’s conception of the perceived object and the approach of Aristotle. In works like *Phaedo* and *Timeus*, Sellars points out, Plato had, conceived of changeable spatio-temporal continuants as “leaky bundles of abstract particulars”—bundles of what are commonly called “tropes.” That is, he had thought of a physical substance such as *Socrates* as a collection of features such as “the white,” “the hot,” and so on, features much like the “property-objects” with which the pre-Socratics had populated their world. In contrast, Aristotle had reinterpreted the notion of changeable objects to being “bundles of abstract particulars inhering in a substratum.” Sellars, “Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” in *Philosophical Perspectives: History of Philosophy* (Reseda, Cal.: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1967), p. 77. Without reference to the names, Hegel *too* contrasts the more primitive “Platonic” conception of the object as a simple totality of property things, “a *simple togetherness* of a plurality” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 113) with the more developed Aristotelian version in which the essence is conceived as “set free from this unity with its opposites [the totality of properties], and exists in and for itself”. *Ibid.*, § 114.

the perceived state of affairs *is* as it is: a shape of consciousness he calls “the Understanding”, whose “objects” are conceived more as *forces* that are only “perceived” in their expression.<sup>42</sup>

The object “perceived” for Hegel, I suggest, is close to a “this such”, but rather than thought of as expressed by a simple phrase such as “this man”, should perhaps be thought of more like “this man being seated”.<sup>43</sup> The content of the intuition expressed is articulated: the joint between this man and his *being seated* is expressed by the fact that I perceived him as the *same man* when he is *standing*. But this is to think of the content of perception as articulated in the way that a sentence is thought of as articulated, when thought along traditional Aristotelian, rather than Fregean, lines. It has the articulation of a thing with its properties made present to me in experience, and that is just what is needed for the experience to play some sort of justificatory role in my saying *that* this man is seated.

Being an “idealist” about form, with his conception of the structure of the perceived object Hegel is in no way attempting to account for some underlying feature of the way the world is “in itself” independent of thought—he is not attempting to map the features of the world conceived as a totality of states of affairs in the way attempted by David Armstrong, for example.<sup>44</sup> Nor is the idea of the perceivable object with properties meant to be internally coherent. In fact it is meant to be internally *incoherent*, and so as breaking down on reflection and issuing in a new conception of objectivity as found in “the Understanding”. Like Sellars, Hegel thinks of the adequacy of the structural features of the “manifest” world as not able to be extended to the “scientific” image, although his resolution of this disparity is not Sellars’s. And just as Sellars conceives of Kant’s notion of “intuition” as “Janus-faced”, Hegel thinks similarly of our expressed *perceptual judgments*.<sup>45</sup> On the one

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter III.

<sup>43</sup> It is significant that for Kant, all cognitive judgments involve a *sortal* concept in subject place. There are no properly *singular* judgments (judgments with a singular term as subject), and so no real place for a judgment of the type “this is a cube” where “this” is thought of as a bare this.

<sup>44</sup> David M. Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Armstrong has himself likened his “states of affairs” to Aristotelian “this such”es. D. M. Armstrong, *Nominalism and Realism: Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 109, 116. On Armstrong’s account, the traditional version of realism about universals was held back by the inability to properly conceive of relations. In Hegel’s account, the deficit in the traditional approach to relations is made good in the transition from “perception” to “the understanding” as “shapes of consciousness”.

<sup>45</sup> And, of course, this must imply a similar ambiguity in the concept of “concept” under

hand they have to face our perceptual experience, in which case we will read them in a traditional “Aristotelian” way. On the other, they must face the “space of reasons”, the space of relations of logical coherence and compatibility with the other judgments we hold about the world—in Kantian terms, the relations within which they stand in virtue of belonging to the “transcendental unity of apperception”. Here we must grasp their significance primarily in their capacity to be true or false.<sup>46</sup> All this, of course, takes one in the direction of features of Hegel’s thought that one might want to stay well clear of, but regardless of how one would wish to resolve these sorts of differences between Hegel and Sellars, the Hegel–Sellars position on the distinct nature and logic of *perceptual* content can be offered as a way available to McDowell to move beyond the trilemma that results when one asks the question of the “articulation” of intuitional content.

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discussion. For an account of the contrast between the traditional Aristotelian concept as *class* and the modern (Kantian and Fregean) conceptions of concept as *function*, see Ernst Cassirer, “Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff”, translated by W. C. Swabey and M. C Swabey as “Substance and Function”, in *Substance and Function; and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1923).

<sup>46</sup> I have given a preliminary account of the transformations brought about in the “object” of judgment by placing one’s perceptual claims in the “space of reasons” in *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, ch. 7.2.