

Comment on John McDowell's "The disjunctive conception of experience as material for a transcendental argument"

Crispin Wright

§1 *The Disjunctive Conception of Experience*

Descartes was surely right that while normal waking experience, dreams and hallucinations are characteristically distinguished at a purely phenomenological level, — by contrasts of spatial perspective, coherence, clarity of image, etc., — it is not essential that they be so.<sup>1</sup> What is it like for someone who dreams that he is sitting, clothed in his dressing gown, in front of his fire can in principle be subjectively indistinguishable from what it is like to perceive that one is doing so, fully conscious and awake. The same holds for multi-sense hallucination and, it is assumed, would hold of the experience of an envatted brain in the usual postulated scenario.

This thought — that normal perceptual experience allows in principle of perfect phenomenological counterfeit — is, to the best of my knowledge, nowhere seriously challenged in John McDowell's writings.<sup>2</sup> What he rejects is an idea that builds upon and would be potentially explanatory of it: the Lockean idea that, as far as the states enjoyed by the experiencing subject are concerned, there is actually no generic distinction between dream, hallucination, and wakeful perception: — that one and the same *type* of state of consciousness is involved in all three cases, and that which (if any) of the three a particular occurrence of the type falls under is a matter of how it is caused. On this model, the distinction between Descartes' notional fully lucid dream and the corresponding raft of perceptions of his dressing-gowned, sedentary state is like that between a certain kind of sunburn and nettle rash. For Disjunctivism, however, the Lockean — as McDowell likes to say, “Highest Common Factor” — conception of perceptual experience and its potential counterfeits is a *conceptual* error. There is no single type of state of consciousness present in each of dreaming, perceiving and hallucinating, whose instances fall under one or other of those characterisations purely by virtue of their aetiology. In perception one is directly

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes wrote,

"Nevertheless, I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am accustomed to sleep and in my dreams to imagine the same things that lunatics imagine when awake, or sometimes things which are even less plausible. How many times has it occurred that the quiet of the night made me dream of my usual habits: that I was here, clothed in a dressing gown, and sitting by the fire, although I was in fact lying undressed in bed! It seems apparent to me now, that I am not looking at this paper with my eyes closed, that this head that I shake is not drugged with sleep, that it is with design and deliberate intent that I stretch out this hand and perceive it. What happens in sleep seems not at all as clear and distinct as all this. But I am speaking as though I never recall having been misled, while asleep, by similar illusions. When I consider these matters carefully, I realise so clearly that *there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep* that I am quite astonished, and my bewilderment is such that it is almost able to convince me that I am sleeping." — My italics. The passage is from the *First Meditation*; see pp. 145-6 of the Haldane and Ross edition of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. I (Cambridge 1968.)

<sup>2</sup> Though see the text associated with n. 13 of his contribution to the present volume.

aware of the items perceived — the states of mind involved are essentially external world involving.<sup>3</sup> The various relevant kinds of counterfeit states, by contrast, involve no essential relation to the kinds of thing of which, in perception, one is directly aware. Subjectively, they can be such as to allow of being mistaken for states involving the kind of external world relationship essential to perception. But this mistakeability, however tempting its explanation by means of the idea of “Highest Common Factor” — a common front presented by both perceptual awareness and its counterfeits — does not require that idea. A waxwork may, in certain circumstances, be mistakable for a living human being, but it is no part of being human to have a waxwork component.<sup>4</sup>

This is all familiar. What is new in McDowell's present contribution is more about how he thinks the replacement of the Lockean conception of perceptual experience with the Disjunctive Conception helps with the treatment of sceptical doubt, and about how he conceives of the authority for the Disjunctive Conception itself. In what follows I'll briefly review McDowell's offerings on both these points, before turning to his critical reactions to the misgivings expressed in my [2002] (henceforward "Simple and Subtle") concerning the bearing of Disjunctivism on the sceptical paradoxes.

## §2 *What enforces the Disjunctive Conception?*

McDowell offers a "transcendental argument" on behalf of the Disjunctive Conception, albeit one he is at pains to distinguish from two older models. Transcendental arguments of traditional, Kantian stripe aim to show that it is a necessary condition for experience to have a certain — uncontested — characteristic that the real world should have certain (perhaps sceptically contested) characteristics. A notionally more modest kind of transcendental argument, canvassed by Barry Stroud as an antidote to the failure of nerve that the Kantian model may inspire, aims to show that it is a commitment of *our thinking of* experience as having a certain — normally uncontested — characteristic that *we should conceive of* the real world as having some (perhaps sceptically contested) characteristic.<sup>5</sup> A successful example, the idea is, of this latter kind of argument might still be of some anti-sceptical effect if the characteristic of experience in question is one on which a given sceptical argument itself depends in some way. McDowell distinguishes his new transcendental argument from each of these forms.<sup>6</sup> Its premise is, once again, that our (perceptual) experience

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<sup>3</sup> It might be rejoined that so much is also true for Locke: for Locke too, perceptual states are essentially external world involving, since the concept of a perceptual state is one which invokes an external worldly cause. That is true. Where Locke and the Disjunctivist differ is over the claim that the *state of mind* involved in perception is one which essentially has an external worldly cause.

<sup>4</sup> To insist that perception and, say, dreaming have no common factor in the sense gestured at is of course, consistent with recognising that they can present "all sorts of commonalities" (McDowell at note 15 of his contribution to this volume)— including, crucially, the presentation of appearances that P. The vital point for McDowell is that the "epistemic significance" of perceptual appearances differ from that of appearances within a dream. It is a question how exactly this differential epistemic significance is supposed to follow from the disjunctivist conception as just outlined. I will argue later that sceptical doubt on the point has no need of the Lockean conception.

<sup>5</sup> Stroud [1968]

<sup>6</sup> There are some puzzles about the intended relative modesty of the Stroud model. How is it to be argued that *our taking it that* that experience has a certain feature commits us to conceiving of the world as being a certain way except by showing that experience's *having* the feature entails that the

has a certain feature, to wit: *objective purport*. But its advertised conclusion is nothing about the world, nor about any respect in which we are, supposedly, committed to conceiving of the world. Rather, it is the Disjunctive Conception of experience itself — or more specifically, it is the conception of perceptual experience as consisting in a direct apprehension of characteristics and relations exemplified by items in the local material environment.<sup>7</sup>

In McDowell's view, then, the very possession of “objective purport” by episodes of our experience enforces a conception of them as, in the best possible case, episodes of direct awareness of the external world. So the Lockean conception, which holds that they are never that, is refuted unless there is a case to be made that experience lacks objective purport. The crux, of course, is what is to be understood by “objective purport”. McDowell seems to regard it as sufficient to settle the matter that our experience involves *representational* states whose contents are articulated in material conceptual vocabulary. To (seem to) perceive the material environment in my office is to receive a succession of representations that P, — for example, that the screensaver on my computer is active, that there are some gaps on the bookshelf opposite, etc — where the concepts configured in the relevant instances of 'P' are concepts of material things and their observable characteristics. McDowell's idea appears to be that if — as he takes to be so — perceptual experience does indeed consist in the reception of appearances that P, where P is a content of this kind, then there is no alternative but to conceive of the (in principle possible) successful case — where appearance matches reality — as consisting in a direct awareness of the latter.

It is much less my purpose here to assess this idea than to review the work to which McDowell wants to put his conclusion. Nevertheless, one wonders whether so simple a train of thought can possibly do serious damage to a way of thinking about perception that, though I have characterised it as Lockean, is arguably as old as Plato's Cave. McDowell does allow for a possible challenge to the claimed objective purport of experience, “a scepticism willing to doubt that perceptual experience purports to be of objective reality” and concedes that in that case his transcendental argument “cannot do all the work”, so that “we need a prior transcendental argument, one that reveals the fact that consciousness includes states or episodes that purport to be of objective reality as a necessary condition for some more basic feature of

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world is *in fact* that way — so we are taken back to the more ambitious Kantian form of argument? Moreover, why would the effect of any successful argument of the Stroud type not be merely to deepen the aporia generated by the sceptical paradox? For on the one hand we shall then have a transcendental argument that conceiving of experience as having a certain feature commits us to P; and on the other hand, a sceptical argument that somehow depends exactly on that same conception yet appears to show that there is no warrant for P. That hardly seems like progress unless the idea is merely to silence an actual sceptical adversary in debate — “See: you are yourself committed to endorsing the conclusion you claim is unwarranted”. But the fact is that the dialectical situation is not that of confrontation with any such adversary: we are dealing with *paradox*. If the plausible-seeming materials that the paradox exploits themselves engender commitments which it seems to undermine, that deepens, rather than solves it. But I will not pursue these issues further here. [See Wright [1991] on “the Adversarial Stance”.]

<sup>7</sup> A picky reader might wonder why McDowell's argument doesn't actually perfectly fit the Kantian template. Premise about experience: experience has objective purport. Conclusion about the external world: the world is such as to present situations of which we can, in the best case, be directly aware. The answer, I suppose, is that McDowell's argument only gives a weakened conclusion: the external world, *if such there be*, is such as to present situations of which we can, in the best case, be directly aware. Still, it is not clear why it doesn't fit the weaker, Stroudian template — McDowell's emphasis on its alleged novelty of form is a puzzle.

consciousness, perhaps that its states and episodes are potentially self-conscious.” But now it is crucial what 'objective purport' really amounts to. No Lockean, after all, ever denied that we are accustomed to *use* concepts of material reality to describe the flickerings of coloured light and shadow on the screen of inner experience.

McDowell's idea has presumably to be that its carrying of contents articulated in terms of concepts of external material reality is somehow *essential* to perceptual experience —that such content is not a matter of *interpretation* (as it would be for Plato's Cave dwellers.) Since some of the most ancient of sceptical concerns about our relationship to the external are precisely rooted in the opposed, interpretative conception, it may seem that much of the real action is indeed focused on the unargued premise for McDowell's transcendental argument, and that the latter's significance is therefore modest at best.

Actually — on the most straightforward construal of 'objective purport' — it is less than modest. There is, on that construal, a decisive worry about the ability of McDowell's transcendental argument to reach its intended conclusion. For if it suffices for objective purport simply to involve the occurrence of appearances that P for instances of 'P' articulated in terms of concepts of external material reality, then dreams and hallucinations have objective purport too. And in that case its possession of objective purport no longer provides a bridge to the idea that a certain kind of experience is apt to constitute *direct awareness* of the kind of objective material it purports to represent — since such direct awareness is exactly what dreams and hallucinations are essentially *not* apt to constitute.

There is significant reason to doubt that McDowell's present contribution accomplishes much to motivate the Disjunctive Conception. In what follows, however, I am going to assume that a relevant (if you will, transcendental) argument can somehow be made to run, so that we are impelled by unquestioned features of our experience to conceive of perceptual experience both as direct awareness of the external and as possible. Our concern will be with the prospects for the continuation of challenging forms of sceptical paradox even in this setting: with whether Disjunctivism really does "dislodge a prop" on which sceptical doubt depends, or whether — to give the reader a peek at the story's end — it at best presents temporary obstacles to its formulation.

### §3 *Disjunctivism and Cartesian Scepticism*

McDowell thinks that an enforcement of the disjunctive conception is enough to undermine a scepticism that

expresses an inability to make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment. What shapes this scepticism is the thought that even in the best possible case, the most that perceptual experience can yield falls short of a subject's having an environmental state of affairs directly available to her. Consider situations in which a subject seems to see that, say, there is a red cube in front of her. The idea is that even if we focus on the best possible case, her experience could be just as it is, in all respects, even if there were no red cube in front of her. This seems to reveal that perceptual experience provides at best inconclusive warrants for claims about the environment. And that seems incompatible with supposing that we ever, strictly speaking, *know* anything about our objective surroundings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This volume, p. XX

One way of putting the point would be to say that the Lockean conception of experience enforces the idea that, even in the best case, perceptual knowledge, if possible at all, involves a defeasible inference from matters in ones own *cognitive locality* — matters of which one *is* capable of a direct cognitive apprehension — to matters that lie outside it.<sup>9</sup> So the Lockean conception sets up the framework for a type of sceptical argument — *Humean* scepticism, as expressed in what I have termed the I-II-III argument — whose focus is on this strict insufficiency of our evidence for a certain kind of conclusion and on the epistemic status of the collateral presuppositions whose acceptance seems to be required in order to rationalise the ampliative evidential transitions in question.<sup>10</sup>

The Lockean conception certainly provides a platform for a sceptical challenge of this kind. It is, however, another question whether it provides the *only possible* platform for a I-II-III version of external world scepticism. The principal contention of “Simple and Subtle” to which McDowell takes exception was that this is not so — that a sceptical paradox of essentially the same structure can be developed even under the aegis of the Disjunctive Conception. I shall discuss the grounds of McDowell’s resistance to this claim below. But before we come to that, it merits emphasis that the strongest effect that a shift to the Disjunctive Conception can possibly have, in point of provision of anti-sceptical weaponry, is to extend the sphere of our *cognitive locality* — the sphere of matters directly accessible to our cognitive powers — beyond the usual inner Cartesian limits to include the local material environment. Such a shift, accordingly, can accomplish nothing against those forms of sceptical argument that are precisely designed to address what we are normally pleased to regard as our epistemic achievements concerning the cognitively local. It is, in my opinion, a shortcoming of much of McDowell’s discussion of these matters that he tends to write of scepticism as if it were a “frame of mind”, or a kind of rootless anxiety or preoccupation, when the truth — as manifested in the recent and contemporary discussion — is that we have to deal with a number of specific, sharply formulable paradoxes, differing in detail in significant ways. One such form of paradox, designed specifically for the service of scepticism concerning the cognitively local, is the version of the Cartesian dreaming argument formulated and discussed in my [1991]. An outline of its essential structure is offered in the Appendix. A version of this argument will engage the presumed products of *any* form of cognitive activity which allows in principle of subjectively wholly convincing counterfeit. Since that much is not challenged by the Disjunctive Conception, our claims to perceptual knowledge fall within the scope of the Cartesian paradox — as does memory, on direct realist construals of that faculty, and, especially disconcertingly, intellection.

As noted, the form of perceptual scepticism against which McDowell believes that his transcendental argument might be of some purpose is diagnosed as expressing “an inability to make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment”. If the Disjunctive Conception can be enforced, then that idea *does* make sense. And he dismisses the “familiar sceptical scenarios” — Descartes’ Demon, the scientist with our brains in his vat, the suggestion that all our apparent experience might be a dream — as just so many ways of making vivid the Lockean

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<sup>9</sup> For more on “cognitive locality” see Wright [2004] at pp. 172-4 and 201-2.

<sup>10</sup> All this is set out in detail in “Simple and Subtle” at pp. 337-40, and at pp. 169-75 of [Wright] 2004.

predicament of our enclosure within a cognitive locality that allegedly excludes the local material environment. This is not, however, the role of such scenarios in the most important form of perceptual scepticism — the Cartesian scepticism developed on the model outlined in the Appendix — in whose service they are characteristically invoked. Their role is as reminders not of our alleged Lockean predicament but as notional exemplars of the possibility of subjectively perfect counterfeiture of perceptual activity, even when it is direct-realistically construed. McDowell writes that

“Perhaps most people will find it obvious that reinstating the sheer possibility of directly taking in objective reality in perception would undermine a scepticism based on claiming that perceptual experience can never amount to that.”<sup>11</sup>

That is indeed obvious, and — contrary to McDowell's parenthetical remark immediately following — I am no exception to the generalisation. The point remains, simply, that perhaps the epitome of sceptical argument — elicited from Descartes' text, with minor variations, by each of Barry Stroud, James Pryor, and myself<sup>12</sup> — involves no reliance whatever on the alleged senselessness, or impossibility, of direct perceptual acquaintance with the material world. The Disjunctive Conception of experience, even if it can indeed be enforced by transcendental argumentation supplementary to that offered by McDowell, provides us with nothing to address mainstream perceptual scepticism in this mould.

#### §4 *Disjunctivism and Humean Scepticism*

To the main business of this note. Whatever the situation with other sceptical paradoxes, does the I-II-III form of sceptical argument, when directed against perception as a source of warranted belief concerning the local material environment, perforce rely upon the Lockean conception of experience as the best but defeasible ground for local environmental claims, or can it, as I suggested in “Simple and Subtle”, be reconstructed in the context of the Disjunctive Conception?

Here in outline is the case made in “Simple and Subtle” for thinking that it can. Consider first the original trio:

- I        My experience is in all respects as if P (say: as if there is a hand in front of my face)
- II       P (There is a hand in front of my face)
- III      There is an external material world

Here, proposition I is to be understood as recording the occurrence of a Lockean experience, offering at best a defeasible ground for proposition II. So the question arises, what if anything renders the inference from I to II, or the transition from the occurrence of the experience to acceptance of II, rational? The sceptical contention is that its rationality, or otherwise, depends upon the nature of one's collateral information. Minimally, that had better include that there is a material world at all, and that sense experience is a reliable indicator, for the most part, of those of its characteristics that it is able to represent. But if that is correct, then this information

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<sup>11</sup> This volume, p. **XX**

<sup>12</sup> Stroud [1984], chapter 1; Pryor [2000]; Wright [1991].

needs to be in place as stage-setting for the rationality of any particular inference, or transition from experience to belief, of the type schematised by I and II. The problem is then — according to the sceptical argument — that it is impossible to understand how one might *come by* the information that there is a material world at all, still less one broadly veridically represented in ordinary sense experience, except on the basis of acquiring knowledge or grounds for the truth of propositions of type II. Since sense-experience itself represents our best shot at such knowledge, we find ourselves trapped in a justificatory circle. Treating any type I proposition, or experience recorded thereby, as sufficient grounds for the corresponding type II proposition presupposes a warranted acceptance of III; but the later acceptance could be warranted only on the basis of prior warrant for propositions of type II.<sup>13</sup>

My point in “Simple and Subtle” was that no obstacle to the formulation of essentially this paradox is posed by a shift to the Disjunctive Conception. We merely reformulate I disjunctively as

I: Either I am perceiving a hand in front of my face or I am in some kind of delusional state of that phenomenal character,

retaining II and III as before. So reformulated, the inference from I to II, if it is to be rationally justified, will depend — or so the sceptical argument will contend — on the justifiability of discounting the right-hand, uncongenial disjunct. And if the uncongenial disjunct is to be justifiably discountable in general, it appears that we had better have evidence that delusional states are exceptional — that, for the most part, states of the relevant phenomenal character constitute genuine perceptual apprehension of features of the local material environment. Yet that, in effect, is just another way of articulating the presupposition that featured in the original, Lockean formulation of the argument: the presupposition there is a material world and that our perceptual experience is a mostly reliable guide to those aspects of it which it seems fitted to disclose. True, the nature of the “disclosure” varies between the two conceptions of experience. But that doesn’t affect the dialectical functioning of the paradox.

Very well. So why does McDowell believe that, by adopting the Disjunctive Conception, we acquire the resources to avoid the paradox? In “Simple and Subtle”, after developing the above analogy, I summarised the situation as follows:

The key point is that the disjunctivist makes a tendentious assumption in supposing that to conceive of perceptual experience as a form of direct acquaintance with reality is automatically to eliminate the idea that in the justification of perceptual statements, there is any role for claims weaker than perceptual statements....In brief: whether our perceptual faculties engage the material world directly is one issue and whether the canonical justification for perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base is another. One is, so far, at liberty to take a positive view of *both* issues.... When we do, the I-II-III pattern re-emerges along [the indicated] lines.<sup>14</sup>

The thought was, in brief, that to think of our perceptual faculties as providing, in the best case, means of direct cognitive awareness of the material environment is so far a

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<sup>13</sup> For detailed development of the paradox, see the references at n. 9.

<sup>14</sup> “Simple and Subtle” p. 346.

commitment to no particular view about the justificational architecture of perceptual claims, or about how, in the best case, a claim to be perceiving the local environment — and thereby to have found out that P — is itself to be justified. To accept the Disjunctive Conception is to take on board the idea that, in the best case, one is capable of a direct awareness of the “layout of reality”. But it is — so I was suggesting — another question, what constitutes *justification* for a claim about those aspects of reality which, in the best case, one's direct perceptual awareness is awareness of.

This is the crux of the dispute. McDowell needs to make a case that the I-II-III template does indeed misrepresent the justificational architecture of perceptual claims. That case must be that when disjunctivism is incorporated into the picture, we are no longer grounded, so to speak, at stage I, with mandate only for the disjunction and requiring collateral information to progress beyond it. Rather, we now start, in effect, at stage II. McDowell accordingly writes that

The point of the disjunctive conception is that if one undergoes an experience that belongs on the “good” side of disjunction, that warrants one in believing — indeed presents one with an opportunity to know — that things are as the experience reveals them as being. When one's perceptual faculties “engage the material world directly . . . . the result — a case of having an environmental state of affairs directly present to one in experience — *constitutes one's being justified* [my emphasis] in making the associated perceptual claim. It is hard to see how any other kind of justification could have a stronger claim to the title “canonical”. And this justification is *not* defeasible. If someone sees that P, it cannot fail to be the case that P. So if one accepts the disjunctive conception, one is *not* at liberty to go on supposing that “the canonical justification of perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base”.<sup>15</sup>

And later

The point for now is that Wright is wrong to claim that the disjunctive conception leaves one free to think perceptual claims rest on defeasible inferential support.<sup>16</sup>

McDowell here says exactly what he has to say. He has to say that there is a better kind of warrant for perceptual claims and that provided by the information lodged in proposition I of the reconfigured I-II-III argument, together with collateral grounds for the supplementary claims, including III, argued to be necessary if that information is to add up to a warrant for II. But the obstinate fact is that, for all his assertion to the contrary, nothing in the Disjunctive Conception per se enforces that view of the matter. Indeed it had better not. For there is an evident gap between direct awareness of a situation in virtue which P is true and the acquisition of warrant for the belief that P, even for one sufficiently conceptually *savvy* to ensure that the direct awareness presents as an appearance that P.

One consideration which opens the gap is very familiar in the externalist tradition (with which McDowell's thinking in these passages is in effect, but unacknowledgedly, coincident.) Driving in Barn Façade County, but in all innocence of the locally distinctive “layout of reality”, the one-in-a-thousand real barn confronting me at the turn of the road ahead may draw my perceptual attention. I am

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<sup>15</sup> This volume at p. XX

<sup>16</sup> This volume at p. XX



directly aware of the barn, its location, the colour of its roof, its approximate dimensions, and so on. Yet scores of writers have scrupled over the suggestion that, in the circumstances, I *know* that there is a barn up the road, of such-and-such approximate dimensions, and with such-and-such a colour of roof. Whether they are right to do so, and if so why, are issues. The circumstances are such as to encourage false judgements about the things of which I am directly aware, they are such that I am merely lucky to be right in this instance, they are such that my claim is defeasible by improved information. McDowell doubtless has proposals to make about the proper handling of such veteran examples. But by writing in his present contribution as if perceptual uptake were tout court sufficient for warranted belief, he writes as though the issues they raise do not exist.

Direct awareness of states of affairs that make P true is one thing; warranted belief that P, for one fully apprised of what it takes for P to be true, is something else. One plausible additional necessary condition for the latter, not — as it happens — motivated by barn-façade type examples, is that the belief that P not be held irresponsibly or irrationally. What it takes, however, for a belief to avoid those failings is here exactly the key issue. Suppose I knowingly participate in double-blind trials of a new hallucinogenic drug. Half the participants receive the drug, the other half an identical looking and tasting vitamin pill. The consciousness of those who ingest the drug will move — so it is predicted — seamlessly into a completely plausible, sustained, multi-sense hallucination, in which all the experiences “make sense” in the context of the subjects’ recollection of their previous waking experiences of the day prior to ingestion of the pill, and indeed of the general fabric of their lives. This will happen — if the drug performs as expected — within a few minutes of ingestion, and the hallucination will then be sustained for several hours.

I take the pill and then am invited to sit down. Within what seems a very few minutes, a nurse invites me to join the other trialists in a recreation area. I am, seemingly, led down a corridor and through a pair of swing doors into what appears to be a converted gymnasium, with sauna, swimming-pool, snooker table and a poolside restaurant area with a wide screen television showing footage of an international cricket match that, when I see it, I seem to remember was due to be played today.

Suppose that all this is as it happens perfectly normal, veridical waking experience. Nevertheless it would, in the circumstances, be unwarranted for me to believe any of the mundane propositions of whose truth-conditions I am perceiving the worldly satisfaction. I do not know that these propositions are true. I am not, in the circumstances, even justified in claiming that they are true (the trialists, remember, are knowingly divided 50-50 but blind between those who take the drug and those who take the vitamins.)

Here, then — to spell it out — is the salient sceptical rejoinder to McDowell’s notion that the sheer possibility of direct perceptual engagement with the world, and the consequent Disjunctive Conception of experience, suffices to pre-empt the development of the I-II-III paradox for perceptual knowledge of matters external to us. Even for one apprised of all relevant concepts, and disposed to believe the proposition in question, the perceptual apprehension of a state of affairs that makes it the case that P is one thing, and possession of warrant for taking it to be the case that P is another. The former, even when a subject’s belief that P is based on that very apprehension, is insufficient for warrant if aspects of the subject’s collateral information conspire to make the belief that P somehow irrational or irresponsible. We have just reviewed a case where, as it may seem, that would be so. In the circumstances of the example, my collateral information makes it as likely as not, for

all I can tell, that my perceptual faculties are systematically but wildly malfunctioning; in these circumstances, my actual perceptual apprehension, as normal, of a whole range of local environmental states of affairs, does *not* provide a warrant for the beliefs which my experiences may dispose me to form — indeed, if I am rational, it will inhibit those dispositions. It is, however, a key feature of the example that my collateral information stops short of justifying me in believing that my perceptual faculties are actually malfunctioning. Rather, it forces me to regard the question as open. And — the crucial point — the mere openness of the issue seems to be enough to neutralise the evidence my faculties provide. The point the example makes is not — what McDowell can take in stride — that once one has all-things-considered sufficient grounds to doubt that one’s perceptual faculties are working properly — that is, sufficient grounds to opine that they are not — one cannot warrantably believe what seems to be disclosed by one’s senses. *Mandated agnosticism* seems to be sufficient to do the damage.

It merely remains to harness the last consideration to the I-II-III paradox. The sceptical contention will be that, in the light of the possibility in principle — granted by McDowell — that instances of the ‘bad’ member of the disjunction may counterfeit instances of the ‘good’ disjunct to phenomenological perfection, one is in fact no better placed *in general* — at least as far as the evidence of one’s own subjectivity is concerned — than the hypothetical subject of the imaginary double-blind trial. The hypothetical subject has balanced evidence for and against the possibility that he is out of perceptual touch with the real world. But a special case of balanced evidence is the situation of *no evidence* either way. And that, the sceptical claim will be, is exactly our predicament in general. For it is undeniable that if the alternatives are to suppose that my current experiences are elements of veridical perceptual activity and to suppose that they are a marvellously convincing counterfeit, then the subjective quality of the experiences itself — what it is like to undergo them — can indeed provide no rational motive for either view. *If*, therefore, there is reason for a view, it must originate elsewhere — and the suggestion of the final section of “Simple and Subtle” was that it must be found in our grounds, if any, for our ordinary picture of the material world: one broadly accessible to us via our perceptual faculties, and, most of the time, successfully accessed thereby. But the crucial point is that, once it is accepted that mandated agnosticism about the proper functioning of our perceptual faculties defeats the warrant supplied even by veridical experience as conceived by Disjunctivism, we owe an argument that we are in a better position than one of mandated agnosticism if we are to lay claim to the warrants which experience potentially provides. This is where the dialectic goes — some distance past the point where McDowell would like it to stop.

It is for this reason that the I-II-III paradox, originally composed for the Lockean setting, transfers smoothly to the Disjunctivist context. It cannot be finessed by McDowell’s simple stratagem of treating sheer apprehension as the “canonical warrant” for perceptual claims. Of course, if direct realism is true, sheer perceptual apprehension is a *component* of the very best kind of warranting situation for such claims that it is possible to enter into. But there are other necessary conditions that need to be met before apprehension can underwrite warranted belief. The sceptical argument is a case that they are unmet. It must be addressed differently.

##### §5 *Taking Scepticism seriously*

McDowell, it seems, is provoked by my attribution to him of “an official refusal to take scepticism seriously”. He does, apparently, believe that the Disjunctive

Conception provides a rationally principled way of finessing sceptical doubt. What, he explains, he does not take seriously is the project of attempting to prove the propositions which scepticism brings into doubt — the forlorn project, apparently embarked on by Moore,<sup>17</sup> of trying to prove the existence of the external world (or, I suppose, that of other minds, or the reality of the long past, or the inductive amenability of Nature) by purely philosophical means. I am pleased to withdraw any imputation to McDowell of a cavalier dismissal of a serious philosophical problem and to welcome him to the company of those who would like to do something about it. Let me close, however, by emphasising why the project of making a case for propositions that scepticism brings into doubt must indeed be part and parcel of any satisfactory response to it.

Lest that seem too shocking, let me immediately stress that I do not hereby mean to allow that Moore had the right project. He did not. But the reason why he did not is because the conclusion of his “Proof” — that there is an external material world, — is *not*, in any relevant sense, a proposition that scepticism brings into doubt. One reason why McDowell has been inclined to underestimate scepticism is because he persistently fails to see any daylight between the forlorn projects — the Quixotic pursuit of the resources to establish a priori that there is matter, many minds, a substantial past, etc., — and, what he thinks *is* possible, viz. the provision<sup>18</sup> of alternatives to various of the preconceptions which sceptical paradoxes exploit, thereby showing that those preconceptions are not mandatory. Yet there is daylight, and the project we really need is in fact neither of these but falls in the daylight area.

Distinguish *doubt* and rationally enforced *agnosticism*. The thrust of material world scepticism is indeed that we do not know or even have sufficient evidence to believe that there is an external material world at all and that there is, moreover, no escaping from this predicament. The conclusion that — it is alleged — we should draw is that no attitude other than agnosticism on the matter is justified (even if it is an attitude we cannot actually psychologically sustain.) But if ‘doubting’ is taken to involve believing that not, rather than merely not believing, then scepticism does *not* bring the existence of the material world into doubt. What it brings into doubt are *epistemic* claims — for instance, that we know, or have sufficient reason to believe, that there is an external material world. *These* doubts are ones that any satisfactory response to scepticism *must* remove. Somehow or other, considerations have to be marshalled to show that we are at least in a position rationally to claim the kind of knowledge of material reality with which we routinely credit ourselves. Modern epistemological scepticism — that is, the sceptical tradition in epistemology of the last 400 years — is preoccupied not with the reality of the subject matter of our large regions of knowledge — matter, other minds, the past — but with the credentials of our epistemic claims themselves. Cartesian doubt is already a *second order* doubt — a doubt about the extent of the knowledge we can rationally lay claim to. When that is the orientation of our enquiry, it's obvious from the start that merely canvassing possibilities of direct cognitive acquaintance is unlikely to result in the placing of any very powerful philosophical levers. The nagging voice of intellectual conscience will rejoinder: “Well yes, but even if that — a mode of direct acquaintance — is how we *have* to conceive of our experience, in the best case, what reason is there to take it that the

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<sup>17</sup> It is, of course, debatable whether Moore really had this project. At n. 17 of his present paper, McDowell flags a hint of a misgiving about it. See also Coliva [2006].

best case is common, or even that it ever occurs at all?" We could have run the I-II-III argument, reconfigured for the disjunctive setting, in second order terms *ab initio*. It would have sufficed merely to prefix each line with the operator: *I am in position rationally to claim knowledge that*. Thus

I I am in position rationally to claim knowledge that either I am perceiving a hand in front of my face or I am in some kind of delusional state of that phenomenal character

II I am in position rationally to claim knowledge that there is a hand in front of my face

III I am in position rationally to claim knowledge that there is an external material world

No doubt I is true — subjectivity alone puts one in position rationally to claim knowledge of the original disjunction. The question for McDowell is: what if anything puts me in a position rationally to claim knowledge that here is a hand — what makes II true? His proposal in the first order case was that the actual perceptual apprehension of the hand would be knowledge constituting. I explained above how scepticism can question that. But even if one repudiates that explanation, there is surely no plausibility whatever in the thought that the mere perceptual apprehension of the hand in front of my face is all it takes to put me in position *rationally to claim* knowledge that it is there. For to lay claim to the latter knowledge, I have to lay claim to the relevant episode of awareness as one of genuine sensory experience. The mere fact of perceptual apprehension, if that is what it is, cannot *per se* make it rational to claim that that is what it is; and the rational defensibility of the belief that knowledge is what one has depends, in the circumstances, on the rationality of the latter claim.

It goes with McDowell's tendency to prefer to think of scepticism as a kind of anxious preoccupation,<sup>19</sup> rather than a family of paradoxes, that he tends to see it as something that needs, in the best later-Wittgensteinian tradition, diagnosis and therapy. I think this orientation tends to skew the philosophical discussion. But for what it is worth, if diagnosis is the objective, then it needs to be recognised that the basic, troubling thought in the vicinity is not that dreaming, hallucination, and veridical experience are all states of the same kind, distinguished only by their causes. It is, rather, exactly what Descartes said: that there are no "conclusive indications" by which to tell these states apart, and that this imperils our right to claim what we take to be our normal, commonplace cognitive achievements which depend on it being the 'good', rather than the alternative, 'bad' kinds of state that we normally occupy. It is the supposedly possible phenomenology of subjective indistinguishability, rather than a supposed "highest common factor", that is at the base of the problem. Once the root concern is thus properly identified, it should be obvious that the Disjunctive Conception has no materials to address it.<sup>20</sup>

Arché AHRC Research Centre, University of St. Andrews  
Department of Philosophy, New York University

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, no one is actually *anxious* about any of this!

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Annalisa Coliva, Lars Gundersen, Adrian Haddock, Aidan McGlynn, Duncan Pritchard and Elia Zardini for helpful comments and criticisms.

## Appendix

### *The Cartesian Dreaming Paradox*

Read 'Dxt' as x is undergoing a fully lucid, coherent dream at t at t, and 'WxtP' as: x is warranted in believing P at t, where such warrant is taken as requiring possession of all-things-considered sufficient evidence for P at t.

The premises for the paradox are then two. For fixed x and t (think in terms of "you" and "now"), premise 1 is

$\sim Wxt[\sim Dxt]$

— you do not right now have all-things-considered sufficient evidence for the claim that you are not right now undergoing a fully lucid, coherent dream.

Premise 2 is

$Wxt[WxtP \rightarrow \sim Dxt]$

— you *do* right now have warrant (that is, all-things-considered sufficient evidence) for the claim that if you right now have warrant for the claim that P, then you are not right now dreaming.

The classic Cartesian motive for premise 1 is simply the possible subjective indistinguishability of waking life and dreams. A subtler motive is provided by the following train of thought. That you are right now not dreaming is an empirical claim. So all-things-considered sufficient evidence for it has to be empirical evidence. To get empirical evidence you have to carry out some empirical procedure. It is plausible that the evidence produced by such a procedure may not rationally be regarded as any stronger than one's independent evidence that the procedure was carried out competently and with due diligence,<sup>21</sup> — and hence that it was carried out at all. Dreaming excludes the genuine execution of empirical procedures. Hence the strength of warrant generated by executing such a procedure is rationally limited by the strength of one's independent warrant that one did not dream its execution! Hence no such procedure can generate a warrant that one is not (fully lucidly and coherently) dreaming.

A motivation for premise 2 may be given as follows. First, restrict attention to any P for which x's situation and state of information at t is such that in order to have sufficient evidence for P, she will have to *perceive* (so, for example, the range of P comprises all propositions about your local visible environment which you have never considered before.) Then reflect that perceiving is *conceptually excluded* by dreaming. To be sure, in a dream you may seem to perceive things which are actually true—that it is, for instance, raining outside. But in order to count as perceiving that it is raining outside, you have to meet counter-factual constraints of sensitivity to the rain which in a dream you necessarily fail.<sup>22</sup> It follows that  $WxtP \rightarrow \sim Dxt$  is true. But you have just run through the foregoing reasoning at t ("now".) So you right now have sufficient evidence for the conditional. And that is just what premise 2 says.

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<sup>21</sup> This is the *Proper Execution Principle* of Wright [1991].

<sup>22</sup> If, in a state of apparent sleep, you turn out to satisfy those constraints, —however exactly they should be specified—, we will say that you were not really asleep—or at any rate, that even if in a sleep-like state, you were not genuinely dreaming but rather engaged in some form of unusual perception compatible with sleep. Dreaming proper necessarily involves *disconnection*.

The proof-theory for the operator 'W' need involve no more than *closure* across (known) entailment—there is warrant for things which follow from what is warranted—and (as an optional extra) *iterativity*—if one is warranted in believing something, that one is so is itself something which one is warranted in believing.

The paradox is then very immediate:

Assume       WxtWxtP

Then         Wxt~Dxt — from premise 2, logic and Closure

So           ~WxtWxtP— from premise 1 and *reductio*

That is as much as to say that no-one ever is warranted in thinking that they have warrant for a proposition which it would, at their time and informational circumstances, take perception to justify. In effect, claims to be perceiving that P are never warranted if, in context, P could only be warranted by perception. That is a bad result, though it takes an appeal to iterativity to convert it into the properly sceptical conclusion,

~WxtP

—one never has warrant for any proposition which it would, in one's context, take perception to justify, so that, in effect, perception is never a source of warrant.

This form of paradox will run against any cognitive faculty whose operations can in principle be mimicked by a kind of subjective state whose 'outputs' would be evidentially worthless.

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