

# Avoiding the Myth of the Given

John McDowell

University of Pittsburgh

## 1. What is the Myth of the Given?

Wilfrid Sellars, who is responsible for the label, notoriously neglects to explain in general terms what he means by it. As he remarks, the idea of givenness for knowledge, givenness to a knowing subject, can be innocuous.<sup>1</sup> So how does it become pernicious? Here is a suggestion: Givenness in the sense of the Myth would be an availability for cognition to subjects whose getting what is supposedly Given to them does not draw on capacities required for the sort of cognition in question.

If that is what Givenness would be, it is straightforward that it must be mythical. Having something Given to one would be being given something for knowledge without needing to have capacities that would be necessary for one to be able to get to know it. And that is incoherent.

So how can the Myth be a pitfall? Well, one could fall into it if one did not realize that knowledge of some kind requires certain capacities. And we can see how that might be a real risk, in the context in which Sellars mostly discusses the Myth, by considering a Sellarsian dictum about knowledge.

Sellars says attributions of knowledge place episodes or states ‘in the logical space of reasons’.<sup>2</sup> He identifies the logical space of reasons as the space ‘of justifying and being able to justify what one says’. Sellars means to exclude an externalistic view of epistemic satisfactoriness, a view according to which one can be entitled to a belief without being in a position to know what entitles one to it. Knowing things, as Sellars means his dictum, must draw on capacities that belong to reason, conceived as a faculty whose exercises include vindicating one’s entitlement to say things. Such a faculty

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963; reissued Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), §1.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, §36.

acquires its first actuality, its elevation above mere potentiality, when one learns to talk. There must be a potential for self-consciousness in its operations.

Now consider how this applies to perceptual knowledge. Perceptual knowledge involves sensibility: that is, a capacity for differential responsiveness to features of the environment, made possible by properly functioning sensory systems. But sensibility does not belong to reason. We share it with non-rational animals. According to Sellars's dictum, the rational faculty that distinguishes us from non-rational animals must also be operative in our being perceptually given things to know.

This brings into view a way to fall into the Myth of the Given. Sellars's dictum implies that it is a form of the Myth to think sensibility by itself, without any involvement of capacities that belong to our rationality, can make things available for our cognition. That coincides with a basic doctrine of Kant.

Note that I say 'for *our* cognition'. It can be tempting to object to Sellars's dictum on the ground that it denies knowledge to non-rational animals. It is perfectly natural — the objection goes — to talk of knowledge when we say how the sensibility of non-rational animals enables them to deal competently with their environments. But there is no need to read Sellars, or Kant, as denying that. We can accept it but still take Sellars's dictum, and the associated rejection of the Myth, to express an insight. Sellars's dictum characterizes knowledge of a distinctive sort, attributable only to rational animals. The Myth, in the version I have introduced, is the idea that sensibility by itself could make things available for the sort of cognition that draws on the subject's rational powers.

2. A knowledgeable perceptual judgment has its rational intelligibility, amounting in this case to epistemic entitlement, in the light of the subject's experience. She judges that things are thus and so because her experience reveals to her that things are thus and so: for instance, she sees that things are thus and so. The intelligibility displayed by such an explanation belongs to a kind that is also exemplified when a subject judges that things are thus and so because her experience merely seems to reveal to her that things are thus and so. These uses of 'because' introduce explanations that show rationality in operation. In the kind of case I began with, rationality enables knowledgeable judgments. In the

other kind of case, reason leads its possessor astray, or at best enables her to make a judgment that merely happens to be true.

In Kant, the higher faculty that distinguishes us from non-rational animals figures in experience in the guise of the understanding, the faculty of concepts. So to follow Kant's way of avoiding the Myth of the Given in this context, we must suppose capacities that belong to that faculty — conceptual capacities — are in play in the way experience makes knowledge available to us.

For the moment, we can take this introduction of the idea of conceptual capacities quite abstractly. All we need to know so far is that they must be capacities that belong to a faculty of reason. I shall try to be more specific later.

I have invoked the idea of judgments that are rationally intelligible in the light of experience, in the best case to the extent of being revealed as knowledgeable. There is an interpretation of this idea that I need to reject.

The idea is not just that experience yields items — experiences — to which judgments are rational responses. That would be consistent with supposing that rational capacities are operative only in responses to experiences, not in experiences themselves. On this view the involvement of rational capacities would be entirely downstream from experiences.

But that would not do justice to the role of experience in our acquisition of knowledge. As I noted, even for Sellars there is nothing wrong with saying things are given to us for knowledge. The idea of givenness becomes mythical — becomes the idea of Givenness — only if we fail to impose the necessary requirements on getting what is given. And it is in experiencing itself that we have things perceptually given to us for knowledge. Avoiding the Myth requires capacities that belong to reason to be operative in experiencing itself, not just in judgments in which we respond to experience.

3. How should we elaborate this picture? I used to assume that to conceive experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, we would need to credit experiences with *propositional* content, the sort of content judgments have. And I used to assume that the content of an experience would need to include *everything* the experience enables its subject to know noninferentially. But both these assumptions now strike me as wrong.

4. Let me start with the second. We can question it even if, for the moment, we go on assuming experiences have propositional content.

Suppose I have a bird in plain view, and that puts me in a position to know noninferentially that it is a cardinal. It is not that I infer that what I see is a cardinal from the way it looks, as when I identify a bird's species by comparing what I see with a photograph in a field guide. I can immediately recognize cardinals if the viewing conditions are good enough.

Charles Travis has forced me to think about such cases, and in abandoning my old assumption I am partly coming around to a view he has urged on me.<sup>3</sup>

On my old assumption, since my experience puts me in a position to know noninferentially that what I see is a cardinal, its content would have to include a proposition in which the concept of a cardinal figures: perhaps one expressible, on the occasion, by saying 'That's a cardinal'. But what seems right is this: my experience makes the bird visually present to me, and my recognitional capacity enables me to know noninferentially that what I see is a cardinal. Even if we go on assuming my experience has content, there is no need to suppose that the concept under which my recognitional capacity enables me to bring what I see figures in that content.

Consider an experience had, in matching circumstances, by someone who cannot immediately identify what she sees as a cardinal. Perhaps she does not even have the concept of a cardinal. Her experience might be just like mine in how it makes the bird visually present to her. It is true that in an obvious sense things look different to me and to her. To me what I see looks like (looks to be) a cardinal, and to her it does not. But that is just to say that my experience inclines me, and her similar experience does not incline her, to say it is a cardinal. There is no ground here for insisting that the concept of a cardinal must figure in the content of my experience itself.

It would be right to say I am unlike this other person in that I see that the bird is a cardinal; my experience reveals to me that it is a cardinal. But that is no problem for what I am proposing. Such locutions — 'I see that ...', 'My experience reveals to me that ...' — accept, in their 'that ...' clauses, specifications of things one's experience puts

---

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Travis for much helpful discussion.

one in a position to know noninferentially.<sup>4</sup> That can include knowledge that experience makes available by bringing something into view for someone who has a suitable recognitional capacity. And as I have urged, content whose figuring in such knowledge is owed to the recognitional capacity need not be part of the content of the experience itself.

5. Should we conclude that conceptual capacities are not operative in having objects visually present to one, but only in what one makes of what one anyway sees? Should we drop the very idea that perceptual experiences had by rational animals have conceptual content?

That would be too drastic. Nothing in what I have said about recognitional capacities dislodges the argument that on pain of the Myth of the Given, capacities that belong to the higher cognitive faculty must be operative in experience. In giving one things to know, experience must draw on conceptual capacities. Some concepts that figure in knowledge afforded by an experience can be excluded from the content of the experience itself, in the way I have illustrated with the concept of a cardinal, but not all can.

A natural stopping point, for visual experiences, would be proper sensibles of sight and common sensibles accessible to sight. We should conceive experience as drawing on conceptual capacities associated with concepts of proper and common sensibles.

So should we suppose my experience when I see a cardinal has propositional content involving proper and common sensibles? That would preserve the other of those two assumptions I used to make. But I think this assumption is wrong too. What we need is an idea of content that is not propositional but intuitional, in what I take to be a Kantian sense.

‘Intuition’ is the standard English translation of Kant’s *‘Anschauung’*. The etymology of ‘intuition’ fits Kant’s notion, and Kant uses a cognate expression when he writes in Latin. But we need to forget much of the philosophical resonance of the

---

<sup>4</sup> These locutions can even be understood in such a way that inferential credentials are not ruled out for the knowledge in question. Consider, for instance, ‘I see that the mailman has not yet come today’.

English word. An *Anschauung* is a having in view. (As is usual in philosophy, Kant treats visual experiences as exemplary.)

Kant says: ‘The same function which gives unity to the various representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations *in an intuition*; and this unity, in its most general expression, we entitle the pure concept of the understanding.’<sup>5</sup> The capacity whose exercise in judging accounts for the unity of the content of judgments — propositional unity — also accounts for a corresponding unity in the content of intuitions. Sellars gives a helpful illustration: the propositional unity in a judgment expressible by ‘This is a cube’ corresponds to an intuitional unity expressible by ‘this cube’.<sup>6</sup> The demonstrative phrase might partly capture the content of an intuition in which one is visually presented with a cube. (I shall return to this.)

Propositional unity comes in various forms. Kant takes a classification of forms of judgment, and thus of forms of propositional unity, from the logic of his day, and works to describe a corresponding form of intuitional unity for each. But the idea that forms of intuitional unity correspond to forms of propositional unity can be separated from the details of how Kant elaborates it. It is not obvious why Kant thinks the idea requires that to every form of propositional unity there must correspond a form of intuitional unity. And anyway we need not follow Kant in his inventory of forms of propositional unity.

Michael Thompson has identified a distinctive form of propositional unity for thought and talk about the living as such.<sup>7</sup> Thompson’s primary point is about a form exemplified in saying what living things of certain kinds *do*, as in ‘Wolves hunt in packs’ or ‘The lesser celandine blooms in spring’. But Thompson’s thought naturally extends to a form or forms exemplified in talk about what individual living things *are doing*, as in ‘Those wolves are hunting’ or ‘This lesser celandine is coming into bloom’.<sup>8</sup> And it

---

<sup>5</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), A79/B104-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967; reissued Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1992), 5.

<sup>7</sup> See ‘The Representation of Life’, in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn, eds., *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> A form or forms: perhaps we should distinguish an animal version from a non-animal version. A special case of the animal version would be a form for talk of intentional action, which is the topic of G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957; reissued Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

would be in the spirit of Kant's conception to identify a corresponding form or corresponding forms of intuitional unity, one of which we might find in my visual experience of a cardinal. The concept of a bird, like the concept of a cardinal, need not be part of the content of the experience; the same considerations would apply. But perhaps we can say it is given to me in such an experience, not something I know by bringing a conceptual capacity to bear on what I anyway see, that what I see is an animal — not because 'animal' expresses part of the content unified in the experience in accordance with a certain form of intuitional unity, but because 'animal' captures the intuition's categorial form, the distinctive kind of unity it has.

The common sensibles accessible to sight are modes of space occupancy: shape, size, position, movement or its absence. In an intuition unified by a form capturable by 'animal', we might recognize content, under the head of modes of space occupancy, that could not figure in intuitions of inanimate objects. We might think of common sensibles accessible to sight as including, for instance, postures such as perching and modes of locomotion such as hopping or flying.

We can avoid such issues by concentrating, as Sellars often does, on visual presentness of things like coloured cubes. But even with this restricted focus, there is still a complication. If there can be visual intuitions whose content is partly specifiable by, say, 'that cube', intuitions in which something's being cubic is visually given to one, then the higher cognitive faculty needs to be in our picture not just to account for the unity with which certain content figures in such an intuition, but also, in the guise of the productive imagination, to provide for part of the content itself — supplying, as it were, the rest of the cube, behind the facing surfaces. Sellars often uses the example of a pink ice cube, and one reason is presumably that it allows him not to bother with this complication, because he envisages his ice cube as translucent, so that its back can be actually in view.<sup>9</sup>

6. So far, conceptual capacities are on the scene only as the kind of capacities that must be in play in experience if we are to avoid the Myth: capacities that belong to rationality in a demanding sense. But I undertook to try to be more specific.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Willem A. deVries, *Wilfrid Sellars* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), 305, n. 18.

If the idea of the conceptual singles out a kind of content, it seems right to focus on the content of judgments, since judging is the paradigmatic exercise of theoretical rationality.

We can think of judgments as inner analogues to assertions. That makes it natural to count judging as a *discursive* activity, even though the idea of discourse has its primary application to overt performances.<sup>10</sup> In an assertion one makes something discursively explicit. And the idea of making things explicit extends without strain to judging. We can say that one makes what one judges explicit to oneself.

I said we should centre our idea of the conceptual on the content of judgments. But now that I have introduced the idea of the discursive, I can put the point like this: we should centre our idea of the conceptual on the content of discursive activity.

Now intuiting is not discursive, even in the extended sense in which judging is. Discursive content is articulated. Intuitional content is not.

Part of the point is that there are typically aspects of the content of an intuition that the subject has no means of making discursively explicit. Visual intuitions typically present one with visible characteristics of objects that one is not equipped to attribute to the objects by making appropriate predications in claims or judgments. To make such an aspect of the content of an intuition into the content associated with a capacity that is discursive in the primary sense, one would need to carve it out, as it were, from the categorially unified but as yet unarticulated content of the intuition by determining it to be the meaning of a linguistic expression, which one thereby sets up as a means for making that content explicit. (This might be a matter of coining an adjective. Or the expression might be one like ‘having that shade of colour’.) Perhaps one can bypass language and directly equip oneself with a counterpart capacity that is discursive in the sense in which judging is discursive. There would be the same need to isolate an aspect of the content of the intuition, by determining it to be the content associated with a capacity to make predications in judgments.

And articulating goes beyond intuiting even if we restrict ourselves to aspects of intuitional content that are associated with discursive capacities one already has.

---

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is already metaphorical even in that application. See Stephen Engstrom, ‘Sensibility and Understanding’, *Inquiry* 49 (2006), for some remarks on how the discursive understanding can be conceived as running about, which is what the etymology of the term indicates that it should mean.

In discursive dealings with content, one puts significances together. This is particularly clear with discursive performances in the primary sense, whose content is the significance of a combination of meaningful expressions. But even though judging need not be conceived as an act spread out in time, like making a claim, its being discursive involves a counterpart to the way one puts significances together in meaningful speech.

I mean this to be consistent with rejecting, as we should, the idea that the contents one puts together in discursive activity are self-standing building-blocks, separately thinkable elements in the contents of claims or judgments. One can think the significance of, say, a predicative expression only in the context of a thought in which that content occurs predicatively. But we can acknowledge that and still say that in discursive activity one puts contents together, in a way that can be modelled on stringing meaningful expressions together in discourse literally so called.

That is not how it is with intuitional content. The unity of intuitional content is *given*, not a result of our putting significances together. Even if discursive exploitation of some content given in an intuition does not require one to acquire a new discursive capacity, one needs to carve out that content from the intuition's unarticulated content before one can put it together with other bits of content in discursive activity. Intuiting does not do this carving out for one.

If intuitional content is not discursive, why go on insisting it is conceptual? Because every aspect of the content of an intuition is present in a form in which it is already suitable to be the content associated with a discursive capacity, if it is not — at least not yet — actually so associated. That is part of the force of saying, with Kant, that what gives unity to intuitions is the same function that gives unity to judgments. If a subject does not already have a discursive capacity associated with some aspect of the content of an intuition of hers, all she needs to do, to acquire such a discursive capacity, is to isolate that aspect by equipping herself with a means to make that content — that very content — explicit in speech or judgment. The content of an intuition is such that its subject can analyse it into significances for discursive capacities, whether or not this requires introducing new discursive capacities to be associated with those significances. Whether by way of introducing new discursive capacities or not, the subject of an

intuition is in a position to put aspects of its content, the very content that is already there in the intuition, together in discursive performances.

I said that the unity of intuitional content is *given*. Kant sometimes implies a different picture. He says, for instance, that ‘all combination, be we conscious of it or not, ... is an act of the understanding (*Verstandeshandlung*)’ (B130). In its context, this remark implies that we actively put content together in intuitions no less than in judgments (though with intuitions the activity has to be unconscious). And that goes badly with my claim that intuitional content is not discursive. But Kant does not need to hold that the unity of intuitional content is not given. What he really wants to insist is that it is not Given: that it is not provided by sensibility alone. In intuiting, capacities that belong to the higher cognitive faculty are in play. The unity of intuitional content reflects an operation of the same unifying function that is operative in the unity of judgments, in that case actively exercised. That is why it is right to say the content unified in intuitions is of the same kind as the content unified in judgments: that is, conceptual content. We could not have intuitions, with their specific forms of unity, if we could not make judgments, with their corresponding forms of unity. We can even say that the unity-providing function is essentially a faculty for discursive activity, a power to judge. But its operation in providing for the unity of intuitions is not itself a case of discursive activity.

Not that it is a case of prediscursive activity, at least if that means that intuiting is a more primitive forerunner of judging. The two kinds of unity that Kant says are provided by the same function, the unity of intuitions and the unity of judgments, are on a level with one another.

7. In a visual intuition, an object is visually present to a subject with those of its features that are visible to the subject from her vantage point. It is through the presence of those features that the object is present. How else could an object be visually present to one?

The concept of an object here is formal. In Kant’s terms, a category, a pure concept of the understanding, is a concept of an object in general. A formal concept of, as we can naturally say, a kind of object is explained by specifying a form of categorial

unity, a form of the kind of unity that characterizes intuitions. Perhaps, as I suggested, following Thompson, ‘animal’ can be understood as expressing such a concept.

On the account I have been giving, having an object present to one in an intuition is an actualization of capacities that are conceptual, in a sense that belongs with Kant’s thesis that what accounts for the unity with which the associated content figures in the intuition is the same function that provides for the unity of judgments. I have urged that even though the unity-providing function is a faculty for discursive activity, it is not in discursive activity that these capacities are operative in intuitions. With much of the content of an ordinary visual intuition, the capacities that are in play in one’s having it as part of the content of one’s intuition are not even susceptible of discursive exercise. One can make use of content’s being given in an intuition to acquire a new discursive capacity, but with much of the content of an ordinary intuition, one never does that. (Think of the finely discriminable shapes and shades of colour that visual experience presents to one.) Nevertheless an intuition’s content is all conceptual, in this sense: it is in the intuition in a form in which one *could* make it, that very content, figure in discursive activity. That would be to exploit a potential for discursive activity that is already there in the capacities actualized in having an intuition with that content.<sup>11</sup>

In an intuition, an object is present to one whether or not one exploits this potential for discursive activity. Kant says the ‘I think’ of apperception must be able to accompany all *Vorstellungen* that are mine, in a sense that is related to the idea of operations of the function that gives unity both to judgments and to intuitions (B131). An object is present to a subject in an intuition whether or not the ‘I think’ accompanies any of the intuition’s content. But any of the content of an intuition must be able to be accompanied by the ‘I think’. And for the ‘I think’ to accompany some of the content of an intuition, say a visual intuition, of mine is for me to *judge* that I am visually confronted by an object with such-and-such features. Since the intuition makes the object visually present to me through those features, such a judgment would be knowledgeable.

We now have in view two ways in which intuitions enable knowledgeable judgments.

---

<sup>11</sup> Intuitional content that is not brought to discursive activity is easily forgotten. This does not tell at all against saying it is conceptual content, in the sense I have tried to explain. See Sean Dorrance Kelly, ‘Demonstrative Concepts and Experience’, *Philosophical Review* 110 (2001).

One is the way I have just described. A potential for discursive activity is already there in an intuition's having its content. And one can exploit some of that potential in a knowledgeable judgment that redeploys some of the content of the intuition. In the kind of case that first opens up this possibility, one adds a reference to the first person. When the 'I think' accompanies some content provided in an intuition, that yields a knowledgeable judgment that I am confronted by an object with such-and-such features. But being in a position to make such a judgment is being in a position to judge that there is an object with such-and-such features at such-and-such a location. One need not explicitly refer to oneself in a judgment whose status as knowledgeable depends on its being a discursive exploitation of some of the content of an intuition.

The other way intuitions make knowledge possible is the way I illustrated with my knowledge that a bird I see is a cardinal. Here a knowledgeable judgment enabled by an intuition has content that goes beyond the content of the intuition. The intuition makes something perceptually present to the subject, and the subject recognizes that thing as an instance of a kind. Or as an individual; it seems reasonable to find a corresponding structure in a case in which an experience enables one to know noninferentially who it is that one is perceptually presented with.

8. Travis urges that experiences do not represent things as so.<sup>12</sup> If experiences are intuitions, he is strictly correct. Anything that represents things as so has propositional content, and I have been spelling out a conception of intuitions on which they do not have propositional content. But though Travis is right about the letter of the thesis that experiences represent things as so, he is wrong about the spirit, as we can see by considering the first of those two ways in which intuitions enable judgments that are knowledgeable. Though they are not discursive, intuitions have content of a sort that embodies an immediate potential for exploiting that same content in knowledgeable judgments. Intuitions immediately reveal things to be the way they would be judged to be in those judgments.

---

<sup>12</sup> See 'The Silence of the Senses', *Mind* 113 (2004).

When Sellars introduces the conceptual character he attributes to experiences, he describes experiences as ‘so to speak, making’ claims or ‘containing’ claims.<sup>13</sup> If experiences are intuitions, that is similarly wrong in the letter but right in spirit. Intuitions do not have the sort of content claims have. But intuitions immediately reveal things to be as they would be claimed to be in claims that would be no more than a discursive exploitation of some of the content of the intuitions.

When Travis says experiences do not represent things as so, he does not mean that experiences are intuitions in the sense I have been explaining. He says experience is not a case of intentionality, and I think it is fair to understand him as denying that conceptual capacities are in play in experience at all. Visual experiences bring our surroundings into view; that should be common ground. Travis’s idea is that the way experience makes knowledge available can be understood, across the board, on the model of how an experience might enable me to know that what I see is a cardinal. In Travis’s picture conceptual capacities are in play only in our making what we can of what visual experiences anyway bring into view for us, independently of any operation of our conceptual capacities.<sup>14</sup> In Travis’s picture, having things in view does not draw on conceptual capacities. And if it does not draw on conceptual capacities, having things in view must be provided for by sensibility alone.

The trouble with this is that it is a form of the Myth of the Given. We do not fall into the Myth just by supposing that features of our surroundings are given to us in visual experience. But in Travis’s picture that givenness becomes a case of Givenness.

Travis thinks the idea that experiences have content conflicts with the idea that experience directly brings our surroundings into view. He is not alone in this.<sup>15</sup> Wanting, as is reasonable, to keep the idea that experience directly brings our surroundings into view, he is led to deny that experiences have content. But there is no conflict. Intuitions as I have explained them directly bring objects into view through bringing their perceptible properties into view. Intuitions do that precisely by having the kind of content they have.

---

<sup>13</sup> ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, §16.

<sup>14</sup> ‘In making out, or trying to, what it is that we confront’: ‘The Silence of the Senses’, 65.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Bill Brewer, ‘Perception and Content’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006).

If intuitions make knowledge available to us, merely seeming intuitions merely seem to make knowledge available to us. It is often thought that when people urge that experiences have content, they are responding to a felt need to accommodate the fact that experience can mislead us.<sup>16</sup> But the proper ground for crediting experiences with content is that we must avoid the Myth of the Given. Making room for misleading experiences is a routine by-product.

9. Donald Davidson claims that ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’.<sup>17</sup> His point is to deny that beliefs can be displayed as rational in the light of episodes or states in sensory consciousness — unless that means they can be displayed as rational in the light of *beliefs about* episodes or states in sensory consciousness. That would put the potential rational relevance to beliefs of episodes or states in sensory consciousness on a level with the potential rational relevance to beliefs of anything at all that one might have beliefs about.

In previous work, I took it that Davidson’s slogan reflects an insight: that conceptual capacities must be in play not only in rationally forming beliefs or making judgments, but also in having the rational entitlements one exploits in doing that. But I urged that the insight, so understood, permits judgments to be displayed as rational in the light of experiences themselves, not just in the light of beliefs about experiences, since we can understand experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities.<sup>18</sup>

Trying to spell out this possibility, which I found missing from Davidson’s picture, I made one of the assumptions I have here renounced: that if experiences are actualizations of conceptual capacities, they must have propositional content. That gave Davidson an opening for a telling response. Davidson argued that if by ‘experience’ we mean something with propositional content, it can only be a case of taking things to be so, distinctive in being caused by the impact of the environment on our sensory

---

<sup>16</sup> See Brewer, ‘Perception and Content’.

<sup>17</sup> ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, 141 in the reprint in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1994).

apparatus. But of course his picture includes such things. So I was wrong, he claimed, to suppose there is anything missing from his picture.<sup>19</sup>

I want to insist, against Davidson, that experiencing is not taking things to be so. As Travis urges, our visual experiences bring our surroundings into view. Some of what we are thereby entitled to take to be so, in judgments that would be rational given what is visually present to us, we do take to be so. But even when we detach belief-acquisition from explicitly judging things to be so, as we should, we exaggerate the extent of the doxastic activity experience prompts in us if we suppose we acquire all the beliefs we would be entitled to by what we have in view.

So I agree with Travis that visual experiences just bring our surroundings into view, thereby entitling us to take certain things to be so, but leaving it a further question what, if anything, we do take to be so. But as I have argued, Travis's version of that thought falls into the Myth of the Given. And if we avoid the Myth by conceiving experiences as actualizations of conceptual capacities, while retaining the assumption that that requires crediting experiences with propositional content, Davidson's point seems well taken. If experiences have propositional content, it is hard to deny that experiencing is taking things to be so, rather than what I want: a different kind of thing that entitles us to take things to be so.

If experience comprises intuitions, there is a way between these positions. Intuitions bring our surroundings into view, but not in an operation of mere sensibility, so we avoid Travis's form of the Myth of the Given. But the conceptual content that allows us to avoid the Myth is intuitional, not propositional, so experiencing is not taking things to be so. In bringing our surroundings into view, experiences entitle us to take things to be so; whether we do is a further question.

As I said, there are two ways in which experience, conceived as comprising intuitions, entitles us to moves with discursive content. It entitles us to judgments that would exploit some of the content of an intuition, and it figures in our entitlement to judgments that would go beyond that content in ways that reflect capacities to recognize

---

<sup>19</sup> For a particularly clear expression, see 'Reply to John McDowell', in L. E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 1999). Berkeley colleagues of Davidson's have weighed in in a similar vein. See Barry Stroud, 'Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought', in Nicholas H. Smith, ed., *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Hannah Ginsborg, 'Reasons for Belief', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006).

things made present to one in an intuition. But as I have insisted, in intuiting itself we do not deal discursively with content.

I mentioned Sellars's proposal that the content of an intuition might be captured, in part, by a form of words like 'this red cube'. Content so expressed would be fragmentary discursive content. It might be part of the content of a judgment warranted in the second of those two ways, where what one judges includes, over and above content contained in the intuition itself, concepts whose figuring in the judgment reflects recognitional capacities brought to bear on something the intuition makes present to one. Thus, a bit of discourse that begins 'This red cube ...' might go on '... is the one I saw yesterday'.

I think this indicates that Sellars's proposal is useful only up to a point. It might seem to imply that intuitional content is essentially fragmentary discursive content. But intuitional content is not discursive content at all. Having something in view, say a red cube, can be complete in itself. Having something in view can enable a demonstrative expression, or an analogue in judgment, that one might use in making explicit something one takes to be so, but the potential need not be actualized.

10. Davidson's slogan as it stands restricts the way beliefs can be displayed as rational to exploitations of *inferential* structures. It implies that giving a reason for holding a belief is depicting the content of the belief as the conclusion of an inference with the content of another belief as a premise.

I proposed to modify Davidson's slogan by saying that not only beliefs but also experiences can be reasons for belief. And according to my old assumption experiences have the same kind of content as beliefs. So it was understandable that I should be taken to be recommending an inferential, or at least quasi-inferential, conception of the way experience entitles us to perceptual beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

That was not what I intended. I did not mean to imply that experience yields premises for inferences whose conclusions are the contents of perceptual beliefs. On the contrary, I think experience directly reveals things to be as they are believed to be in perceptual beliefs, or at least seems to do that. But it is hard to make that cohere with

---

<sup>20</sup> See Crispin Wright, 'Human Nature', in Smith, ed., *Reading McDowell*.

supposing experiences have the same kind of content as beliefs. That is just a way of registering how persuasive Davidson's 'Nothing is missing' response is, so long as we do not question the assumption that conceptual content for experiences would have to be propositional.

Taking experience to comprise intuitions, in the sense I have explained, removes this problem. It should not even seem that the way intuitions entitle us to beliefs involves an inferential structure. If an object is present to one through the presence to one of some of its properties, in an intuition in which concepts of those properties exemplify a unity that constitutes the content of a formal concept of an object, one is thereby entitled to judge that one is confronted by an object with those properties. The entitlement derives from the presence to one of the object itself, not from a premise for an inference, at one's disposal by being the content of one's experience.

On the interpretation I offered at the beginning, Sellars's view of the Given as a pitfall to be avoided, in thinking about experience, is an application of his thought that knowledge, as enjoyed by rational animals, draws on our distinctively rational capacities. I have just explained how that does not imply that the warrant for a perceptual judgment is quasi-inferential.<sup>21</sup>

Finding such an implication is of a piece with thinking Sellars's Kantian understanding of what knowledge is for rational animals over-intellectualizes our epistemic life.<sup>22</sup> This needs discussion, but I shall end by briefly arguing that it is the very reverse of the truth.

An intellectualistic conception of the human intellect regards it as something distinct from our animal nature. The best antidote is to see capacities of reason as operative even in our unreflective perceptual awareness.

It is utterly wrong to think Sellars's conception implies that all of our epistemic life is actively led by us, in the bright light of reason. That rational capacities are pervasively in play in human epistemic life is reflected in the fact that any of it *can* be accompanied by the 'I think' of explicit self-consciousness. But even though all of our

---

<sup>21</sup> For the idea that Sellars's rejection of the Given amounts to the thesis that the warrant for perceptual judgments is inferential or quasi-inferential, see Daniel Bonevac, 'Sellars vs. the Given', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002).

<sup>22</sup> See Tyler Burge, 'Perceptual Entitlement', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003).

epistemic life is able to be accompanied by the ‘I think’, in much of it we unreflectively go with the flow.

I said that all of our epistemic life can be accompanied by the ‘I think’. Sub-personal occurrences in our cognitive machinery are not a counter-example to this claim. They are not, in the relevant sense, part of our epistemic life. No doubt knowledge of how our cognitive machinery works is essential for a full understanding of how it can be that our epistemic capacities are as they are. But having a standing in the space of reasons — for instance, being in a position to see that things are thus and so — is not a sub-personal matter. It is true that the sub-personal machinery that enables us to have such standings operates outside the reach of our apperception. And there are, unsurprisingly, similarities between our sub-personal cognitive machinery and the cognitive machinery of non-rational animals. But that does not threaten the idea that rational animals are special in having epistemic standings to which it is essential that they are available to apperception.

What makes Sellars’s internalistic conception appropriate for our perceptual knowledge is not that in perception we engage in rational activity on the lines of reasoning — something that might be regarded as separate from our animal nature, specifically, for present purposes, our sentient nature. That *would* be over-intellectualizing our perceptual knowledge. But the reason why internalism is correct about our perceptual knowledge is that rational capacities, and hence availability to apperception, permeate our experience itself, including the experience we act on unreflectively in our ordinary coping with our surroundings. Such is the form that animal engagement with the perceptible environment takes in the case of rational animals.