The Conceptual Content of Experience

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It is part of common sense that our perceptual experience and judgments are connected with the world about which we claim to have knowledge. Those philosophers who want to preserve this ordinary intuition think that what we receive in experience are not sense data, nor the false contents implanted by Descartes’ evil genius, nor Berkeley’s ideas under the esse est percipi principle. Rather, they think that the content of experience is about an independent reality. Objects of our experiences belong to the world that is real and independent of our thought and experience. When experience is veridical, it provides us with a direct access to how things are. In *Mind and World*, John McDowell claims that in order to preserve this commonsensical view we have to conceive the content of experience as conceptual. In this paper, I want to examine this claim.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell intends to use Kantian resources to carry out a Wittgensteinian therapy; the goal is to expel a philosophical predicament that threatens to cut the link between empirical thought and reality. He criticizes the Myth of the Given and Davidson’s coherentism that set up the predicament and exposes their shared presupposition—the view that experience is nonconceptual. He then proposes a way out of the quandary, one that he thinks can be found in Kant. His main thesis that the content of experience is conceptual. I will present McDowell’s account of experience in a way that emphasizes the role of the idea of conceptual integration in his account. Then I will raise the following two issues: First, I will point out that his main thesis relies on his
idea of conceptual integration with regard to our capacities of thinking and judging. I will examine whether McDowell has successfully made this idea work. Second, I will raise an issue concerning the possibility of conceptual confusion. I want to show that the passivity of experience and its openness to reality are actually more complicated than McDowell thinks.

1. Lessons from Common Sense and the Predicament

According to McDowell, an account of empirical thought or judgment is unacceptable if it fails to make room for two commonsensical claims: (1) *Our empirical judgments have genuine content.* Empirical judgments purport to tell us something about the world; if they fail to connect with the world, they don’t have genuine content. (2) *Experience provides justification for our empirical judgments.* This is just to register the ordinary view that a natural way to justify claims like “A rabbit is jumping on the grass” is to appeal to perceptual experience, e.g., I see that a rabbit is jumping on the grass. McDowell thinks that there are important lessons embedded in these two commonsensical claims.

To think or to make a judgment about the world is to exercise conceptual capacities in a certain way. The first lesson, according to McDowell, is that the exercises of our conceptual capacities must be constrained *externally*; that is, there needs to be constraint from outside our thinking activities. He thinks this is the role to be played by the impact of the world, i.e., experience. Regarding the nature of justification, McDowell thinks it is essentially a rational relation. Here McDowell draws heavily on Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”: 
In characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. \(EPM, \text{§36}\)  

McDowell accepts Sellars’s view that justification is fundamentally different from causal interactions between physical states of affairs precisely in that justification is a rational relation, causal relation is not. The second lesson according to McDowell is this: since experience provides justification for our empirical thought, the relation between experience and empirical thought must be rational.

So here are the two lessons from common sense: To have genuine content, our empirical thought must receive external constraint from experience; and in order to provide justification the relation experience bears with empirical thought must be rational. Putting the two lessons together, McDowell’s contention is that the external constraint on empirical thought must also be rational. Our empirical thinking must be rationally answerable to the world.

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McDowell presents the predicament as an oscillation between two equally unacceptable philosophical positions. They fail to make room for the above two lessons about empirical content and justification. The first position is one that commits the so-called the Myth of the Given, according to which experience figures as the outer boundary of the conceptual realm. So construed, the content of experience is characterized as the Given. Whatever the mind receives through senses is simply given to us such that there is no room for our conceptual capacities to shape what it is. On this view, the Given is essentially nonconceptual. Its role is to provide noninferential and ultimate justification for our empirical judgments, and hence serves as the foundation of
empirical knowledge.

The problem for this position, according to McDowell, is that although it aspires to offer an account of external constraint, it fails to accommodate the requirement that the constraint needs to be rational. Since experience is taken to be nonconceptual, it can bear only causal relations with our mind, not rational relations. McDowell says: “the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications (p. 8).” As I read McDowell, he holds that rationality and conceptuality are not separable notions. Only something with conceptual content can give reason to another conceptual content. Justification is essentially both rational and conceptual. On the one hand, according to the idea of the Given, experience is supposed to function as the ultimate empirical justification. But on the other hand, this idea construes experience as nonconceptual, which makes it incapable of bearing rational relations to empirical thought. The result is that the very idea of the Given renders it impossible for experience to perform the justificatory role. The idea of the Given is then a myth. Any epistemological account that falls into the Myth of the Given is incoherent.

The second unsatisfactory position that sets up the philosophical predicament is Davidsonian coherentism. Davidson conceives experience as nonconceptual as well, but he thinks conferring a justificatory role to experience is a mistake. So he does not commit the error of the Myth of the Given. According to his coherentism, the justification of beliefs comes from their coherence with other beliefs, “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief (CTTK, p. 310)”, and from the principle of charity that upholds an interpretive presumption in favor of their truth (CTTK, p. 319).
The problem with this position, according to McDowell, is that although it respects both the view that justification is a rational relation, and that empirical thought needs external constraint, it treats these two matters separately. For Davidson, justification as the rational constraint comes from other beliefs; the external constraint comes from the world as the cause of beliefs. McDowell contends that this view does not work. It fails the requirement that the constraint on empirical beliefs must be both rational and external. Since Davidson’s notion of experience is nonconceptual, it cannot meet this need. For Davidson, the only resources that can serve as justification are within the sphere of the freedom of spontaneity. McDowell criticizes that this view suggests “images of confinement within the sphere of thinking, as opposed to being in touch with something outside it (p. 15).” That is, there is no rational external constraint on the confined belief system, which opens the door to the danger of “frictionless spinning in a void”, i.e., losing its bearing on reality. For McDowell, the principle of charity can be effective only after empirical judgments have genuine content. But without proper external constraint, our empirical thought does not really have content. Beliefs in a system that is “spinning in a void” are not genuine beliefs. So Davidson’s coherentism collapses for it makes the very idea of empirical content unintelligible.

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According to McDowell, both the Myth of the Given and Davidson’s coherentism presuppose a notion of experience that is nonconceptual. McDowell thinks that as long as we keep this notion of experience in place, the oscillation between the two unacceptable positions will be inescapable. This is the philosophical predicament. What we need, according to him, is another conception of experience that allows
experience to bear not only causal but also rational relations to our thought. The task for the therapy is to find a way to see that our conceptual capacities to think and make judgments are both externally and rationally constrained by experience.

2. McDowell’s Kantian Treatment

McDowell’s proposal is that the solution can be found in Kant. Kant asserts that “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind (Critique of Pure Reason, A51/B75).” Experience is a product of the cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity. Here is how McDowell reads Kant:

The relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity . . . It is not that they are exercised on an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity. We should understand what Kant calls “intuition”—experiential intake—not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. (p. 9)

McDowell takes Kant’s remark to be saying that the only way for empirical thoughts and judgments to have genuine representational content is that they are externally and rationally constrained by the world. Through receptivity, our mind passively takes in the impact of the world, i.e., experience. Through spontaneity, conceptual capacities are drawn into play in experience. This enables experience to bear rational relations with empirical thoughts. The exercises of conceptual capacities are externally constrained by experience, so as to ensure that our thoughts are related to reality. The key is that the contributions or operations of spontaneity and receptivity are, at least partly, constitutive of each other. Based on this reading of Kant, McDowell makes his central claim that experience already has conceptual content. He contends that this claim will expel the philosophical predicament.
What does it mean to say that the content of experience is conceptual? McDowell’s view is that whenever we have experience conceptual capacities are already involved in it. Those capacities can be recognized as conceptual only because they are integrated into a larger conceptual repertoire of spontaneity (pp. 11, 29). The typical application of this conceptual repertoire is to make judgments, which according to McDowell is an exercise of our freedom to responsibly adjust one’s worldview based on how things are. The very same conceptual capacities implemented in experience can also be used to make judgments. The difference is that the way conceptual capacities get involved in making judgments is active; in the case of experience, it is passive, i.e., under the control of how things are. As I read him, McDowell holds that since experience obtains its content in virtue of concepts, and concepts are integrated into a larger conceptual network, one can say that it is because of the conceptual integration of spontaneity that the content of experience is conceptual.

The idea of conceptual integration plays two crucial roles in McDowell’s account of experience. First, as shown above, it helps to explain why the content of experience should be thought of as conceptual in nature. Second, it helps to explain why we are able to say that the content of our perceptual experience is about the world. If what is conveyed within a particular slice of here and now is all there is to the content of experience, all we have would be piecemeal and unconnected perceptions. We cannot acquire a worldview based on fragmented perceptions, because a worldview is supposed to tell us how things fit together in the world, but perceptual fragments are incapable of providing an empirical basis for precisely that. Without a wider worldview providing the connections between different experiences, we are not able to assert anything beyond
what we perceive here and now. We then lose the right to say that the content of our experience is about a larger and independent reality.

What prevents us from this absurdity, according to McDowell, is the idea of conceptual integration. He says: “It is this integration that makes it possible for us to conceive experience as awareness, or at least seeming awareness, of a reality independent of experience (p. 31).” McDowell is suggesting that it is because of the conceptual integration of spontaneity that the notion of mind independent reality can be considered as built into the very idea of experience. This is how he interprets Kant’s remark that “intuitions without concepts are blind (cf. M&W, p. 32).” This is a difficult point; my reading of McDowell is as follows.

Because experience involves conceptual capacities that are integrated into a larger repertoire of spontaneity, which is a “rationally organized network of capacities for active adjustment of one’s thinking to the deliverances of experience”, we can place what we learn from experience into a tentative worldview provided by the conceptual network (p. 29). On the one hand, the tentative worldview provided by the conceptual network of spontaneity is rationally and externally constrained by how things are. On the other hand, since the idea of conceptual integration is partly constitutive of the content of experience, genuine experience is not separable from a wider worldview. That is, a worldview is always in place whenever we enjoy an experience; it helps us to see how experiences in different locations and times connect together. This connection allows us to make empirical judgments in such a way that their contents are beyond the here and now yet still grounded in experience. Hence, according to McDowell, “the subject of experience understands what the experience takes in (or at least seems to take in) as part
of a wider reality (p. 32).” Therefore, it is the conceptual integration that entitles us to say that the content of our experience is about the world. I will come back to this point in the next section.

According to McDowell, this account allows us to construe experience as openness to reality. He says that although the world is external to our thinking activities and independent of experience, it is not outside thinkable contents (p. 28). What McDowell means is this: That things are thus and so can be the content of our experience and, if we endorse it, the content of our judgment. Now if the judgment is true, the same content is also a fact about the world. To say that the world is thinkable is to say that the conceptual content of experience and the layout of the world can have the same shape, i.e., that things are thus and so. Both are propositional, hence can bear rational relations with each other. This allows us to say that the world bears a rational relation with our mind. The world as an independent reality can serve as the ultimate source of the rational external constraint for spontaneity. It provides content and justifications for empirical judgments through experience. In this sense, McDowell says that experience is openness to reality, and that the world is embraceable in thought (pp. 26, 32).5

McDowell’s account of experience is now on the table. By recognizing the passivity of experience, and by distinguishing between thinking activities and thinkable contents, experience can take in external constraint from the independent reality. This prevents our empirical thought from “spinning in a void.” By articulating the conceptual integration of spontaneity, and explaining how it entitles us to take the content of experience to be about the world, we see that conceptual capacities are partly
constitutive of experience. This allows experience to bear rational relations to empirical thought, hence the Myth of the Given is avoided. Therefore, McDowell concludes, if we see that experience already possesses conceptual content, we don’t have to fall into the oscillation between the two implausible views. The predicament then loses its grip.

3. Conceptual Integration Examined

In the remaining of this paper I want to raise two issues for McDowell’s account of experience. I have pointed out that McDowell’s account appeals to the idea of conceptual integration. He says, “It is this integration that makes it possible for us to conceive experience as awareness, or at least seeming awareness, of a reality independent of experience (p. 31).” Here is a crucial passage in *Mind and World* concerning this point:

By virtue of the way in which the conceptual capacities that are drawn into operation in an experience are rationally linked into the whole network, the subject of experience understands what the experience takes in (or at least seems to take in) as part of a wider reality, a reality that is all embraceable in thought but not all available to this experience. The object of experience is understood as integrated into a wider reality, in a way that mirrors how the relevant concepts are integrated into the repertoire of spontaneity at large. (p. 32, my emphasis)

This passage is rich and intricate, especially the last sentence when he uses the image of mirroring. Here is a simple example.6 Suppose there is a red cube in front of me, and I see it with good eyesight and under proper illumination. The content of my visual experience is articulated by the empirical judgment that there is a red cube in front of me. From where I stand, I only see the three front surfaces of the cube, not its back and bottom. So what is manifest to me in the experience are the three red surfaces that face me. It is common sense that I am not just having some red perception; I am seeing
a red cube. I am not just having some subjective visual impressions; what I receive in experience is something that belongs to the empirical world. According to McDowell, what enables me to say this is that experience involves actualizations of conceptual capacities. This is not a claim about epistemic justification, but about the very idea of experience. In this example, the conceptual capacities associated with concepts red and cube are implemented in my visual experience; they partly constitute the content of my experience.

At this point, the idea of conceptual integration comes into play. The conceptual capacities associated with concepts red and cube are not isolated; they are rationally connected with others in my conceptual repertoire. For instance, cube implies that what I see is an object, it has six faces, etc; red refers to a color, which is often a property of an object; red also implies that the thing looks red to me, not green, and that my eyesight and illumination must be in a suitable condition in order for it to look red to me, etc. These rational implications of the conceptual capacities enter into shaping the content of my experience. They enable me to understand that although the back and bottom surfaces are currently not in my sight, they are really there. The three front faces that I see are then understood as part of a red cube, a concrete object in the world. Since not all aspects of the object are available to my current visual field, I understand that what I see is something that belongs to a wider reality. As I walk around and pick up the object, I can see all six faces of the red cube. I then understand how they fit together as surfaces of a red cube in such a manner that mirrors the way the relevant conceptual capacities are integrated into my larger conceptual repertoire. Therefore, experience is about the world because what one receives in experience is understood as integrated into a wider
Let me make two observations. First, as I see it, McDowell’s account at least allows a reading that he registers the view that the concepts involved in experience bear a one-to-one correspondence relation to things in the world. For example, the concept cube implemented in my experience refers to an object, i.e., the cube in front of me. Each of the concepts that are implied by the concept cube refers to a property of the cube I see, e.g., cube implies the concept six surfaces, just like the cube in front of me has six surfaces. Similarly, the concept red picks out the color red. When McDowell characterizes the relation between how the object of experience is integrated into a wider reality, on the one hand, and how the relevant concepts are integrated into a larger conceptual network, on the other, he uses the image of mirroring. This image supports the reading that for McDowell one-to-one correspondence is the way that concepts connect with the world. I will come back to this observation in the next section.

Second, McDowell is clearly using the idea of a part integrated into a whole with regard to the conceptual network of spontaneity to explain how experience is about the world. This is the way conceptual integration figures in McDowell’s account of the content of experience. Here, I want to raise the first issue for him.

In order for the idea of part/whole integration to carry out its task, i.e., to make sense of the point that experience is about the world, McDowell needs to explain the role of the part, the role of the whole, and the relation between them. Moreover, as is shown in the passage cited above, McDowell uses two kinds of part/whole relations to make sense of the connection between the conceptual content of experience and the world.
The first kind is the integration of individual empirical concepts into a larger conceptual repertoire of spontaneity. The second kind is the integration of objects of experiences into a wider independent reality. For McDowell’s account to work, he needs to explain how these two kinds of part/whole relations are connected.

On McDowell’s account, our experience is about the world because of the second kind of integration, the one between particular objects of experience and a wider reality. The second kind of integration is related to the first, i.e., the integration of particular conceptual capacities into a larger network, because the content of experience is conceptual, which he takes to be successfully motivated by the failure of the Myth of the Given and Davidson’s coherentism. Then he makes a strong claim concerning the relation between the two kinds of integration. As cited above, he says: “The object of experience is understood as integrated into a wider reality, in a way that mirrors how the relevant concepts are integrated into the repertoire of spontaneity at large.” This is to say that the second kind of integration is to be understood in terms of the first kind. In fact, McDowell seems to hold that the structure of the object/reality integration mirrors the structure of the concept/network integration and vise versa, i.e., there is a mutual mirroring between the network of our conceptual capacities and how things fit together in the world. So we see that the role of the image of mirroring in McDowell’s picture is to connect the two kinds of integration (pp. 32-34).

However, the image of mirroring here is puzzling. The two kinds of integration are different in nature. It is not clear how one is supposed to mirror the other. Consider the integration of particular objects of experience into a wider reality. This integration is a physical relation. How the three front surfaces of a red cube fit together
with its bottom and back sides, or how pillars and walls are integrated into the structure of a whole building, etc., are physical matters. We need to exercise conceptual capacities to understand them, but they themselves do not involve concepts. Contrarily, the integration of individual conceptual capacities into a larger network of spontaneity is surely not physical. The conceptual capacities that are implemented in experience are integrated with others through various sorts of rational relations, such as implication, justification, consistence, etc. As said earlier, when McDowell criticizes the Given as a myth, he draws on Sellars’s remark that rational relations are fundamentally distinct from mere causal interactions. I think a similar point can apply here—physical integration and conceptual integration are intrinsically different.

If my reading of McDowell is correct, how the two kinds of integration are related is crucial for his account of the conceptual content of experience. He intends to explain it by using the idea of mirroring. But as far as I can see, he has not made clear how this idea is supposed to work. I think what McDowell wants to say is something parallel to Kant’s remark that “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” Just as intuitions and concepts are dependent on each other, McDowell wants to say there is some sort of mutual dependence between the contribution of the physical integration and the contribution of the conceptual integration to our empirical knowledge of the world and to the content of experience. I suspect that talking about mutual dependence with respect to their contribution to empirical content is more plausible and easier to establish than talking about mutual mirroring. But then McDowell’s account needs revision, at least more clarification, in this regard.
4. Conceptual Confusion

According to McDowell, the content of experience is conceptual and propositional. When veridical, it also tells us how things are in the world, i.e., for McDowell the content of experience is representational. This allows me to consider the relation between experience and the world as a kind of the relation between representational content and the world. For the purpose of this paper, let me say that a content is representational if (1) it is propositional, and (2) it is constrained by the world and tells us how things are in the world. The world is the source of the content and its justification. For the purpose of this paper, let me say that the strongest kind of representation-world relation is a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic or thought items and things in the world. The former strictly answers to the latter. In making judgments to talk about objects, the concepts that constitute those judgments uniquely pick out certain objects. The weakest representation-world relation is suggested by fictionalism. It is the position that the content of the discourse in question does not aim at stating facts about the world or a particular subject matter, because there are no such facts in reality. The content of the discourse is a sort of fiction invented by us for pragmatic goals. Some philosophers think that the only way for a discourse not to be representationally vacuous is for it to bear a one-to-one correspondence relation to the world. This is not the case. There are other relations of representations that are neither strictly constrained by the world nor vacuous. In this section I want to identify one possibility. Based on this third pattern I will raise another issue for McDowell’s account of experience.

The representation-world relation that I want to discuss here is one that involves
conceptual confusion in the subject’s worldview. Joseph Camp gives an interesting example of confusion with regard to reasoning and judgment:

A guy named Fred sees an advertisement for an ant colony in the back of a magazine he is reading in the dentist’s office. He sends away for it, and when it arrives he sets it up in his kitchen. The ant colony consists of a glass box that Fred fills with dirt from his back yard, some leaves and twigs also from Fred’s back yard, a bottle cap for water, and some ant food from a little envelope that came with the kit. The ants arrived in two separate containers, one labeled “little” and one labeled “big”. Never reading the labels, Fred dumps the contents of both containers into the ant colony. He notices that there are a large number of little ants, as one would expect of little ants, and—he believes—one big ant, much bigger than the others. But Fred was inattentive and missed a second big ant when it tumbled into the ant colony.

Everyone knows that big ants make every effort to avoid conflict. Fred’s two big ants immediately arrange to split their time between running around on the surface performing feats of strength, and napping down in the bowels of the ant colony. They alternate up-time, one down below whenever the other is on the surface. As a result, even after Fred becomes fascinated by “the” big ant, studying “its” movements as often as he can, he never catches on that there are in fact two big ants. He decides to name “the” big ant “Charley”.

We, on the other hand, watch Fred set up his ant colony and notice the two big ants go in. We even notice that one of them is a tad skinnier than the other, although only someone looking for the difference, and as keen a judge of ants as we, would ever be able to tell. We decide to call the big ants “Ant A” and “Ant B”. But we decide against clueing Fred in. Although it does not put us in a very good light to say it, we rather enjoy making fun of Fred’s inability to tell that Ant A is not Ant B, his carrying on about “Charley”, his theorizing about the social relations between Charley and the many smaller, weaker ants. We find it especially amusing when Fred looks at Ant A (Ant B) and says “Charley, there, did X earlier today”, or something along those lines, when—as we know—it was Ant B (Ant A) who actually did X. Fred, we say, thinks Ant A is Ant B. He is wrong to do so, we believe—not that we can say very much about the kind of “wrongness” this is, except that it is a matter of confusing things. Let this be our working example of a confusion, and let our judgment “Fred thinks Ant A is Ant B” be our working example of an attribution of confusion.10

In Camp’s example, Fred fails to notice that there are two big ants in his ant colony, and mistakenly thinks there is only one. Fred confuses Ant A with Ant B, and calls “the” big ant “Charley”. As a result, whenever Fred thinks and talks about “Charley”, i.e., whenever he uses the singular concept Charley and tries to pick out “that”
big ant, there is confusion involved in his thoughts and judgments. If one adopts McDowell’s suggestion that concepts play a constitutive role in experience, then Fred’s visual experience of “that” big ant is also confused. Now I want to say that even so there is a sense in which Fred’s thoughts and experiences still connect with reality.

In considering conceptual confusion, there is an issue of whether Charley is really a concept. As I understand McDowell, he would say no. I disagree with him on this point. I will discuss this disagreement later. For now, I assume that Charley is a genuine concept, whatever its reference might be.

Here is my view. Although Fred’s concept Charley is confused, the way he uses it is not arbitrary. Fred’s experience may also be confused, but there is still a sense in which his thoughts and experiences about the subject matter are rationally and externally constrained by reality. What one should say, I contend, is that the connection between Fred’s thoughts and experience about “that” big ant on the one hand, and how things really are on the other hand, is flawed, but not empty.

Suppose Fred reports his current content of experience: “Charley is there walking.” There are various possible explanations of the reference of the confused concept Charley: (1) The concept Charley may be taken to pick out the big ant that Fred saw at the moment when he first gave the name “Charley”. (2) The concept Charley may be taken to pick out the big ant that is currently in front of Fred’s eyes when he makes judgments. (3) The concept Charley may be regarded as picking out both big ants. With these options we are able to make sense of Fred’s thoughts and judgments in many occasions; some of them can even be evaluated as true or false or useful. Let me illustrate how Fred himself may use his thoughts about “Charley” to learn things about
the world, so as to show that his confused thoughts can be meaningful and factual.

Fred sees “Charley” is playing on the west surface of the colony. He puts a piece of bread near “Charley” then leaves. Half an hour later Fred comes back and finds that the piece of bread is now on the east side of the colony. So he forms a belief that either “Charley” moved the bread or Mary did—since Fred knows that Mary was the only other person at home then. After a while, Fred realizes that the piece, though tiny, is too heavy for any ant to carry it around. So he thinks “Charley” did not move the bread, and concludes that it was moved by Mary.

What we have here is that, despite Fred’s confusion, he is able to make a valid disjunctive inference by using the confused concept Charley and forming beliefs about it. Suppose it is true that Mary moved the bread. Then, even from our point of view, Fred’s conclusion not only says something meaningful and informative but also reports a fact. It will be unattractive to insist that, since the premises of the inference are empty due to the concept Charley, Fred reaches the conclusion by pure guess. It is more plausible to say that Fred reaches the conclusion by rational thinking, through which both Fred and we learn something about the world, i.e., we learn the reason why the position of the bread is changed.

Therefore, although Fred suffers confusion in his worldview, his use of the confused concept can still manage to tell us something about the world. So it is justified to say that the confused concept Charley is indeed connected with reality. This shows that a subject’s use of concepts can manage to represent how things are even if his worldview embodies conceptual confusion. We will see in the next section that conceptual confusion is relevant to McDowell’s view. I will use this idea to raise the
second issue for McDowell’s account of experience.

5. Experience and Confused Concept

Now I want to show that conceptual confusion is at odds with McDowell’s idea of experience as openness to reality. For McDowell, empirical thought, experience, and a fact about the world, can have the same propositional content. Taking the content of experience as conceptual enables us to conceive experience as openness to reality. I think McDowell’s account implies that in order for someone’s experience to be about the world, the concepts that are actualized in experience must pick out some objects or properties in the world, i.e., must relate to reality in a substantial way. As I suggested previously, McDowell at least conveys an impression that he implicitly holds that there is a simple one-to-one correspondence relation between the conceptual content of experience and things in the world. The way the concepts are arranged in experiences mirrors the structure of empirical facts.

However, it may happen that the conceptual repertoire of the subject embeds some confusion, e.g., the subject may have confused concepts that fail to relate to reality in a strict way. This may cause complications in McDowell’s account, since it raises the possibility that the confused concepts get involved in constituting the subject’s experience, which may put into question McDowell’s construal of experience as openness to reality. If experience is passive in that what conceptual capacities get involved in experience is totally not up to us, how are we to make sense of the idea that experience may be confused? If experience is openness to reality in that it allows the world to rationally constrain what we perceive, then how can there be such thing as confused experience?
Intuitively, we want to say that what accounts for confusion is the subject’s worldview, not the world. It is not clear how McDowell’s notion of openness might accommodate the case of confusion. If there can be confused experience that is connected with the world yet not in the fashion of one-to-one correspondence, then at least there is pressure on McDowell to reconsider his idea of openness.

One strategy on McDowell’s behalf is to deny the possibility that there can be such things as confused concepts. Since for McDowell experience is partly constituted by concepts, it follows from this denial that there is no such thing as confused experience. The complication above then disappears. In the following I want to give this strategy a try and then respond to it. I want to defend the point that there is a representational relation between empirical content and reality even in the case of confusion. If so, it is reasonable to require that every account of empirical content, including McDowell’s, should accommodate the possibility of confusion.

In the last section I assumed that Charley is a genuine concept. This assumption allows me to say that, although the concept is confused, it is still rationally related to other non-confused ones, so the connection between Fred’s empirical thought and reality is not vacuous. Now someone might reject this assumption on McDowell’s behalf by claiming that there are no such things as confused concepts. Suppose Fred sees Ant A and reports his experience as “Charley is right there.” Then Ant A goes into the dirt and Ant B goes up to the surface; Fred sees Ant B, and again reports his experience as “Charley is right there.” Since Fred confuses Ant A with Ant B, he takes himself to be having the same experience again, i.e., to be seeing the same object. According to McDowell, is Fred having the same experience again? McDowell will say no, because
Ant A and Ant B are different objects, which presumably give different intuitions to Fred. Fred’s first experience is about Ant A; his second experience is about Ant B. The concept Charley plays no role in Fred’s experiences. And “Charley is right there” does not really mean anything.

The idea here is that if Charley does not refer to an object in reality, it is not a concept at all. If an empirical thought is confused, it is not really a thought. I think this is the line that McDowell is inclined to take when faced with the case of confusion. He might hold this view: there is no such thing as “Charley”. Fred thought that “Charley” refers to a real object in the world, but actually it refers to nothing. From a Kantian point of view, the world does not provide intuitions for Charley to be a genuine concept. Fred can have empirical thought and experience when he sees Ant A or Ant B, but Charley does not play any role in them—Fred cannot have thought and experience about “Charley”.

My plan to reply to this line of thought is this: I will present a case to show how Charley may obtain a new use or new content that is not confused, and the new content evolves from the original confused use. This will give us reason to say that Charley, though still confused, is a genuine concept and plays a role in Fred’s thought and experience. Therefore, Fred has confused yet meaningful thought and experience about “Charley”, and they can be representationally connected with reality in some way. Hence, the strategy on behalf of McDowell fails.

Here is the story. One day, Fred’s friend gives him another big ant, and Fred decides to call it Henry. As we learn later, Henry belongs to a slightly different species from the species of which Ant A and Ant B are members. Now Fred wants to find a
way to visually distinguish between “Charley” and Henry. He wants to be able to identify Henry when he sees it. So he observes the big ants’ activities very carefully. After a few weeks, Fred establishes for himself a tentative perceptual criterion: “Charley” walks faster than Henry. This turns out to be successful in the sense that it enables Fred to identify Henry when Ant A or Ant B is around. This bothers us, so we start to observe the ants closely, too. We spend a lot more time than Fred—day and night. We find that sometimes Ant A walks faster than Henry but sometimes slower, same as Ant B. So we do not see there is a correlation between their walking speed and Henry’s identity. After our diligence languishes, we can tell Ant A and Ant B apart as usual, but we are not able to visually differentiate them from Henry. Contrarily, although Fred continues to be confused about Ant A and Ant B, he is able to distinguish between “Charley” and Henry. But at this stage we think Fred is just lucky.

Suppose now we learn from an authoritative ant expert that members of the species that Ant A and Ant B belong to (call it species {AB}) usually walk faster than members of Henry’s species. This general fact is of course a statistical result based on tons of samples and is perfectly consistent with individual counterexamples like Ant A and Ant B. In the mean time, Fred continues to discover more clues to Henry’s identity, e.g., “Charley” can lift more weight than Henry, etc. It turns out that most of Fred’s observational judgments about the correlation between “Charley” and Henry help him pick out Henry successfully. Also, they fit the corresponding statistical scientific facts about the two ant species, whether or not Ant A and Ant B are counterexamples. Now we are forced to revise our evaluation of Fred’s judgments and experiences. Because of the scientific knowledge we gain from the ant expert, we become reluctant to say Fred’s
criteria for identifying Henry are completely without justification.

It seems plausible to say that Fred has now learned the skill of identifying Henry. When it comes to distinguishing between “Charley” and Henry, he may be more reliable than the ant expert, not to mention us. To explain his success, we have no choice but to say that Fred’s criteria are rational and justified to a certain extent. The point I want to make here is that since he picks out Henry by comparing its behavior with “Charley”, Fred’s success essentially involves his thoughts and visual experiences about “Charley”. This is so not only from Fred’s standpoint, but also from ours. If my point is plausible, there is reason to say that since Charley makes contribution to the representational connection of Fred’s thought and experience with reality, Charley is a genuine concept.

What happens in this case is that the concept Charley has obtained a new content. The concept’s original use is supposed to pick out a unique object in the world. This use is confused. Now throughout the process it has a second use: it picks out an instance of the species to which Ant A and Ant B belong, i.e., an instance of species {AB}, in Fred’s ant colony. Fred may not be aware of the second use in the beginning, but this new use is not confused. How does it contribute to the representational connection of the content of Fred’s thought and experience with reality? Consider the following case:

Fred reports his experience as: “Look, Charley is walking faster than Henry again.” Suppose it was Ant A walking in front of him in the first time, but now it is Ant B. What does Fred actually see? According to a suggestion in the last section, i.e., (2), Charley refers to the big ant that is in Fred’s view at the time when he makes the judgment. So on the one hand, he saw Ant A walking faster than Henry a while ago, and now he sees Ant B walking faster than Henry. But he does not see the same ant
walking faster than Henry again. The “again” part of his experience does not make sense, which impairs the connection between his experience and reality. In so far as Fred takes himself to be seeing the same big ant again, he is confused. But on the other hand, according to the new content of the concept Charley, Fred saw an instance of species \{AB\} walking faster than Henry a while ago, and now he sees the same thing happens again. The “again” part of his experience now makes perfect sense. From this point of view, Fred’s experience is not confused and is well connected with reality.

Charley is a singular concept. Its original confused use is supposed to function like a proper name in language. It is meant to pick out a definite object. The second non-confused use of the concept is also singular, but only partially definite—it picks out an instance of species \{AB\} in Fred’s ant colony. It is important to notice that, as I tell the story, the way Fred acquires the second use of Charley is intimately related to its original use. In Fred’s worldview, the second use evolves from the first. We can say that part of the content of this concept is confused, but part of it is not.

Whenever Fred uses this concept, he is as confused as before. But contrary to the line of thought that McDowell might take, because of the non-confused content it is less plausible to deny Charley as a genuine concept. Fred can use this concept to form meaningful thoughts, and it can be passively involved in his experience about the world. Hence, I conclude that there can be confused concepts, and there can be representational relations between empirical content and the world even when the subject’s worldview involves confused concepts. So the strategy on behalf of McDowell is not successful.

I do not think the issue about conceptual confusion will do any harm to McDowell’s Wittgensteinian therapy. With regard to his account of experience, I am
not suggesting that his idea of experience as openness to reality does not work.

Contrarily, I think this idea is essentially correct. My contention is that I have made a case showing that the idea of openness to reality may be more complicated than McDowell thinks. An account of empirical content should take conceptual confusion into consideration.
FOOTNOTES


4 In fact I think McDowell would say that they are not perceptions at all, i.e., there are no such things as piecemeal and unconnected perceptions.

5 For McDowell, the point that the world is embraceable in thought is not a heavy, metaphysical proposition. Rather, it is meant to express the commonsensical view that what one thinks or judges can turn out to be the case, and that, when one is not mistaken, experience tells us how things are. McDowell also contends that characterizing the world as reachable by conceptual capacities does not compromise the independence of reality. cf. *M&W*, pp. 36, 44, 66.

6 McDowell gave me this example in a conversation.

7 My awareness of this problem is partly inspired and encouraged by David Finkelstein.

8 cf. Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, §36, the passage I quoted in p. 3.


11 What I mean by “intuitions” here is Kantian empirical intuitions.

12 Based on my conversation with McDowell, he tends to hold that the concept “Charley” plays no role in constituting Fred’s experiences.