

Appearances and Disjunctions: Empirical Authority in McDowell's Space of Reasons

Jesús Vega Encabo¹

RESUMEN

En este artículo presento una tensión filosófica en la caracterización que McDowell propone del espacio de las razones. Por un lado, McDowell insiste en la imagen sellarsiana del conocer como posicionamientos en el espacio de las razones; cada posicionamiento requiere un apoyo racional. Por otro lado, las autorizaciones empíricas son contempladas desde la perspectiva de una concepción disyuntiva de la experiencia, según la cual considerar un contenido de experiencia no implica ni una aceptación por parte del sujeto ni credenciales para que se sitúe en el espacio de las razones. Argumentaré que esta tensión, entre una concepción epistémicamente simétrica del espacio de las razones y la asimetría epistémica implícita en la tesis disyuntiva, hace difícil ofrecer una interpretación unificada de la autoridad empírica en el espacio de las razones propuesto por McDowell.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will present a philosophical tension in McDowell's characterization of the space of reasons. On the one hand, McDowell insists on the Sellarsian image of knowings as standings in the space of reasons, epistemic positions requiring rational support. On the other hand, empirical entitlements are viewed from the perspective of the disjunctive account of experience, in which entertaining an experiential content does not involve either acceptance by the subject or credentials to stand in the space of reasons. I will argue that this tension, between an epistemically symmetrical account of the space of reasons and the epistemological asymmetry implicit in the disjunctivist thesis, makes it difficult to give an unified interpretation of empirical authority in McDowell's space of reasons.

I

Traditional epistemology has been an inexhaustible source of philosophical anxiety. Sceptical scenarios and motivations have provoked odd diseases and nervous reactions in the philosophical community. Ancient sceptics intended to give the human mind back its health, a health ruined by philosophical excesses. But nowadays we need to recover from sceptical oddities; we need an adequate therapy to calm our fears and anxieties. McDowell's philosophy represents a valuable aid in this task.

Sceptical scenarios cause a real fear of losing the world. I am not very sure about the urgency of sceptical problems, nor about the best way to confront the challenges they raise. Obviously, refusing to argue against them is a clear way of limiting their value and interest. I do not think that therapy can simply consist in diagnosis; healing is something distinct from prevention. If we limit ourselves to the diagnostic task, then we are viewing the sceptical illness, once we have contracted it, as hopeless. The only solution would seem to be philosophical prophylaxis. Anxiety has to be relieved with good arguments.

One of the most treacherous kinds of scepticism is the claim that the subject is out of touch with the world. If perceptual experiences do not provide us with direct access to the world, we have a version of scepticism about the external world in which the sceptic puts pressure on the difficult task of giving a clear account of epistemic authority at the most sensitive points in our cognitive access to the world.

McDowell relies on the diagnostic strategy to overcome sceptical temptations. He claims that it is sufficient to reject the assumption causing the illness: the idea that perceptual experiences *never* put us in touch with the world. Otherwise, the role played by experience in the structure of empirical entitlements would remain problematic. His position adopts the following two sources of inspiration: first, the Sellarsian characterization of knowings as standings in the space of reasons; second, the Wittgensteinian intuitions in *On Certainty* concerning the value of sceptical arguments and the special authority of some of our beliefs. The resulting epistemological framework, that corrects Sellars with Wittgenstein, is particularly stimulating as regards the role played by experience in grounding observational knowledge. Empirical knowings are standings in the space of reasons “grounded” by experiencing that such and such is the case.

In this paper, I will argue that the account of experience that coheres better with this twofold inspiration, the so-called disjunctive view, introduces an odd asymmetry in how we account for the empirical authority of our empirical beliefs. But an asymmetric account does not agree with a Sellarsian conception of the space of reasons. And, on the other hand, trying to restore the symmetry by defending the disjunctive view does not prevent us from catching the sceptical illness.

II

What is the cause of our ills? McDowell contends that it is a suspicious move of interiorization in characterizing the space of reasons. By this move the subject becomes persuaded by the fantasy of a realm under her absolute control [McDowell (1998a)]. We could describe the “internal” facts belonging to this realm as absolutely independent of the world itself. This “reality”

would be such as it is independent of how things happen to be in the external world. The facts in this realm are self-standing [McDowell (1998b)].

But the move of recoiling to an inner space of facts is advantageous only in appearance. In trying to secure the infallible knowing of these facts, the interiorization move cuts definitively any rational tie with the world. The anxiety provoked by the traditional epistemological outlook comes from the confidence that, once we have retreated to this realm of fantasy, we could recover the world at a later time. But our confidence is always frustrated. The sceptics will always win. To show whether we have *real* access to the external world, these infallibly knowable facts are not enough; the only thing that can contribute to our success is that the world itself does us a favour. The only epistemic entitlements we can acquire without fear of error concern these internal facts. And it is the world, as external to any rational requirement, which explains the possibility of being mistaken. In other words, being lucky is essential to our knowings. So my *entitlement* to the world being thus and so is nothing but a “guess”, because whatever my epistemic efforts are it could always turn out that the world was not doing me a favour. Again, if we surrender to the interiorization move, the sceptic will have a definitive advantage in the game.

Some standings in the space of reasons, the starting-points within it, are privileged. Experiences used to play this role in the empiricist tradition. The interiorization move affects them in a special way: they begin to be conceived as an inner realm of subjective appearances. So, now, the point is how to understand the infallibly knowable facts concerning appearances (“the seeming to one that things are thus and so”). The error lies in viewing them as knowings in an interiorized space of reasons, which means that the appearance serves as a starting-point *by* yielding a premise in a cogent argument to recover the world. As we have seen, to the extent that the argument itself could never secure us against error concerning the external world, the alternative between the sceptic’s triumph and the world doing us favours is still in place. The whole debate concerns how appearances are *epistemically* working within the space of reasons. The interiorization move conceives them as epistemic intermediaries between us and the world. They are immediate standings in the space of reasons, a point of departure for the justificatory arguments that would support *with authority* our empirical beliefs. In this realm of fantasy, the neutral starting-points, the appearances as “the highest common factor” in veridical and deceptive cases, are the *prime movers* in the arguments to recover the world. The temptation to consider these starting-points as absolute and immediate is very strong. This is the temptation of a foundationalist picture committed to the Given.

As we have seen, McDowell detects two dangers in this move of interiorization: first, losing the world as something into which our experience is open; second, deforming the space of reasons in such a way that the truth

condition in knowing is never secured. The dangers come from the same assumption: the idea that appearances work as epistemic intermediaries within the space of reasons.

III

The Sellarsian space of reasons is the logical space “of justifying and being able to justify” [Sellars (1997), §36, p. 76]. To adopt a position within it requires, at least, to be able to justify the standing. Every position within the space of reasons needs some *credentials*. But are all credentials of the same kind? And what do authoritative credentials consist in?

I will assume that the following two points are not controversial in trying to spell out the conditions that an epistemic standing must meet:

- (i) every authorized state must be able to contribute to supporting the relevant inferences needed to spread justification within the whole space of reasons;
- (ii) every authorized state has to be subject to fallibility conditions in two different ways: either by falling short of the facts or by being doxastically blameworthy.

So, if appearances are positions in the space of reasons, it has to be because they can contribute to some kind of inferences and be subject to fallibility conditions, that is, they may deceive us and we could be blameworthy in accepting what the appearances “tell” us.

IV

In empirical knowledge, for a state to be a standing in the space of reasons it is necessary that it can be inferentially articulated and answerable to the world. First, experiences yield us genuine standings by being indebted to the world [McDowell (1998a), p. 396]. The indebtedness to the world is not an extra to the person’s standing in the space of reasons; experience itself works as a rational constraint. And, second they are sensitive to other rational considerations. In order to provide the inferential capacities and extend the epistemic authority to other epistemic states, experiences must be conceptually structured. As Sellars would say, experiences contain “propositional claims” [Sellars (1997), §16, pp. 39-40]. And conceptual episodes are seen according to the model of linguistic performances. Thus, to enter into the space of reasons is to be initiated into language.

Nonetheless, this is not the decisive thesis in the defence that McDowell

makes of experiences as starting-points in the space of reasons. And it is not because it does not capture where the epistemic authority of experiences stems from. It is not enough to be conceptually structured in order to acquire epistemic credentials. The epistemic authority of experience depends on “the cogency of the inference from someone’s being in such a position to the fact that things are thus and so” [McDowell (1998c), p. 432].² To be a standing in the space of reasons necessarily involves some sensitivity to the inferential linkages, but the satisfactory epistemic *status* of some standings is not accountable in terms of an argument based on immediately satisfactory positions. Inferential linkages, in these cases, only conform some kind of background; they are not constitutive of epistemic authority. In these cases, McDowell would argue that factiveness and conceptuality are intimately tied. Factiveness is possible only for beings endowed with conceptual states and a linguistic framework.³ The conceptual content of an experience, in non-deceptive cases, is a “perceptible fact”.⁴ And this does not depend on any rational considerations that would lead the subject to take the experience “at face value”. As he has declared in clear and emphatic terms, “factiveness takes care of itself” [McDowell (1998c), p. 433]. If the experience is veridical, then we do not need any other rational consideration to give epistemic credentials to our seeing that *p*. Not only are inferential linkages insufficient to ensure factiveness; furthermore, they are not constitutive of epistemic authority in the empirical starting-points in the space of reasons. In this (the veridical) case, epistemic credentials do not consist in the rational force of the considerations that would help the subject to fulfill her epistemic responsibility.

First, it is clear that the standings in the space of reasons enable inferential articulation because they are conceptually structured, but this does not entail that the space itself is inferentially accountable. Not every proper move in the space of reasons is an inferential one. As McDowell puts it in his debate with R. Brandom, “[t]he point just brings out the insufficiency of a conception of justification that limits itself to inferential inheritance on entitlement” [McDowell (2002a), p. 100]. Second, the centrality of factiveness in empirical knowledge does not entail that we are confronted with absolute standings and states endowed with unmediated credentials. McDowell defends a version of “mediated” standings in the space of reasons that excludes absolute starting-points: every epistemic position involves being “responsive to the mediating considerations”, to the “rational force of surrounding considerations” [McDowell (1998c), p. 430]. The thesis could be stated in the following terms: it is essential for being an (authoritative) epistemic position in the space of reasons to be subject to doxastic responsibility and rational criticism; but this rationally mediated force is not always *constitutive* of being epistemically authorized.

Two aspects need some explanation if we want to talk about experiences as starting-points in the space of reasons:

(a) How are we sensitive to rational considerations in perception? The idea is that experience is responsive to rational relations in the sense that our empirical judgements are fallible due to failure in the rational control of the subject. Oddly enough, one could claim that we could control our experience rationally, but it is more reasonable to say that we exert our control over the beliefs grounded on the experiences or, at least, over our rational *takings*.

(b) How is it possible that this sensitivity to rational linkages is not constitutive of the satisfactory epistemic *status* of perceptual “knowings”? The idea is that the experience is a standing in the space of reasons in so far as, when the subject is not misled, truth and justification do not come apart. In that case, “seeing that...” is a proper move in the space of reasons and offers reasons to endorse some empirical beliefs without appealing to any other rational considerations.

The disjunctive view of experience is designed to explain both points: the possibility of being fallible while preserving the idea that in experience we are in cognitive touch with the world. Fallibility is something implicit in the very idea of knowing: knowledge involves both a truth requirement and a condition of doxastic responsibility. Either requirement may not be fulfilled. In the first case, I could entertain the experience as if p while it is the case that not- p ; in the second case, even if really p , I fail to be justified in claiming that p by appearing to me that p , because the “rational surroundings of my experience” lead me to withhold that p . How does the disjunctive view accommodate both possibilities of fallibility?

V

The disjunctive view is designed to resist the charms of the “highest common factor” model of experience. The latter tries to accommodate two features of the experience: (1) a phenomenological fact concerning the indistinguishability of veridical and deceptive experiences; both kinds of cases involve a “seeming to someone as if p ”; (2) the epistemic significance of experience, that is, how experience contributes in grounding rationally empirical beliefs. The way the “highest common factor” model answers both requirements is a cause of philosophical anxieties.

The defender of the “highest common factor” defender argues as follows: experiences, veridical or deceptive, are intrinsically indistinguishable; from the subject’s point of view, it is impossible to distinguish which one is veridical or which one is not. From this “fact”, she draws the conclusion that in both kinds of cases the experiential intake has to be the same, an *appearance*. But,

in talking about the epistemic significance of experience, it is necessary to accommodate the possibility of being misled. Fallibility considerations compel us to view appearances in non-deceptive cases as intermediaries between the experiencing subject and the world. Appearances would provide defeasible reasons to infer how the world is in fact; they must be supplemented with a cogent argument if they are going to serve as groundings for empirical beliefs about the environment. I am credited with empirical knowledge only when the availability of the appearance is supplemented with an inference to secure that it is a veridical appearance.

The disjunctive view tries to block both inferences, from “indistinguishability” to the “highest common factor”, and from “fallibility” to the “veil of ideas” as epistemic intermediaries. Nevertheless, the key point in the argument is not the incoherence in talking about both kinds of cases (veridical and deceptive) as indistinguishable, but the picture the “highest common factor” view introduces to account for the role played by appearances in the epistemic game of “giving” reasons. There is nothing wrong with the idea that both cases involve “an appearance that things are thus and so”, to the extent that it “leaves it open that whereas in one kind of case [the deceptive one] what is given to experience is a mere appearance, in the other [the veridical one] it is the fact itself made manifest” [McDowell (1998d), p. 396]. Freeing ourselves from a mistaken conception of empirical authority, that is, a mistaken account of experiences as proper moves in the space of reasons, we could yet accept the phenomenological fact that any experience is characterized by how things *look* or *appear* to the subject. The idea that appearances (understood as *appearings*, not as a kind of object) play a role in characterizing experience is not questionable,⁵ only the idea that they can function as premises in an argument to recover the world at a later time.⁶

So, what would be the best characterization of experiences if we don’t want to be committed to this self-standing realm of appearances?

Suppose we say — not at all unnaturally — that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself [McDowell (1998d), pp. 386-7].

VI

But the disjunctive view does not follow directly from the denial of the “highest common factor” account. They are not the only “theories” in town.

The so-called epistemic conception of experience seems to satisfy the requirements without assuming the disjunction. In fact, McDowell's account of experience is very close to some versions of the epistemic view.

The classical epistemic model claims that to perceive that p is to be disposed to believe that p . Nevertheless, McDowell does not accept this thesis and argues for the belief-independence of experiential states: belief involves spontaneity and rational control by the subject in a way that is not available to experience. "In a picture in which all there is behind the judgement is a disposition to make it, the experience itself goes missing" [McDowell (1996), p. 61]. What motivates the rejection of the epistemic view is its inability to accommodate the phenomenological character of experience, the role played by how things *appear* in experience. Appearing that p would have to be epistemically relevant to ground the judgement that p . And it would also have to be relevant in cases in which there is no fact p that would make the judgement that p true. My conviction of being correct in applying an empirical concept would have to be the same in veridical and deceptive cases if it is the phenomenology of the experience that counts as a relevant feature in grounding my epistemic entitlements. But it is not clear whether McDowell would accept that in deceptive cases phenomenology itself gives any epistemic credentials to the fact that p . But this is not the point I want to raise regarding McDowell's conception of empirical authority.

Even if we assume the belief-independence of experiential states, there is yet another way to defend an epistemic conception of experience. Perceiving that p is a matter of accepting that p , and accepting that p is like "making an assertion".⁷ McDowell also rejects this version. In his response to B. Stroud,⁸ he argues that there is no need to assume that in having the experience that p , in the sense of *having the impression* that p , the subject is accepting the proposition that p .⁹ McDowell insists that experiences are not acceptings, but "invitations" to accept or withhold the propositional content involved in the experience. But what is the difference between an invitation to judge that p and a disposition to do so? The difference could be explained as follows: to be disposed seems to involve simply "causal relations", whereas an invitation leaves the decision to accept or withhold the proposition up to the subject. An invitation seems to involve rational considerations. To accept or withhold the invitation is "up to me".

Nevertheless, we could still ask whether it is the appearing itself or the acceptance or withholding of the invitation that the experience offers to me that constitutes a standing in the space of reasons. In what sense does the appearing itself belong to the space of "justifying and being able to justify"? How things appear to me in having the impression that p is not "up to me", if we try to preserve the passive dimension of our sensibility. The appearing as such is not revisable and it is doubtful that we could offer any rational consideration that allows me to experience things in a different way. It seems

that it is my acceptance that things appear to me as being thus and so that is subject to my responsibility.

Another option would be to argue that rational sensitivity is explained by the fact that the experience actualizes the same conceptual capacities that would be present in the acceptance of a proposition about the objective world. But it is clear that entertaining the *same content* is not sufficient to explain how the experience can rationally ground an empirical judgement; we also need to specify what kind of “rational linkage” exists between the content of the experience and the content of the belief. McDowell talks about “being aware that...” as the reason constituting state. Now we need to clear up what we understand by the state of awareness that constitutes the authoritative rational relation between the experience and the corresponding belief. We have two different ways of conceiving “being aware”. In the first, we identify awareness with “noticings”; we are intellectually aware that something is present in experience, such that one has the occurrent belief that it is so. Surely, this interpretation takes us back to experiencing as “accepting”. The second way is better suited to McDowell’s purposes: we talk about “experiential awareness” as being directly aware of the experience in virtue of having it.¹⁰ But it seems to me that in the justificatory task the unnoticed features could not enter in the actual grounding of the empirical belief. Every epistemically relevant feature has to be noticed by the experiencing subject. If not, there would be no clear difference between experiential and intellectual awareness. It seems as if the only way-out is to suppose that it is the fact itself, in so far as the subject is aware of it, that justifies the belief.¹¹ But, in this case, if we don’t want to take “appearances” as singular facts in a realm of fantasy, we are not acquainted with appearing-facts but with the very facts in the world that would make the empirical belief true. The possibility of being misled is not open, because it is the truth that *p as experientially given* that justifies the belief that *p*.

One should resist such temptation. It does not seem to be very far from some versions of the Myth of the Given. Remember that Sellars was worried about the knowings in presence and not only about the non-defeasible character of empirical knowledge. So it is not only the idea that there are no absolute standings in the space of reasons that is at stake, but also the possibility that the awareness of the fact be the only feature in explaining the satisfactory epistemic standing of our empirical beliefs, their credibility and authoritative *status*. One could argue that it is because we don’t take the disjunctive conception of experience seriously that we have such tempting inclinations. McDowell insists on the idea that, in the best cases (veridical cases of experience), “entitlement and truth do not come apart” [McDowell (2002a), p. 99]. Being aware that thus and so in experience makes the presence of *p* manifest to someone. The very fact of *seeing* entitles the subject to a rational taking that *p* (judging, believing or accepting). In the unhappy cases of deception, the very “fact” of *mere seeming* is compatible with there being no *p*. But is

the subject not entitled to a rational taking that p ? Of course, she is not, because in this case she would be irresponsible in accepting that p : rational considerations and truth would come apart.

McDowell characterizes experiences as conceptual states consisting in the appearing to a subject that the world is thus and so. To this extent, they can play the role of *reasons* to ground the “convictions” that the world is thus and so, but they are not conceived as *rational* takings of the content that would justify the corresponding belief. It is this difference that McDowell tries to accommodate in his discussion by introducing the disjunctive view of experience. But we suspect now that the appearing does not make the same epistemic contribution in veridical as in deceptive cases.

VII

Following the disjunctive thesis, the priority in the explanation of experience is not on the side of deceptive cases, but on the side of veridical ones. It is necessary to reverse the order of explanation: the privilege corresponds to the cases in which the subject is not falling short of the facts [Child (1992)]. If the “highest common factor” theory begins with the possibility of delusion and has problems explaining the possibility of a true openness to the world, then the pressing question becomes the characterization of a *mere* appearance. What does a disjunctivist understand by *mere* appearance? It is an appearing in which the fact that was supposed to appear is not *really* making itself manifest to someone. We could say that it is *as if* the fact is making itself manifest to a subject despite there being no manifesting fact. But this difference cannot be decided by phenomenologically inspecting the content of the experience. Surely, the appearing is not missing in this case and is contentful, because otherwise it would not be easy to explain how the disjunct “mere appearance” can make true the claim that someone has the appearance that such-and-such is the case. But, when the objective fact itself is not present, can we say anything about such appearings? It is certainly difficult to express what “mere appearance” could mean, because, on the one hand, it sounds highly paradoxical to claim that it is a fact of appearing in which no fact appears (remember that we don’t want to postulate appearing-facts), and, on the other hand, it is an empty characterization to claim that it is a case in which a fact is not perceptually manifest or apparent. If we follow this line of reasoning, it would lead us to a mere stipulation: the difference between the case in which it *merely* appears to the subject that there is a dagger before his eyes and the case in which the dagger is *in fact* appearing before the subject’s eyes lies in that, by the very construction of the argument, in the first case *there is no* dagger before his eyes and in the second *there is*. But if this is the best interpretation of the disjunction, the difference is external to the very ap-

pearing itself, to the experiential state. And again this is the image that McDowell is trying to reject, because it is the world, externally conceived, which would do us the favour (or not) in order to know the facts. Nobody would deny that in the veridical case our epistemic position is “excellent”, but to what else could we appeal in veridical and deceptive cases, except the very fact itself, to decide whether we are in this privileged epistemic position?

VIII

The only way to accommodate the role of *mere* appearances in McDowell’s account is to give an asymmetric treatment to each disjunct. But what reason do we have to follow this asymmetric strategy?

One way to understand the disjunctive view symmetrically would be to think that, given the indistinguishability thesis, we are *ipso facto* entitled to endorse the disjunctive claim that *either* I am seeing that *p* *or* I am merely in a seeming state. This would be to promote a very cautious attitude regarding our experiences. Given the way things appear to me, I would be entitled to accept the proposition that *either* it really appears that *p* *or* it is a mere appearance that *p*. We know that one of the disjuncts has to be true; and so we would have a reason to accept the disjunction as justified. But the question is in what sense the disjunct that would support our entitlement to the whole disjunction would be in its turn justified. The disjunctivist would claim that each disjunct has a different epistemic significance. The cautious attitude is not the way experience works in connection with the possibility of judging how the world is. To think that experiencing that such and such is thus and so only entitles us to the disjunctive claim is to reproduce the strategy of the “highest common factor” view. Remember that the objection against this model is less the denial that there is no common factor than the way in which it performs the epistemic role. It is of no help to argue from a “highest common factor” disjunctively characterized; this strategy distorts how the epistemic standings in the space of reasons are to be understood. We would require, if it were so, a cogent argument to eliminate some of the disjuncts. The disjunctive view cannot be but a thesis about the different epistemic significance of each disjunct.¹²

Now the asymmetry in the epistemic authority of the experiential intake seems more pressing. The left side of the disjunction provides a non-defeasible epistemic entitlement to the claim that *p*. The right hand disjunct works very differently. We don’t “immediately” acquire the conviction that it *merely* appears that *p*. In the first case, experiencing is taking in the world as being thus and so, and is not characterized by any state of acceptance or judgement; in the second case, the passage through a state of acceptance is required even to make it true that I have an experience that *p* by *merely* appearing to me that *p*. Even if McDowell sometimes talks about an inference from “seeing that *p*”

to things *being* thus and so, there are two different epistemic “entitlements” present in the very building of the disjunction: in veridical cases, where “to appear” is really conceived as factive, justification and truth cannot be separated; in deceptive cases, it is plain that I am not justified in accepting the *mere* appearance that *p* by any fact being present in my experience; if I am entitled to accept the right hand disjunct is because I have an argument, i.e. good reasons, to withhold my inclination to believe that *p*.¹³ McDowell talks in one case of non-defeasible entitlements; in the other, we are confronted with defeasible entitlements. The question then is about what it is that makes the left hand side of the disjunction so special.

IX

We are now ready to explain how the disjunctive account of experience requires an odd asymmetry in epistemic entitlements. The acceptance that *p* by seeing that *p* requires being rationally sensitive to how things appear to us. We *might* have *good* reasons not to accept that *p* although it appears to me that *p*. But this is expressed, in the disjunctive conception, by taking into consideration the right hand side of the disjunction. At the same time, the acceptance that *p* by appearing to us that *p* does not involve any argument to the conclusion that *p*, any argument excluding the possibly *good* reasons not to accept it. Nevertheless, to conclude that it merely appears that *p* we need to build an argument and consider the rational circumstances of the experience. In the veridical case, we don’t need any credentials apart from the experience that *p*. It is the experience itself which provides credentials and reasons to accept that *p*. To have an experience in this sense does not require any acceptance or withholding. But we cannot give any account of “mere appearing” that *p* without involving some argumentative reasons to hold that “normal conditions” are not *working properly*.

McDowell likes to mention a case in which we could have *good* reasons to distrust our senses, although we are really seeing that *p*, because *as a matter of fact* our faculties are functioning perfectly [McDowell (1998c), p. 430, n. 25; McDowell (2002b), pp. 277-8]. In this case, we could be entitled (in one sense) to withhold the judgement that *p* and even endorse the claim that it is a mere appearance.¹⁴ Nonetheless, does not the very fact that I was really seeing that *p* provide us with an entitlement to *p*? Of course, if I “realize that I was seeing” that *p*. But McDowell contends that if I have reasons to distrust my senses, then I was not seeing that *p*. Why not say at the same time that if I was seeing that *p*, then I have no reason to distrust my senses? This fact reflects the asymmetry. But what happens when I “realize” that I was seeing? How is the entitlement to *p* restored?

McDowell’s case seems to be better when reconstructed in the following way:

1. I have a visual experience that *p*.
2. I withhold that *p*, because I have reasons to suppose that there is a failure in the normal conditions.
3. Then I am entitled to conclude that it merely appears that *p* to me; and this entitlement is grounded *argumentatively* in the rational assessment of my acceptance.
4. Suppose that I realize that I was really seeing that *p*. In this case, it is not enough to mention my previous experience; I have to be convinced that I was wrong in my previous argument and reject my withholding and the idea that I was confronted with a mere appearance. I assume that I was doxastically blameworthy in withholding *p*.

Or is it possible that, after arguing against my previous undefeasible entitlement, there is a mysterious restoration of it? In this case, if I was seeing that *p*, I was at the same time undefeasibly entitled to the belief that *p*. But the right hand side disjunct leaves open the rational possibility of my entitlement being defeated and not seeing that *p* (or thinking that I was not seeing that *p*).¹⁵ The restoration of my confidence in that I was seeing that *p* involves the acceptance that *p* by a cogent argument available to the perceiving subject. To realize now that I was seeing that *p* *explicitly* involves the thought that I do not consider that my faculties are not working properly. Why not say at the same time that my accepting that *p*, by seeing that *p*, is supported by the consideration (explicit or not) that my faculties are working properly? But if it is so, then it is clear that the judgement is not grounded only on the experience that *p*; there must be other aspects in play. If we analyze McDowell's case in these terms, then an experience that *p* would never be *by itself* a sufficient reason to accept that *p*.

McDowell could still reject this conclusion reading the case another way:

- 1'. I have a visual experience that *p*; and to have an experience that *p* provides a *prima facie* entitlement to accept that *p*.
- 2'. I have reasons to suspect that my faculties are not working properly and I accordingly withhold my previous acceptance.
- 3'. Then I am entitled to conclude that it merely appears to me that *p*.
- 4'. If I cast doubt on my previous doubts, then what I am doing is restoring my previous *prima facie* entitlement to *p* by experiencing that *p*.

This reading needs to explain how these entitlements can be restored

once we have assumed that rational considerations are not constitutive of the epistemic credentials involved. Is it not a little odd to claim that, in this case, considering whether my faculties are working properly is not rationally constitutive of my believing that p by having the experience that p ? Moreover, even if we believe in restoration, we have *discovered that* the previous entitlement was in fact correct. And the discovery involves other beliefs and rational considerations. My contention is that all cases of epistemic entitlements in perceptual beliefs involve the same reference to the proper functioning of our faculties. How this involvement has to be conceived in order to explain empirical authority may still be a matter of controversy. Some authors would regard the question as the involvement of a concealed argument; others would claim that my entitlement to p in veridical cases *presupposes* that our faculties are working properly; and others would appeal to the vocabulary of virtues. All of them would consider that we have no clear reason to defend a strong asymmetry between veridical and deceptive cases.

Moreover, we sometimes use appearings to justify our claims about objective reality and take into account other rational considerations without concluding that we are in the presence of *mere* appearances. If I have an experience of something elliptical, this can serve as a reason to hold the belief that that thing is round.¹⁶ Evidently, the appearing is a reason to hold this belief only when one knows other things. But to enter as a satisfactory epistemic position into the Sellarsian space of reasons, one needs to argue as follows: first, I have to endorse the claim that this object appears elliptical; second, I endorse the claim that certain appearances are the way in which round things appear elliptical; then I endorse the claim that that thing is round. In which sense are we confronted with mere appearances? It is true that the appearings are relevant in the justificatory task, but they are relevant in every case *and in the same way*. It is clear to me that the way things appear to me as being elliptical in certain circumstances resists my effort to think that it is round, because the appearing itself cannot be revised; it is not “up to me”. In Sellars’ account, what is rationally accountable, and thus a starting-point in the space of reasons, is my accepting or withholding the content of the appearance given other beliefs that I consider in order to establish my decision.

Finally, we can reconsider the cases of illusory perceptions. If one accepts that appearings can intervene as reasons to ground perceptual beliefs, there is nothing that prevents us from concluding that in the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion the lines *are* unequal. Other evidence would put this conclusion in doubt. In this case the subject will be cautious, that is, she will consider the possibility of being misled. She will need some evidence to decide whether she takes the content of the way things look to her at face value. So, to take how things appear to the subject at face value would not be sufficient to ground her acceptance that they are how they appear. The disjunctive view tries to insist on the fact that we do not really see that the lines are un-

equal, because we cannot see what is not there. Nevertheless, the point is not about our use and understanding of the word “see”, but about how the subject is entitled to take the way things appear to her as reasons for accepting or withholding the propositional claim. If “seeing that *p*” is a genuine standing in the space of reasons, it is because we take it to be a “knowing”, that is, a move in the game of “justifying and being able to justify”, and in performing this function the subject uses something other than the way things appear to her.

X

But there is yet another way to understand the disjunction. We have a structure of acceptance by default. Confronted with the way things look to us, we are entitled by default to conclude that they are thus and so. Only in the case where we have *reasonable* doubts in supposing that the “other things equal” clause is violated, is the right hand side of the disjunction activated. McDowell is very close to adopting such a view in texts like the following.¹⁷

Unless there are grounds for suspicion, such as odd lighting conditions, having it look to one as if things are a certain way — ostensibly seeing things to be that way — becomes accepting that things are that way by a sort of default, involving no exercise of the freedom that figures in a Kantian conception of judgment [McDowell (1998e), p. 439].

But, again, this way of understanding the disjunction introduces a clear asymmetry in the way we conceive the empirical entitlements within the space of reasons. An initial point: claiming that we are confronted with a justificatory structure by default is clearly different from affirming the unfeasible nature of the entitlement when someone is seeing that *p*. In any case, the point is that when someone takes herself as seeing that *p*, she is already accepting or endorsing the claim that *p*. That is Sellars’ idea of standings in the space of reasons. Our seeing that *p* has to be rationally sensitive to how things look to us in the same way that the mere seeming that *p* is also rationally sensitive to the way things look. In both kinds of cases, the reliability of our faculties in providing us with access to the objective facts is in question. The structure by default only points to the fact that we do not make our assessment on the epistemic position in which we stand explicit, but the possibility of failure in the proper working of our faculties depends on how we see ourselves as knowers: we do not have to ascertain that we are not confronted with delusive perceptions in every case, but it is *by* the appropriate working of our cognitive faculties that we are entitled to accept that things are thus and so by looking thus and so to us. The asymmetric treatment hides the very nature of our being in a good epistemic position, and this is particularly relevant in those cases in which we are trying to understand the empirical authority of

the starting-points in the space of reasons.

Moreover, the asymmetry could lead us to some unadvisable consequences. If we want to explain what the source of the empirical authority of our entitlements is, we can appeal to the fact that I see that things are thus and so. Then, by default, I would be entitled to accept that things are thus and so. But what is my entitlement to accept that I am seeing that things are thus and so? McDowell is tempted to claim that it is the *fact* itself that one is perceiving so. My entitlement then is guaranteed by the truth of the claim. In a certain sense, the epistemic acceptability is “directly reflected” in the seeing itself. At the same time, this is the condition for the subject to *immediately* recognize the authority of her claim. In the very fact of seeing that *p*, the subject is entitled to the claim that *p* and recognizes her own empirical authority to accept it. This immediate recognition, reflected in the very fact that we are really seeing, excludes any temptation to demand any evidence from which we need to reconstruct an argument for the authority of our empirical claims. The asymmetry with the right hand side of the disjunction is evident and it is also evident that we are out of the Sellarsian space of reasons, in which we cannot acquire empirical authority for our observational claims without knowing “general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*” [Sellars (1997), §26, p. 75]. This is his way of eliminating any temptation to the knowings in presence.¹⁸

XI

The Sellarsian account of the space of reasons conceives the kind of rational assessments every standing within the space is subject to symmetrically. Every satisfactory epistemic position in the space of reasons is subject to the same rational constraints; an epistemic standing needs to be justified (supported by reasons) and be able to function as a possible reason. I think that the disjunctive strategy has a different line of inspiration, whose aim is to preserve the common sense intuition of our direct access to the world. Hence, the privilege of veridical cases in explaining experience. Veridical cases represent special standings in the space of reasons. Experiences, McDowell claims, do not have epistemic credentials, but they can rationally ground the acceptance of a belief with the same conceptual content. But, in the Sellarsian conception, that would mean that it is the acceptance itself which constitutes a truly epistemic standing in the space of reasons. The asymmetric account that McDowell offers requires that, in order to explain the rational assessment involving experiences, we distinguish between the kind of empirical entitlement we have for the belief that we are in the presence of a fact making itself manifest, and that we have for the belief that we are in the presence of a mere appearance. In the latter case, we need an argument involving a set of previous acceptings and withholdings. I have argued that this seems at odds with

the way in which how things appear to us works in grounding our beliefs.

There are two direct ways to restore the symmetry within the space of reasons. The first would be to assume that we are entitled to endorse the appearance that p even in cases in which there is no p . This would be a retreat to conceive appearances as intermediaries and the sceptic will have a place in the picture.

The second is to conceive, as Sellars did, every entitlement within the space of reasons as inferential; surely sceptical doubts will also be in place. And then we need to argue against the sceptic and not simply show that sceptical questions lack any urgency. At least, we need to consider whether we are in a good epistemic position in order to claim that what is directly manifested to us is a fact.

But we could also abandon symmetry in understanding empirical entitlements; the basic idea is that, in genuine perceptual entitlements, truth and justification do not come apart. I suspect that this was the main thesis in the epistemological theories of the “given”. Givenness is a thesis about how to ground our empirical beliefs: our taking the truth that p is sufficient to justify endorsing p . It is the presence of the fact itself that secures my being entitled to my empirical belief.

A less direct way of restoring the symmetry could consist in naturalizing the space of reasons and translating the structure of empirical entitlements by default into the language of the proper functioning of reliable processes. The epistemic excellence within the space of reasons is derived from the virtuous working of our faculties.

*Departamento de Lingüística, Lógica y Filosofía de la Ciencia
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
Campus de Cantoblanco, E-28049 Cantoblanco, Madrid, Spain
E-mail: jesus.vega@uam.es*

NOTES

¹ This paper would not have been written without the discussions held with Fernando Broncano who put pressure on some dubious points of my arguments and defended the disjunctive view. This text grew out of the doubts raised by C. Thiebaut against my account of the disjunctive conception. Ever fruitful conversations with Diego Lawler about McDowell’s philosophy have helped me to articulate my argument. Javier Gil and David Teira had read previous versions of this paper. I am very grateful to all of them for their observations and comments.

² In any case, we are confronted with a “peculiar” kind of inference in trying to spell out the conditions of the epistemic satisfactoriness of basic empirical entitlements, in which no other inferential states are constitutive of the empirical entitlement.

³ “It goes with being restrictive about conceptually structured content that we

cannot employ the very same notion of factiveness in connection with the states that result from such non-rational or pre-rational capacities" [McDowell (1998c), p. 433].

⁴ "That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world" [McDowell (1996), p. 26].

⁵ More controversial is the idea that the phenomenological features of experience would contribute to give empirical credentials to the subject's beliefs.

⁶ The main motivation in McDowell's arguments is not only epistemological: he is worried by the semantic consequences of the highest common factor. The disjunctive view seems to be the only alternative to losing the world. Experience itself would be deprived of objective content if it were not viewed as answering to the world itself. Then, the disjunctivist tries to restore the possibility of experience being directed to the world. So McDowell is less worried by the sceptical scenarios than by the intelligibility of the idea that the experience is open to the world. This is the main target in McDowell's *Mind & World*. See pages 111-3.

⁷ This is Sellars' expression in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*: "For to say that a certain experience is a *seeing that* something is the case, is to do more than describe the experience. It is to characterize it as, so to speak, making an assertion or claim, and... to *endorse* that claim" [Sellars (1997), §16, p. 39]. "Seeing that..." is a standing in the space of reasons in so far as we conceive the experience as making an assertion and endorsing a claim. I think we have enough textual basis in Sellars' writing to attribute to him a version of the epistemic conception of experience. This does not mean that Sellars wasn't worried about the phenomenological character of perceptual experiences; but it is clear that phenomenology does not affect the explanation he gives about how *seeings* acquire the epistemic credentials that place them in the space of reasons.

⁸ The response [McDowell (2002b)] and Stroud's paper (2002) can be found in the book edited by N. H. Smith, *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World* (London & New York, Routledge, 2002). McDowell's response is in pages 277-9.

⁹ Some points in my argument are very close to the dialectics in Stroud's paper.

¹⁰ See E. Sosa in chapter 7 of his book with L. Bonjour (2003), pp. 119-20.

¹¹ I take this option as a version of a theory of perceptual acquaintance with facts.

¹² McDowell expresses such a conviction in McDowell (this volume), where he answers some objections by C. Wright about the significance of the disjunctive view to answer the sceptic [Wright (2002)].

¹³ It is not, as Wright argues, that we need an *a priori* entitlement to the belief that delusions are rare in warranting the left hand side of the disjunction and that we discover in deceptive cases that it would be wrong to accept the propositional content of the experience. McDowell contends that we are before two different ways of talking about "being entitled to".

¹⁴ It is clear that, if one is defending the disjunctive view, in having the experience that *p* and doubting that *p*, one is at the same time withholding that *p* and endorsing the claim that it merely appears that *p*.

¹⁵ The problem lies in answering the question about what "fact", if any, would lead me to consider this kind of thought. What would the content of the thought be? Or would it also be better to talk about the mere appearance that I was thinking that I was not seeing that *p*?

¹⁶ In other cases we conclude that we *see* things just how they look to us. These

are the cases that suggest the special entitlement of our empirical beliefs.

¹⁷ In fact, McDowell is not talking in this text about defeasibility as a justificatory question but as a genetic one. He is trying to explain how the acquisition of a perceptual belief does not necessarily involve a judgement. It is acquired by default in certain circumstances. Nonetheless, we can draw a certain version of disjunctivism from these terms and apply it to the epistemological question.

¹⁸ I do not see this question as merely exegetical. The Myth of the Given cannot be stated only in terms of sensuous contents or appearing-facts; it is above all a question about the immediacy and status of our epistemic entitlements. Sellars rejects the idea that we can have an empirical standing in the space of reasons without “presupposing” other knowledge. Obviously, the exegetical question would be how to understand this kind of “presupposition”. It is the understanding of this question that I think is contentious in McDowell’s response.

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