

An Antinomy of Empirical Judgment: Brandom and McDowell

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In empirical judgment, one would seem to be at once answerable for how one takes things to be and answerable to how things are. It is not so easy, however, to see how these moments fit together. Tracing some main themes in Brandom's work and that of John McDowell, I aim to show that the difficulty arises out of an interaction between two otherwise cogent chains of reasoning: Brandom's argument that since the Given is a myth, the impacts of reality on a perceiver cannot constitute a tribunal for judgment, and McDowell's that since the spontaneity of judgment is empty independent of answerability to how things are, those impacts must constitute a tribunal for judgment. (See Figure 1.)¹

Brandom and McDowell are agreed that empirical judgment is at once an exercise of rational freedom and answerable to things as they are. They are also agreed that all awareness (at least of the sort that matters to empirical judgment) is conceptual, and that the capacity for such awareness is essentially learned through acculturation into a shared public language. Where they disagree is on the question what it means to say that awareness is conceptual. For Brandom to say that awareness is conceptual is to say that it involves the application of a concept where to apply a concept just is to make a judgment. On his account, which he takes to be Sellars's as well, we avoid the Myth of the Given "by seeing nothing non-judgmental that could serve to *justify* perceptual judgments, rather than just to *cause* them".² For McDowell, Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given is aimed only at the atomism of traditional empiricism. On McDowell's account,

which he takes to be Sellars's as well, conceptual capacities are exercised *passively* in experience; they are actualized in experiences conceived as direct disclosures of how things are, as revelatory of facts. For him, while “conceptual capacities are essentially exercisable in judging”, nevertheless “judging is not the only mode of actualization of conceptual capacities”.³ Conceptual capacities, as McDowell understands them, are also passively drawn into operation in experience.

Brandom takes exercises of conceptual capacities just to be exercises of freedom, of the spontaneity of judgment. McDowell claims that conceptual capacities can also be passively exercised, that they *are* passively exercised in experience. We can begin to understand why McDowell and Brandom diverge at just this point and in just this way by going back to Kant, in particular to Kant's dictum that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”. For McDowell it is the first half of the dictum, according to which thoughts without content are empty, that is paramount. What it means, he thinks, is that the spontaneity of judgment is empty, mere play, absent answerability to how things are. McDowell explains why in his introduction to *Mind and World*:

a belief or judgment to the effect that things are thus and so—a belief or judgment whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so—must be a posture or stance that is *correctly* or *incorrectly* adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so. . . . This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgment, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world—to how things are—for whether or not it is correctly executed.⁴

Once we see this, McDowell argues, we should be able to see that perceptual experience constitutes a “tribunal” for empirical judgment, that “experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks”.⁵ Experience so

conceived must be conceptually articulated, and also something with respect to which a thinker is wholly passive.

It is the second half of Kant's dictum, according to which intuitions without concepts are blind, that is key for Brandom. If intuitions are blind, that is, as nothing to us, independent of the exercise of conceptual capacities, then they can make no contribution to the contents of concepts. It follows, as Sellars puts the point in "Inference and Meaning", that "the 'content' of concepts as well as their logical 'form' is determined by the rules of the understanding".⁶ Sellars's view, and Brandom's following him, is the "rationalist's" that "the meaning of a term lies in the materially and formally valid inferences it makes possible"⁷—or, as Brandom has put it, "conceptual contents are inferential roles".⁸ A third way to put that same point, one that highlights the tension between Brandom and McDowell, is to say that concepts belong *wholly* to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity. Because they do, their exercise is in every case an exercise of freedom.

Now Kant too thinks that concepts belong to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity. As we are told in the *Jäsche Logic*, sensibility and understanding are at once logically distinguished as involving fundamentally different sorts of representations, intuitions and concepts, and also metaphysically distinguished.⁹ As metaphysically distinguished, sensibility is a receptive faculty, "the capacity of receiving representations", and understanding is a faculty of spontaneity, "the power of knowing an object through those representations".¹⁰ Nor are these merely alternative ways of putting things for Kant. It is for him a substantive thesis that the concept/intuition distinction is aligned in this way with the spontaneity/receptivity distinction. The idea of an

understanding, a spontaneity, that is itself intuitive—one “through whose representation the objects of the representation should at the same time exist” (B138-9)—is not incoherent. It is only our spontaneity (more generally, that of any finite being) that is and must be discursive through concepts, only our intuitions (more generally, those of any finite being) that are and must be given through a receptive faculty. But though Kant does think that concepts belong to the faculty of spontaneity as it contrasts with the receptive faculty of sense, and so that all exercises of conceptual capacities are exercises of spontaneity, he *also* recognizes that the exercise of spontaneity in judgment is empty independent of rational constraint by what is *and* that nothing not in conceptual shape can rationally constrain anything. Because his two insights—and I am prepared to call them both insights—seem, then, to be incompatible, Kant introduces two different perspectives, a transcendental perspective from which to discern the radical separation of sensibility and understanding, and an empirical perspective from which to discern their internal relationship one to the other. Transcendentally, on Kant’s view, concepts belong to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity; empirically, concepts are passively exercised in receptivity and furnish thereby a rational constraint on judgment.

Kant has both the insights with which we began, both the insight at the heart of McDowell’s view that exercises of spontaneity in judgment are empty independent of receptivity or rational constraint by what is, and the insight that underlies Brandom’s view, the insight that concepts have the form of rules belonging to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity. Kant’s problem, for which his Transcendental Idealism is to be the solution, is to reconcile those insights. This, I want briefly to indicate, is also Sellars’s

problem. Once we see that it is, we will be able to appreciate (at least in general) how it is that McDowell and Brandom can read Sellars so differently.

As Sellars understands it, the distinction between sensibility and understanding is a distinction between a faculty of noncognitive representations with respect to which we are wholly passive and a faculty of epistemically significant conceptual representations which, as such, involve spontaneity. His task, as he understands it, is to locate “the conceptual order in the causal order”.¹¹ Whereas Kant aims, in effect, to locate the causal order within the conceptual order—by taking the causally structured world of our experience to be empirically real but transcendently ideal—Sellars aims to avoid Kant’s Transcendental Idealism by doing just the reverse. As a result, where Kant appeals to two perspectives, one transcendental and one empirical, to negotiate the competing demands of his two insights, Sellars appeals instead to a two-part account of truth, an intra-linguistic notion of truth as semantic assertibility, and a matter-of-factual (i.e., nonintentional) notion of truth as picturing.¹² On Sellars’s view, empirical judgments are to be treated as episodes in the space of reasons, the conceptual order, that is, as justified or not according to the semantic rules of the language; *and* they are to be treated as episodes in the realm of nature, in the real order, as states of affairs in the real order that picture, correctly or incorrectly, other states of affairs in the real order. We are then to understand the representational bearing of thought on reality by appeal to sense impressions, noncognitive deliverances of sheer receptivity which guide minds in a way that is to be understood both retrospectively as the (ineffable) cause of our finding things to be thus and so, and prospectively—through the development of ever more adequate

scientific theories—as the (effable) causes of the linguistic pictures we produce that in the limit correctly picture those causes.¹³

Neither McDowell nor Brandom makes anything of Sellars’s idea that noncognitive sense experience somehow “guides” minds in a way that is at once merely causal and also constitutive of an adequate conception of the intentionality of our thought and judgment. Brandom, holding firm to the rationalist strand in Sellars’s thinking according to which concepts belong wholly to spontaneity as it contrasts with the (merely causal) receptivity of sense, gives up the notion of sense experience altogether in his account of the intentionality of thought and judgment. In Brandom’s own account, and in his reading of Sellars, the Sellarsian *space* of giving and asking for reasons is transformed into an essentially social *game* of giving and asking for reasons. Sellars’s talk of experience in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* gives way, in Brandom’s Study Guide, to talk of differential responsive dispositions and score-keeping in a game. McDowell holds firm instead to the empiricist strand in Sellars’s thinking, the strand according to which sense experience has a constitutive role to play in our understanding of the representational bearing of thought on reality—only in McDowell’s account, and in his reading of Sellars, observation reports are not merely the “reliable indicators” and “reliable symptoms” that Sellars says they are.¹⁴ Instead, on McDowell’s reading, observation reports express the observed presence of states of affairs, things themselves as they are brought to mind in experience conceived as a passive actualization of conceptual capacities.

Brandom’s inferentialism, which he describes as “the fundamental semantic innovation around which [*Making It Explicit*] is built”¹⁵, seems directly to follow from the insight that concepts belong to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity.

McDowell's conception of experience as "openness to the layout of reality"¹⁶, which might be described as the fundamental semantic innovation around which *Mind and World* is built, seems directly to follow from the insight that the spontaneity of judgment constitutively involves answerability to how things are. Yet both Brandom and McDowell think they must reject the other's first move. McDowell, while agreeing that awareness requires initiation into a learned public language, nonetheless denies that the contents of concepts are exhausted by inferential relations. On McDowell's account, the contents of concepts are essentially world-involving. As Rorty has put the point:

on McDowell's understanding of "content", some uses of words to classify visible and tangible things—such as "witch" and "Boche" and "phlogiston"—turn out not to have empirical content. They are pseudo-concepts. As we learn more and more about the world, the fewer pseudo-concepts we have and the more real, contentful empirical concepts. As we make intellectual progress, we become more and more open to the world.

Davidson, Sellars, and Brandom have no use for this contrast between uses of words that have content and uses of those that do not. As good inferentialists and panrelationists, they think that all a concept needs to have content is for the word to function as a node in a pattern of inferences.¹⁷

For Brandom, correlatively, the fact that the answerability constitutive of judgment requires rational constraint by how things are should not be taken to imply that experience constitutes a tribunal. On Brandom's account, while it is true that "perceptual experience is the medium through which our thoughts become answerable to how things are"¹⁸, nevertheless "the responsibility of noninferential reports to the corresponding facts is essentially a *social* phenomenon".¹⁹ Rational constraint by things as they are, which for McDowell is directly secured by our passive capacity to be impressed upon by how things are, is secured on Brandom's account only indirectly, "from the point of view of

someone who is assessing the extent to which a report is true or the perceiver is reliable".²⁰

On Brandom's view, the second half of Kant's dictum expresses the insight that the capacity to have intuitions, that is, sensations which merely natural animals also have, is not yet to have a cognitive capacity, the capacity to be aware. As Sellars once put the point,

by denying that sense impressions, however indispensable to cognition, were themselves cognitive, Kant made a radical break with all his predecessors, empiricist and rationalist alike. The 'of-ness' of sensation simply isn't the 'of-ness' of even the most rudimentary thought. Sense grasps no facts, not even such simple ones as something's being red and triangular.²¹

To say further, as Kant also does, that thoughts without content are empty, is to say that sense experience, though noncognitive, is nonetheless essential to knowing. Kant's only mistake, on this reading, was to think that he had somehow to supplement his insight into the radical separation of the roles of sensibility, conceived as a noncognitive sensory receptivity, and understanding, a spontaneous faculty of concepts, with an additional empirical perspective. Kant, that is to say, spoiled his own insight into concepts as belonging to the faculty of spontaneity by thinking that concepts nonetheless have content, objective significance, only in virtue of their relation to objects. As Sellars puts the point,

The familiar notion (Kantian in its origin, but present in various disguises in many contemporary systems) that the form of a concept is determined by 'logical rules', while the content is 'derived from experience' embodies a radical misunderstanding of the manner in which the 'manifold of sense' contributes to the shaping of the conceptual apparatus 'applied' to the manifold in the process of cognition. The contribution does not consist in providing plums for Jack Horner. There is nothing to a conceptual apparatus that isn't determined by its rules, and there is no such thing as choosing those rules to conform with antecedently

apprehended universals and connexions, for the “apprehension of universals and connexions” is already the use of a conceptual frame, and as such presupposes the rules in question.²²

Brandom takes just this view.

Thought, on Brandom’s account, has content in virtue of the inferential rules that govern it, and it is world-directed in virtue of the constitutive yet noncognitive role of sense experience in knowing. What thought is not and cannot be on this view is rationally constrained by experience. Brandom explains in “Perception and Rational Constraint”:

If a suitable story is told about the constitutive inferential engagement of these noninferentially elicited judgments with other judgments, then their status as denizens of the space of reasons and products of spontaneity is secured. . . . If a suitable story is told about how they are rationally criticizable by those who key their correctness to their correspondence to the facts reported, and about their entitlement to the reliability of the noninferential process that elicits them, then rational constraint by how things actually are is secured. . . . And since sense impressions play only an explanatory, not a justificatory role, the Myth of the Given is avoided.²³

Concepts belong to the spontaneity of judgment as it contrasts with the receptivity of sensibility on Brandom’s view. It follows that the realm of the conceptual, of freedom, has an outer boundary beyond which is located the reality on which thought aims to bear; and once that boundary is in place, experience cannot be conceived as openness to reality. Rather, “when we are properly wired up and trained, the perceptible facts wring from us perceptual judgments”.²⁴ Impacts from the world cause us to form perceptual judgments on Brandom’s view; they cannot justify our judgments.²⁵

This conception of the radical separation of sensibility and understanding is available in Kant’s thinking only from the transcendental perspective. Empirically, Kant thinks, sensibility and understanding are inextricably combined. It is the empirical perspective that McDowell focusses on. As a result, his interpretation of Kant’s dictum is

very different from Brandom's. On McDowell's reading, Kant's essential insight is that thoughts without content are empty where this is to be read as the claim that "experiential uptake . . . supplies the content, the substance, that thoughts would otherwise lack".²⁶ Since as Kant also sees, intuitions without concepts are blind, "we should [on McDowell's reading] 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".²⁷ For McDowell, Kant's key insight is that intuitions—understood as cognitively significant, conceptually articulated sensory experiences—mediate the way our thinking is answerable to how things are. Kant's only mistake, as McDowell reads him, is to set this conception of the unbounded conceptual sphere within which all our thought moves within his transcendental frame; for then "the good thought that our sensibility opens us to a reality that is not external to the conceptual can show up only in a distorted form, as if the ordinary empirical world were constituted by appearances of a reality beyond".²⁸ In McDowell's thinking, the insight that the spontaneity of judgment constitutively involves receptivity shows that experience constitutes a tribunal for judgment. It follows, as McDowell argues, that there can be no outer boundary to the realm of the conceptual.

Beginning with the insight that concepts belong to spontaneity, Brandom argues that empirical reality cannot rationally constrain judgment through experience conceived as openness to the layout of reality; for if concepts belong to spontaneity, the reality on which thought aims to bear must lie outside the boundary of the conceptual. Beginning with the insight that the spontaneity of judgment is empty independent of receptivity, McDowell argues that empirical reality must rationally constrain empirical judgment, that

experience must constitute a tribunal for judgment, and hence that there can be no boundary around the conceptual. Reality must lie outside the boundary of the conceptual and hence the notion of experience can play no role in an account of our cognitive involvement in the world (Brandom) and reality cannot lie outside the boundary of the conceptual because experience must function as a tribunal for empirical judgment (McDowell). That is our antinomy. Brandom and McDowell avoid it, each in his own thinking and in his own reading of Sellars, by rejecting the other's first move. McDowell rejects Brandom's (and Sellars's) inferentialist conception of concepts because, he thinks, concepts must be constitutively world-involving (given that spontaneity constitutively involves receptivity). But because, as he sees, the Given is a myth, he must then "reenchant" the world, take it that "the dictates of reason are there [in the world] anyway, whether or not one's eyes are open to them".²⁹ Nature, McDowell concludes (*pace* Sellars), cannot be the realm of law. Brandom, correlatively, rejects McDowell's (and Sellars's) representationalist conception of judgment: "the representational dimension of conceptual contents—the sort of correctness of concept application that answers to how things are with the things represented" is to be understood on Brandom's account "in terms of the *inferential* articulation that defines those contents".³⁰ Because, as Brandom sees, reality must rationally constrain judgment, he holds (*pace* Sellars) that the objective purport of empirical judgment is nothing more than "a structural aspect of the social-perspectival *form* of conceptual contents".³¹ Whereas both Kant and Sellars aim—albeit unsuccessfully³²—to combine the two insights, McDowell and Brandom split them between them. The upshot is a dilemma: McDowell's reenchanting nature or Brandom's social pragmatism.

Empirical judgment, one would like to say, is an act of freedom and answerable to things as they are. It also seems right to argue that *if* the contents of concepts are exhausted by inferential relations then the realm of the conceptual has an outer boundary beyond which lies the reality on which thought aims to bear. Concepts so conceived belong wholly to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity; the realm of the conceptual, on this account, just is the realm of freedom as it contrasts with the realm of (natural) law. But if that is so then Brandom's social pragmatism seems unavoidable. *If*, on the other hand, experience constitutes a tribunal for empirical judgment then empirical reality must be conceptually articulated; for only so can its impacts on us exert a rational constraint on judgment. But then it seems inevitably to follow that, the progress of modern science notwithstanding, nature is not the realm of law. We are left, finally, with the two first moves: Brandom's inference, that concepts belong to spontaneity therefore conceptual contents are inferential roles, which McDowell thinks he must reject; and McDowell's inference, that the spontaneity of judgment requires answerability therefore experience constitutes a tribunal for judgment, which Brandom thinks he must reject. What we need to see is that *both* these inferences are sound, that both ought to be endorsed. We need, that is, to reconcile an inferentialist conception of concepts with a conception of experience as openness to the layout of reality—and the way so much as to begin to do that, I think, is by drawing a distinction between a thought *qua* thinkable, available to be grasped by a thinker, and that same thought *qua* judgeable, available to be acknowledged as true, where this distinction in turn is to be understood in terms of Frege's notions of *Sinn* or sense and *Bedeutung*, meaning.³³

According to Frege's mature view, both object names and concept words at once express inferentially articulated senses, and also, in favored cases, designate objects and concepts.³⁴ A thought *qua* thinkable is an inferentially articulated Fregean sense. It belongs to the realm of freedom and is not world-involving.³⁵ But that same thought is judgeable, available to be acknowledged as true, just if the relevant object names and concept words designate objects and concepts respectively. A *judgeable* content must designate a truth-value; for to judge just is to advance from a thought to a truth-value. A judgeable content is thus essentially world-involving. Brandom's founding insight, then, is an insight into thinkable, or as we might say, *cognitive* content; it is an insight into the nature of a thought insofar as it is available to be grasped by a thinker. McDowell's founding insight, by contrast, is an insight into the nature of judgeable, or as we might say, *semantic* content; it is an insight into the nature of a thought insofar as it is available to be acknowledged as true by a thinker.

As Frege understands it, the world is always already in conceptual shape because, as he holds, concepts as well as objects are something objective. But the world is not, on Frege's account, always already in conceptual shape in *McDowell's* sense of the conceptual. Because, for McDowell, "the right gloss on 'conceptual' is . . . 'belonging to the realm of Fregean sense'"³⁶, for *McDowell* to say that reality is always already in conceptual shape is to say that it is always already *sinnlich*, belonging to the realm of Fregean sense. McDowell's demand for the reenchantment of nature is the demand that the world be in conceptual shape not only in Frege's sense of including concepts as the *Bedeutung* of concept words but also as including the *senses*, the *Sinn*, of concept words. This demand, we should now be able to see, depends on failing to distinguish cognitive

and semantic content. McDowell is right: *semantic* content *is* world-involving (because only if object names and concept words designate objects and concepts respectively can thoughts expressed using them have truth-values). But because, as he also thinks, semantic content just is cognitive content, McDowell takes the sheer thinkability of a thought to be also world-involving. If that were so then the world, the reality on which thought aims to bear, would have to be not only conceptually articulated in Frege's sense but also *sinnlich*.

On Frege's account, the dictates of reason as set in place by the *Bedeutung* of object names and concept words have as such only the *potential* rationally to constrain our thinking. That potential is realized in our developing adequate inferentially articulated conceptions of how things are and thereby the eyes to see. His account is perfectly compatible with a conception of nature as the realm of law. On McDowell's view, by contrast, "the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes [or indeed anyone's eyes] are open to them"³⁷, and that (as McDowell sees) is not compatible with nature as the realm of law for now the favor we need from the world, the favor of setting in place the moment of truth constitutive of *semantic* content, is equally the favor of bestowing *cognitive* content. That, finally, is why McDowell rejects Brandom's first move, why he thinks that the contents not only of our judgments but also of our thoughts are essentially world-involving, why they cannot be exhaustively characterized by their inferential involvements. McDowell thinks he must reject Brandom's first move because he collapses cognitive content into semantic content.

Brandom makes the correlative mistake of collapsing semantic content into cognitive content. Because, as he sees, the contents of concept words (which belong to the realm of

Fregean sense) are exhausted by their inferential relations, and because he does not distinguish between cognitive and semantic content, Brandom infers that the reality on which thought aims to bear is not conceptual in any sense at all, that it does not have even the potential to impress itself on a thinker in a way that rationally constrains judgment. For Brandom, the fact that thinkable contents are not constitutively world-involving means that judgeable contents are also not constitutively world-involving. So, he thinks, his social pragmatist conception of the objectivity of empirical judgment must capture all that is essential to objectivity. Our distinction between cognitive and semantic content blocks the inference. Brandom is right to think that cognitive content is exhausted by inferential relations and as such belongs wholly to the faculty of spontaneity as it contrasts with the faculty of receptivity; but he is wrong to think that that conception of content can serve as a conception of judgeable content. Experience must function as a tribunal for judgment, and we can begin to understand how it can as soon as we recognize that semantic content is different from cognitive content, that it is world-involving.

I have suggested that we need to distinguish between cognitive, or thinkable, content, on the one hand, and semantic, or judgeable content, on the other. I want now to introduce two other, closely related distinctions, one between two sorts of concepts and one between two sorts of claims. The two sorts of concepts are what we might think of as sensory and theoretical concepts. The notion of a sensory concept is essentially that of a concept of a secondary quality, a concept that ineliminably involves an idea of how such things appear to suitably placed perceivers in suitable circumstances. The everyday concept of the color red, say, is such a concept since “what it is for something to be red . . . is not intelligible unless packaged with an understanding of what it is for something to

look red".³⁸ Fully to grasp the sensory concept of red requires having the appropriate experiences. The notion of a theoretical concept does not in the same way constitutively involve sensory experience; the content of a theoretical concept is exhausted by the theory within which it is articulated. Our ordinary concept of water, which (following Aristotle) we can understand as a concept of the cold and the wet, is clearly a sensory concept. To think of water instead as H_2O is to have a theoretical concept of it, one that is articulated within the theory that is codified in the periodic table of the elements. Since, furthermore, there are limits to what, given our sensory endowment, we are capable of experiencing, there are similarly limits to the sensory concepts available to us. Other sorts of beings might have a very different sensory conception of what there is. There are not in the same way limits to the theoretical concepts we might devise. Because the contents of theoretical concepts are exhausted by their inferential articulation within a theory, not only could we devise any theory that might promise to shed light on things, we could also (at least in principle) understand any theory that any other rational being (however different) might devise. The world as it is thought in our best scientific theories, by contrast with the world as we experience it in sense perception, is something that is the same for all rational beings.³⁹

The second distinction is just that between claims regarding how things appear in experience and theoretical claims about how things actually are. It is a fact of everyday experience that our experience of things is largely unaffected by our (theoretical) understanding. Learning that water is H_2O , or that the earth rotates on an axis and revolves around the sun, does not alter our sense experience of water as cold and wet, or our perception of the sun as rising and setting over a motionless earth. Of course we

could have no experience of the world at all except through our acculturation into a natural language and thereby into a view—the manifest image, as Sellars calls it—of the world. Nonetheless, it is a philosopher’s fiction that the scientific image, that is, the still evolving conception of things that is the fruit of over two millennia of scientific investigation, somehow supplants that view in our *experience* of the world. It does supplant earlier knowledge claims, earlier beliefs about how things really are; but our sensory experience remains largely untouched. Because it does, it can play the role it is in fact called upon to play in scientific theorizing, that of providing the data relative to which a theory can be assessed. A theory is to explain the evidence, all the ways things appear to all sorts of perceivers in all manner of circumstances. Obviously, then, we need ordinary empirical experience to understand our cognitive access to things as they are; but, on our Fregean view, we need it only as the *appearance* of the world to suitably acculturated beings like ourselves. Following McDowell, we can say that in the course of our acculturation into an ongoing tradition we acquire a view of the world as it appears to creatures like us. Other sorts of beings, McDowell’s echo-locating Martians for instance, would be acculturated into a very different view of the world, one that would perhaps be utterly unintelligible to us. These appearances constitute a tribunal for one’s scientific theorizing by providing data to be explained by one’s theories. Much as we explain the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies (motions that might appear very differently to other sorts of beings) by way of a theory setting out the actual motions, so we explain appearances generally, whether to creatures like us or to radically different sorts of rational beings, by way of scientific theories descriptive of how things actually are. And we *can* do that on the view outlined here because we can form conceptions of things that

are not beholden at all to our sensory experience of things. As I want finally to indicate, scientific judgments, so conceived, are inherently revelatory of things as they are: judgeable contents are the actualization of thinkable contents much as perceptible objects are, for Aristotle, the actualization of objects' potential for perceptibility, and a correct judgment, like a veridical perception on Aristotle's account, brings things to mind.⁴⁰

According to Aristotle, actualizations of our perceptual capacities are to be understood in terms of two different notions of change. First, we need to acquire (in the course of embryonic development) properly functioning sense organs and an object must become sensible, audible (say) as a wind chime is audible when the wind blows through it, when it is chiming. But, Aristotle notes, this actualization is in another way merely a potential since one can have functioning sense organs and yet perceive nothing, and an object can be visibly red, or audibly chiming, and yet be unperceived. Fully to realize one's sensory capacities, and at the same time the sensible nature of the object, requires a second actualization, the activity (*energeia*) of hearing (say) the ringing chimes and, what comes to the same thing, the ringing chimes' being heard. This full actualization is "in" the perceiver Aristotle thinks. The Fregean conception of empirical judgment that has been gestured at here aims to be fundamentally similar. The essential difference is that the first actualization of ourselves as knowers and of the world as knowable is not merely natural, but is instead second-natural. To acquire the "eyes" to see things as they are (more exactly, to acquire the mind to think things as they are) is to be acculturated into a sufficiently advanced scientific tradition where this is at once a matter of our acquiring adequate conceptions of things *and* of the world acquiring a face, a presence for us. Our capacity to know together with the capacity of the world to be known is then fully

actualized in successful (i.e., correct) judgments. The relevant norms, on this view, are in a sense always already there in nature, as McDowell urges; but they are always already there only potentially. To actualize that potential requires a sufficiently advanced scientific tradition. Only someone acculturated into a true theoretical conception of things has the capacity (second potential) to know the world as it is; only in such a case is the capacity of the world to be known, to rationally constrain judgment, actualized. But even this actualization is only a first actualization. It is to have the eyes to see but not yet to see. The capacity to know together with the capacity of the world to be known is only fully actualized in successful, that is, correct, judgment. To acknowledge the truth of a true thought is (as Aristotle thinks successful perception is) to have things as they are brought to mind. In that case, as in the case of the redness of the red object one sees in veridical perception on Aristotle's account, what one thinks *is* what is the case.

I have argued that Brandom and McDowell together present us with an antinomy according to which the realm of the conceptual both must and cannot have an outer boundary beyond which lies the reality on which thought aims to bear. This antinomy, I have suggested, rests on a confusion, a confusion of cognitive and semantic content. The realm of cognitive content, of Fregean sense, is indeed a kind of bounded sphere beyond which lies the reality on which thought aims to bear. Fregean *Sinn* belongs to spontaneity as it contrasts with receptivity. But the realm of semantic content, of thoughts insofar as they are judgeable, is not so bounded. Semantic content is essentially world-involving, and it is so precisely because the spontaneity of judgment is empty independent of receptivity. The either/or that grounds McDowell's and Brandom's debate over the role of the notion of experience in an account of empirical judgment, that drives their

essentially opposed readings of Sellars, and that underlies the dialectic we have traced in their thinking is dissolved with the recognition that cognitive and semantic content are distinct, though intimately related, notions. We can, and should, embrace not only Kant's founding insights as codified in his famous slogan that thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts blind, but also both the inferentialist and the representationalist consequences that Sellars, and each in their own way, Brandom and McDowell, draw from those insights.

Notes

¹ Although directed towards a different end, Testa's account, in "Second Nature and Recognition" (this volume), of the dialectical relationship between Brandom's conception of our being in the world and McDowell's is fundamentally related to that developed here and is very usefully compared to it.

² Robert Brandom, "Non-inferential knowledge, perceptual experience, and secondary qualities: placing McDowell's empiricism", in *Reading McDowell: Mind and World*, edited Nicholas H. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 93-4.

³ John McDowell, "Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant and Intentionality" (the Woodbridge Lectures 1997), *Journal of Philosophy* xcv (1998): 431-91, p. 434.

⁴ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994; in paper with a new Introduction, 1996), pp. xi-xii.

⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 26.

⁶ Wilfrid Sellars, "Inference and Meaning", *Mind* 62 (1953): 313-338, p. 336.

⁷ Sellars, "Inference and Meaning", p. 317.

⁸ Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 105.

⁹ *Lectures on Logic*, ed. and trans. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 546.

¹⁰ *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), A50/B74.

¹¹ *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Essays in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. H.-N. Castañeda (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p. 285-6.

¹² See Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), Lectures IV and V.

¹³ I explore this aspect of Sellars's thinking more fully in "Empirical Knowledge: Kantian Themes and Sellarsian Variations", *Philosophical Studies* 101 (2000): 113-142.

¹⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, reprinted as a monograph with Introduction by Richard Rorty and Study Guide by Robert Brandom (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997), §35.

¹⁵ Robert Brandom, "Replies", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 189-204, p. 189.

¹⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, "The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell's Version of Empiricism", in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1998), p. 149.

¹⁸ Robert Brandom, "Perception and Rational Constraint", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 369-374, p. 369.

¹⁹ Brandom, "Replies", p. 191.

²⁰ Brandom, "Perception and Rational Constraint", p. 373.

²¹ Wilfrid Sellars, "Autobiographical Reflections", in *Action, Knowledge and Reality: Critical Studies in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. H.-N. Castañeda (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1975), p. 285.

²² Sellars, "Inference and Meaning", p. 337.

²³ Brandom, "Perception and Rational Constraint", p. 372.

²⁴ Brandom, "Perception and Rational Constraint", p. 372.

²⁵ In “Inferentialism and Holistic Role Abstraction in the Telling of *Tales*”, *European Journal of Philosophy* (2005)13: 409-420, I provide a deeper analysis, and critique, of this picture of Brandom’s.

²⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 4.

²⁷ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 9.

²⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 48.

²⁹ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 91.

³⁰ Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 607.

³¹ Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 597.

³² See my “Empirical Knowledge: Kantian Themes and Sellarsian Variations”.

³³ To appeal to Frege’s distinction in resolution of our antinomy might seem a case of explaining the obscure by the more obscure. But see my “Frege and Early Wittgenstein on Logic and Language” in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Essays on Early Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Erich Reck (Oxford University Press, 2002), also my *Frege’s Logic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). For discussion of important *differences* between Brandom’s inferentialism and Frege’s understanding of the role of inference in meaning, which cannot be explored here, see my “Inference, Meaning, and Truth in Brandom, Sellars, and Frege”, forthcoming in *Reading Brandom: Making It Explicit*, ed. Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer (Routledge).

³⁴ See, for instance, “Function and Concept” and “On Sense and Meaning”, in *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984).

³⁵ McDowell would deny this, but he need not. Indeed, I would say, his claim that Fregean senses are essentially world-involving (i.e., that a word lacking meaning, *Bedeutung*, must therefore also lack sense, *Sinn*) just is an expression of his failure to draw the distinction that is needed between thoughts *qua* thinkable and *qua* judgeable.

³⁶ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 107.

³⁷ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 91.

³⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 29.

³⁹ In “Pragmatism and Objective Truth”, *New Pragmatism*, ed. Cheryl Misak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), I argue that it is because they fail to draw this distinction between two sorts of concepts that pragmatists, Peirce and Sellars as well as James, Rorty, and Brandom, have been unable to achieve a satisfactory understanding of objective truth.

⁴⁰ Because mathematics is a non-empirical discipline, its practice is very different from the practice of the natural sciences. But Frege provides us the essential tools to understand mathematical practice as well. See my “Striving for Truth in the Practice of Mathematics: Kant and Frege”, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, spring 2007.