

Non-conceptual experiential content and reason-giving

Abstract: According to John McDowell and Bill Brewer, our experiences have the type of content which can be the content of judgements - content which is the result of the actualization of specific conceptual abilities. They defend this view by arguing that our experiences must have such content in order for us to be able to think about our environment. In this paper I show that they do not provide a conclusive argument for this view. Focusing on Brewer's version of the argument, I show that it rests on a questionable assumption - namely, that if a subject can recognize the normative bearing of a mental content upon what she should think and do, then this content must be the result of the actualization of conceptual capacities (and in this sense conceptual). I argue that considerations regarding the roles played by experience and concepts in our mental lives may require us to reject this assumption.

I

We take ourselves to have an ability to think about the way things are in our environment. According to John McDowell and Bill Brewer, having such an ability implies that our experiences have the type of content which can be the content of a judgement - content which is a result of the actualization of two (or more) conceptual abilities.¹ My aim in this paper is to show that McDowell and Brewer do not offer a conclusive argument for this view.

McDowell and Brewer argue that (i) if our empirical beliefs are to have the content we take them to have, experience must provide a subject with reasons for (at least) some of her empirical beliefs; (ii) such reasons can be provided only by contentful states whose content is of a type which could be the content of a judgement; therefore - assuming that we have the empirical beliefs we take ourselves to have - (iii) the content of experience must be of a type which could be the content of a judgement. The relevant type of content, on their view, is a propositional content which a state has in virtue of the actualization of two or more relevant conceptual abilities. (Following Brewer,² I shall use 'proposition' to refer to a content of this type).

¹ See, for example, McDowell 1996 pp.26 & 46-7 and Brewer 1999 p.149. (Brewer takes the above claim to hold only for the experience of environmental aspects to which the subject attends. This part of his view will become relevant in section IV of this paper, till then we can ignore it).

² See, for example, Brewer 1999 pp.151-2.

It is the argument for the second premise which I find inconclusive. McDowell and Brewer defend this premise - namely, that only contents suitable for being the contents of judgements can provide a subject with reasons - in the following way. They clarify that when they say that experience has to provide a subject with reasons, they mean that the relevant reasons should be *the subject's reasons* - that is, the reasons which the subject recognizes as reasons for endorsing relevant contents (or performing relevant actions), and which consequently motivate her doing so. In addition, they claim that only contents suitable for being the contents of judgements could be recognized by the subject as having such normative bearing on what she believes and does. I shall argue that McDowell and Brewer do not provide conclusive support for this latter claim.

First, in section II, I present Brewer's version of the argument for the view that experiential content must be conceptual (a version which is an attempt to spell out in detail an argument suggested by McDowell), and clarify that Brewer bases the disputed claim on the assumption that conceptual content is the only type of content whose grasp involves grasping normative links between the relevant content and conceptual contents. In sections III and IV I question this assumption and argue that it cannot be defended by appeal to *general* considerations regarding subjects' ability to recognize normative links. Specifically, I outline an argument for the opposing view (namely, that experiential content, though not conceptual, is such that grasping it involves grasping its normative links with certain conceptual contents), which cannot be criticized merely on the basis of considerations of the general type Brewer and McDowell appeal to, but rather has to be evaluated by considering specific, complex issues regarding experience and thought. I end, in section V, by rejecting what might seem to be an alternative argument for premise (ii).

Before turning to discuss of Brewer's argument, I should clarify how I construe premise (i) - namely, that if our empirical beliefs are to have the content we take them to have, experience must provide a subject with reasons for (at least) some of her empirical beliefs - and thus also clarify how I construe in this paper talk about experience's providing reasons or justifying. I have already mentioned that what is in question is *the subject's reasons*: reasons the subject recognizes as such and thus something that has a (rational) motivating force (from the subject's point of view). I want, further, to clarify that, as I understand McDowell and Brewer, premise (i) itself is neutral as to which specific thing should be regarded as the reason, and similarly neutral as to the exact way in which the experience justifies the belief. What they are trying to capture by saying that an experience provides the subject with a reason (or justification) for a belief is that, given her general state of mind, the subject's experience makes it the case that endorsing certain beliefs is a rational thing to do *and* that she is aware of this being the case. The important point is that having the experience is taken by the subject to have a specific normative bearing on what she should do, and particularly on what she should hold true. Thus, in what follows talk about reasons and justification should be construed in this uncommitted manner (i.e., not implying any specific view as to what type of thing should count as the reason and as to the exact sense in which the experience justifies beliefs).

I should also clarify that I construe talk about the subject's recognizing a reason as such, or about her taking an experience to have a certain normative bearing, as implying nothing stronger than saying that the relevant normative link is in some sense something the subject is aware of, something that constitutes part of how things are *from the subject's point of view*. Particularly, talk about the subject's recognition should not be taken to have *immediate* implications regarding which thoughts the subject entertains, if at all. I take it that this is what McDowell and Brewer wish to capture when they say

that the subject's reason is a reason she recognizes as such, and thus something that motivates her.³ If one does not like this interpretation, one may read this paper as questioning the resulting strengthening of the consequent in premise (i).

Finally, I should clarify that in this paper 'conceptual content' refers to the type of content which is the result of the actualization of specific demonstrative abilities. Thus, 'conceptual content' is construed here more narrowly than it is when defined in terms of the need to possess the concepts which are used in the specification of the content.

II

Brewer's argument for the claim that only conceptual contents could be recognized by the subject as having a normative bearing on what she believes and does consists of two parts. First, he argues that giving reasons involves identifying certain propositions as the premises and conclusion of a relevant argument. Secondly, he argues that, in regard to *a subject's reason*, her having the reason consists in her being in a mental state whose content is a premise of the relevant argument - thus, a mental state with a propositional content.

It is not immediately clear how we should read the first claim (that giving reasons involves identifying certain propositions as the premises and conclusion of a relevant argument) and Brewer's argument for it. I therefore quote the passage in which the argument is presented in full, and specify what seems to me the most we can derive from it.

To give a reason [for making a particular judgement, holding a certain belief or performing a certain action at a given time] is to identify some feature of the subject's situation which makes the relevant judgement or belief (or perhaps action) appropriate or intelligible, from the point of view of rationality. It is... to mention considerations which reveal the judgement or belief (or action) as at least approximating to what rationally ought to happen in those circumstances. Now, making something intelligible from the point of view of rationality in this way necessarily involves identifying a valid deductive argument, or an inference of some other kind, which articulates the source of the rational obligation (or

³ See, for example, Brewer 1999 pp.165-6.

permission) in question. For *rational* intelligibility, or appropriateness of the kind revealed by giving reasons, just is the mode of approbation which is made explicit by the reconstruction of *valid reasoning*⁴ of some such kind to a conclusion that is suitably related to the judgement or belief (or action) for which the reasons are being given. Hence, in making essential reference to the relevant valid inference, giving a reason involves making essential reference to its premises and conclusion, and so trivially to the kinds of things which can serve as the premises and conclusion of some kind of inference [namely, propositions]. (1999 pp.150-1).

How should we construe Brewer's talk about 'identifying an argument' and 'making essential reference to it' in this paragraph? It is natural to read him as referring to an activity the subject is actually performing in speech or thought: her actually uttering or entertaining the premise propositions and the conclusion proposition, and taking them to form a correct argument. (I shall shortly contrast this with a weaker reading, thus I shall refer to it as 'the strong reading'). Now, if we read 'giving a reason' as referring to the activity of articulating in speech or thought what makes it appropriate to accept a certain proposition as true,⁵ then it is unquestionable that giving a reason involves making essential reference, in this strong sense, to an argument which (i) has the relevant proposition as its conclusion, (ii) has a proposition expressing the given reason as one of its premises, and (iii) is taken, by the subject who is giving the reason, to be a correct argument. For this just is what the activity of articulating in speech or thought what makes it appropriate to accept a certain proposition as true consists in.

However, the focus of Brewer's argument is not cases in which 'reason giving' directly refer to an activity of the subject, but rather the type of cases in which a certain mental state (or a certain state of affairs) is said to give the subject a reason for accepting a certain proposition due to the fact that the subject takes the relevant state to provide a reason for accepting the proposition in question (it is then the state which is

⁴ Brewer comments in a footnote that 'validity' is to be understood here in a wide sense, including the correctness of inductive and abductive arguments. In what follows I shall use 'correct' rather than 'valid', since 'valid' is linked too closely with deductive arguments.

⁵ In order to simplify the discussion I shall ignore the case of action (as Brewer himself does). Also, for convenience's sake I shall sometimes mention only one of the possibilities (judging or forming a belief) or speak in general about taking or holding a certain proposition to be true.

said to be giving a reason). And it is not at all obvious that the latter type of case *must* involve an identification of an argument in the strong sense. One might argue that such this must be the case by arguing that for a subject to take a state to be a reason for accepting a certain content the subject must articulate a relevant normative link in thought. But, at least in the above quoted paragraph, Brewer does not give us any reason for thinking that such articulation in thought is necessary. It seems, then, that at this stage Brewer can only be granted that a subject's taking some state, *x*, to be a reason for, say, accepting *p*, involves essential reference to an argument in the following weak sense. If *x* provides *S* with a reason (from *S*'s point of view) for accepting *p*, then there is an argument that articulates the normative relation between *x* and the acceptance of *p*, and a full articulation of what makes it the case that *S* takes the relevant state to be a reason for accepting *p* must involve reference to this argument.

Let's turn then to the second stage, which focuses on the subject's reason - i.e., that which, *from the subject's point of view*, makes a certain judgement rationally appropriate, and therefore motivates her to make this judgement. Brewer argues that a subject's having a reason consists in her being in a mental state the content of which is a proposition she takes to be the premise in an argument which, in her view, justifies making the relevant judgement. Thus, it is a mental state with a propositional content.

First, Brewer explains why there has to be some mental state in which the subject's having a reason consists. He says:

... the subject's having such a reason consists in his being in some mental state or other, although this may well be essentially factive. For any actually motivating reason *for the subject* must at the very least register at the personal level in this way. (1999 pp.151-2).

I see no reason to reject this step. Given the way Brewer construes talk about 'the subject's reason' it is clear that it must involve a motivating (personal-level) mental state. For if the reason is to be causally relevant (*as a reason*) to the fact that the subject makes the relevant judgement, then he must recognize its status as a reason, and this, of

course, implies having an appropriate mental state.⁶ Furthermore, what entitles Brewer to the stronger claim (i.e., that having the reason *consists in* the subject's being in the relevant mental state; thus ruling out the possibility that environmental conditions, which are not themselves constituents of the state, may be regarded as further constituents of the subject's reason) is the thought that any environmental condition which is not in some way part of what constitutes the content of the relevant mental state cannot affect the subject's activity (in this case mental activity) in the right way; that is, its causal effect, if it has one, cannot be part of an effect which is due to what the subject recognizes as justifying his activity. Thus it is not part of *the subject's* reason.

Brewer then completes the argument by arguing that the premise proposition of the argument articulating what makes it appropriate to endorse the relevant belief has to be the content of the mental state in which having the reason consists. He says

'It cannot be the case that the proposition, reference to which is required by the first premise above in characterizing the reason in question, can merely be related to this mental state of the subject's *indirectly*, by a theorist in some way. Rather it must actually *be* the content of his mental state in a sense that requires that he has all of its constituent concepts. Otherwise, even though being in some such state may make it advisable, relative to a certain end or need, for the subject to make the judgement ... in question, it cannot constitute *his own* reason for doing so.' (1999 p.152)

I think we can reconstruct Brewer's reasoning here in the following way. If a mental state of the subject provides him with a reason for making a certain judgements, then according to the first stage of Brewer's argument there is in an argument that articulates the normative link between this mental state and the relevant judgement, and it is at least the case that reference to this argument should be involved in a full articulation of what makes it the case that the mental state in question can be said to provide the subject with a reason for making the judgement. The mere fact that there is such an argument is insufficient for making it the case that the subject recognizes that his mental state provides him with a reason for making the judgement. In contrast, a

⁶ On p.155 (1999) Brewer's spells out the consideration in this way.

subject would recognize being provided with a reason for making the relevant judgement if he entertains the propositions which are the premises of the argument in question and takes them to be the premises of a correct argument whose conclusion is the content of the judgement. Furthermore, his entertaining of the premise propositions (taking them to be the premises of a correct argument whose conclusion is the content of the judgement) just is the mental state which provides him with the reason for making the judgement. (One might object here that merely entertaining the premises of an argument (which is taken to be correct) is not sufficient for the subject to recognize having a reason for accepting its conclusion, that the subject must also accept the premises. In the next section I shall explain why Brewer suggests that *in the case of experience* merely entertaining the premises is sufficient; so let's grant Brewer this point).

The problem with this reasoning is that the fact that the mere existence of the relevant argument is not sufficient for accounting for the subject's recognition of having a reason does not immediately entail that such recognition must involve entertaining the premises propositions (taking them to be the premises of a correct argument). At least at first glance, there seem to be other possible ways in which the subject's mental state can account for his recognition of the reason. For example, a naïve intuitive view of how experience provides the subject with reasons (which he recognizes as such) is that having an experience is not a case of entertaining a proposition (it is not the result of the actualization of two or more conceptual abilities), yet when having the experience the subject immediately recognizes the normative bearing of the content of this experience - say, this (the seen object) being brown - on whether he should accept certain propositions (for example, whether he should accept that this [*o*] is brown). Brewer's

argument, as presented so far, does not give us a reason to reject this type of possibility.⁷

Why does Brewer ignore this possibility? The explanation seems to be that he makes the following assumption. It is only in the case of mental states with conceptual content that being in the relevant state can involve awareness of the content's normative bearing on which other conceptual contents should be accepted (or rejected, etc., and on what implication for action the content has, etc.).⁸ In the next section I shall spell out what seems to be Brewer's motivation for this view, and point out its weakness.

Before moving to the next section, let me emphasize the difference between the issue I am raising here and a certain objection raised by Peacocke (2001) and Heck (2000). Both Peacocke and Heck argue that Brewer ignores the possibility that the premise of the argument, the articulation of which constitutes the subject's recognition of her reason as such, has the form 'it appears to me that p' rather than 'p' (where 'p' refers to a proposition that captures the content of the experience, which according to Peacocke and Heck is non-propositional). Once we see that the requirement for recognition is satisfied by such an argument, they claim, there is no reason to require that the content of the experience itself be conceptual. The suggestion I am making, in contrast, does not share with Brewer the view that the subject has to actually entertain a certain argument in order to recognize the normative bearing of the experience. Rather, the suggestion is that having the (non-conceptual) experience, regardless of which further propositions the subject might be entertaining at the time) is sufficient for

⁷ Remember that I am construing Brewer's use of 'the subject recognizes a reason as such' as a way of saying that, from the subject's point of view, being in the mental state she is justifies or gives her a reason for endorsing a certain proposition, where 'justifies or gives her a reason' is construed in an uncommitted way. (See pp.3-3 above.) Specifically, I take it that Brewer does not simply presuppose that recognizing a reason as such must involve the subject's judging that such-and-such is a reason for believing that *p*.

⁸ McDowell also simply takes it for granted that only a conceptual content can stand in a normative (rational) relation to other conceptual contents (see, for example, 1996 p.7 and 1995 pp.233-7).

explaining in virtue of what the subject recognizes the experience's normative bearing. (I should further clarify that, if it is correct to read Peacocke and Heck as holding that the subject's recognition of the experience as providing a reason is wholly explained by her articulating the relevant argument, then I think that Brewer has a conclusive reply objection to their suggestion.⁹)

III

The current question, then, is why Brewer holds that only mental states with conceptual content allow for the subject's recognition of the bearing of the content of the state on which attitude she should take towards certain propositional contents; or in other words, why only mental states with conceptual content allow for the subject's recognition of the obtaining of a normative relation between the content of the mental state in question and certain propositional contents. Brewer's discussion of the view that the relevant content is non-conceptual (pp.166-8 (1999)) suggests the following reply. What is special about conceptual contents is that the grasp of such content - and therefore being in an occurrent state with such content - essentially involves (in some sense) the grasp of normative links between the content in question and other conceptual contents.¹⁰ This includes, in the first place, grasp of normative links which are due to structural relations between the contents (henceforth 'structural links'). For example, grasping the thought that *a* is *F* involves grasping that if this thought is true and in addition it is true that *a* is *G*, then it is true that there is something which is both *F* and *G*; that if, in addition to its being true that *a* is *F*, all *F*s are *H*, then *a* is *H*; and so on. Furthermore, our grasp of concepts also involves grasping normative links between

⁹ See Brewer 2005. For lack of space I do not discuss the objection here.

¹⁰ To be accurate, Brewer says that the grasp of a conceptual content makes knowledge of the relevant normative links possible. I use the above formulation for simplicity's sake. In both cases there is need to say more in order to clarify what exactly is ascribed to the subject.

specific concepts, over and above the structural links (I shall call these ‘substantial links’). For example, grasping the thought that *a* is circular involves grasping that if this thought is true, then *a* is not *F*, for any shape concept *F* (possessed by the subject) which is exactly as determinate as *F* and differs from it.

The crucial point here is that Brewer assumes that *only* conceptual contents have this property. But is this assumption justified? The assumption would have seemed quite plausible, if the grasp of normative links between contents had been *merely* a matter of grasping *structural* links between the contents. For it is difficult to see how there could be *normative structural* relations between a propositional and a non-propositional content. But we have just said that, in addition to the grasp of structural links, our grasp of conceptual contents involves a grasp of substantial links between contents. What is more, as I will show in the next paragraph, Brewer himself does not hold that the normative link between the content of an experience and the content of the belief, in virtue of which the subject recognizes that he has a reason for the belief, is structural. Now, in contrast to the case of structural links, there is no immediate objection to the suggestion that being in a state with non-conceptual content involves the grasp of substantial links between the content of this state and the content of a certain judgement. What, for example, prevents us from holding that (when a subject has no doubts regarding the veridicality of his experience) the subject’s seeing an object *a* having the particular shape it does (e.g., its being circular) - though not involving the actualization of concepts - immediately involves his recognition of his being justified in believing that this [*a*] is circular (and similarly that this [*a*] is thus [circular])?

Before considering this possibility, we should clarify that Brewer is, indeed, not appealing to a structural link. To do this, we need to look at what he takes to be the relevant argument - i.e., the argument which the subject is supposed to grasp in order to recognize a given experience as providing her with a reason for making a certain

judgement. This argument, according to Brewer, consists of (i) the proposition which is the content of the relevant experience as a premise and (ii) the content of the relevant judgement as its conclusion. And, on his view, both the premise proposition and the conclusion proposition are one and the same proposition of the form 'this is thus'.¹¹

At first glance, it is unclear how the view Brewer proposes is supposed to explain how experience provides a subject with reasons for his beliefs. For taking a certain argument to be correct is not, by itself, a reason for accepting its conclusion as true. One must also accept the premise(s) as true. But having an experience with a particular content is not yet to accept its content as true.¹² Brewer's reply to this worry is that demonstrative propositions of the form 'this is thus' are such that, whenever the demonstrated object and the predicated property are determined by the subject's attention to an object and to a certain property of *it*,¹³ the subject cannot entertain the content without taking herself to be justified to hold that it is true that this is thus. This is so due (i) to the background conception involved in the subject's grasp of what it is for 'this is thus' to be true - that is, her grasp of the dependence of her experience on how things are and on various relevant conditions - and (ii) to the fact that the subject is aware of relevant aspects of her current relation with the environment, especially, the fact that she is attending to the relevant object and property.¹⁴ Thus even though experience only involves entertaining the content (not yet endorsing it), the mere fact that it is entertained suffices for displaying to the subject her right to endorse it. Brewer, then, regards the subject's rational move from grasping the proposition to endorsing it as embodying a grasp of a correct argument from the proposition to itself.

¹¹ See 1999 ch.6.

¹² For this type of objection see Martin 2001 and Heck 2000 p.507.

¹³ See Martin 2001 and Brewer's reply (2001) for why this condition is needed.

¹⁴ I use the square quotation marks to signify a proposition.

Given this account of how the experience is supposed to provide the subject with a reason, it is clear that it is not the structural relation between the content of the experience and the content of the belief which accounts for the subject's grasp of the normative relation between the two. It is true that the argument in question - i.e., the argument in which the content of the experience is the premise and the content of the belief the conclusion - has the form ' p ; therefore p ', and is therefore valid in virtue of the structural relation between the two contents (and at some points Brewer does seem to ascribe special significance to this fact). But given the above account, it is clear that it is not the structural relation between the premise and the conclusion that articulates the relevant normative relation for the subject. What really does the work in Brewer's account is not the fact that ' p ; therefore p ' is a valid form of argument, but rather the fact that merely grasping the content 'this is thus' (in the relevant conditions) involves grasping that, in fact, this is thus. Clearly, this does not hold for all p . (And Brewer is not suggesting that the subject first endorses the premise as true in virtue of grasping its content and then relies on the validity of arguments of the form ' p ; therefore p ' to conclude that she is justified to judge that this is thus.)

To recap, it was suggested that Brewer takes it for granted that we cannot allow for the idea that a subject's experience of an object a being F is grasped by the subject as justifying her in believing that this [a] is thus [F] unless we construe the experience as having the content 'this [a] is thus [F]' - that is, as involving the operation of two conceptual demonstrative abilities. But the only justification for this seems to be a commitment to the view (which is not uncommon among philosophers) that only being in a state with a conceptual content can imply a grasp of normative links between the state's content and other conceptual contents. To the extent that grasp of such normative links is due to grasp of structural relations between contents, it seems reasonable to be suspicious of the possibility of there being such relations between non-conceptual

experiential contents and conceptual contents. However, the normative links between contents are not only due to structural relations between them, but rather also to substantial relations between them. My suggestion, then, is that there could be similar substantial relations between non-conceptual experiential contents and certain conceptual contents. More specifically, I suggest that there is no obvious argument against the following view. The capacities in virtue of which a particular experience has the content it does ('experiential capacities'), though distinct from conceptual capacities, resemble them in that being in a state which is the result of the actualization of experiential capacities involves the subject's grasp of ways in which his current state - with the content it has - bears on which conceptual contents he should accept, on how he should act, etc. In the next section I shall outline why I think this suggestion is both plausible and well-motivated.

IV

When trying to evaluate whether subjects should be ascribed experiential capacities which are not conceptual yet resemble conceptual capacities in the way specified above, we should remember that mental capacities, and the states (etc.) a subject is said to be in when his mental capacities are actualized, are (at least partly) individuated according to the function they have in the subject's mental life. Thus, for example, beliefs differ from other propositional attitudes in the type of effect they have on the subject's (mental and cognitive) behaviour, and in the type of way the subject's coming to have a certain belief is related to other beliefs of his. Similarly, specific conceptual capacities are individuated by the way their actualization affects and is affected by the actualization of other

conceptual capacities.¹⁵ (Note that the claim is about how we individuate the relevant capacities and states; it is not a claim about what constitutes them). Thus, when the issue is the type of capacity to which the capacities that determine the content of a subject's experience belong, we should consider the role these capacities play in the subject's mental life.

Part of what McDowell and Brewer are doing is pointing out a role which the capacities actualized in experience and those actualized in entertaining thoughts share - both capacities play a role in providing the subject with reasons for beliefs and actions, or more specifically, they can both play a role in constituting the subject's current view as to how things are, and consequently they can affect in a similar manner what she takes to be the correct way of evaluating thoughts and acting. However, the existence of this common role does not immediately entail that the capacities involved in determining the content of an experience are conceptual. To determine whether they should be regarded as conceptual we must consider other aspects of these capacities as well. When we do this, we find reasons, which cannot be dismissed easily, for distinguishing experiential from conceptual capacities.

For example, one may defend the need for such a distinction by pointing out that experience plays a special role in explaining our possession of particular demonstrative abilities, namely, it provides the subject with knowledge of which thing is in question. If we took the ability to experience a particular environmental aspect to be identical to the relevant demonstrative ability, we would have to deny that experience has such explanatory role.¹⁶

¹⁵ In both examples the description of the functional role should not be read as exhaustive. Specifically, if the suggestion under discussion is in place, we should add here reference to the way beliefs and the actualization of concepts are affected by the subject's experiences.

¹⁶ For this type of objection to the conceptualist's view see Campbell 2002 pp.97&121-4 and Eilan 2001. Peacocke presents a different version of the objection, focusing on the role that the way an object or property are experienced play in the individuation of demonstrative abilities (see, for example, 2001 pp.246-50).

Another consideration which may require distinguishing between experiential and conceptual abilities (and which turns out to work in tandem with the previous one) is as follows. When McDowell and Brewer claim that the abilities actualized in experience are the same as those actualized in judging, they are committing themselves to the view that the former abilities satisfy what Gareth Evans (1982, pp.100ff.) calls the 'Generality Constraint'. If the subject's experience involves the actualization of two specific (conceptual) demonstrative abilities - a specific ability to demonstrate a particular experienced object and a specific ability to predicate a certain demonstrated experienced property - then it has to be the case that (i) for any relevant concept F , which the subject grasps, the subject has the ability to entertain the thought this [the relevant experienced object] is F , and (ii) for any object of a relevant kind, for any ability, a , which the subject has of thinking about one such object, the subject has the ability to entertain the thought a is thus [the relevant experienced property]. Furthermore, it should be possible for the ability in question to be actualized in various contexts - e.g., in judging that such and such is the case, doubting whether such and such is the case, desiring that such and such be the case, etc.

Furthermore, McDowell and Brewer both hold that entertaining a proposition involves knowledge of its truth conditions. Thus they hold that if a subject is to satisfy the Generality Constraint there has to be a relevant sense in which he knows which object or property is in question: he has to know which object is the object relevant to the evaluation of thoughts of the form 'this is F ', and he has to know what it is for an (arbitrary) object to be thus, which in turns requires that he know which property is demonstrated by thus. Brewer suggests that, in the case of the demonstrative abilities actualized in experience, such knowledge of the object or property is due to the subject's

focusing attention on the particular object or property.¹⁷ He explains that focused attention is necessary here since it puts the subject in a position to keep track of the object or property while its appearance might change due to changes in the subject's position in relation to it, or due to environmental conditions such as the lighting. And it is this that allows the subject to single out the particular object or property while taking it to be a mind-independent object or property.

Now, if Brewer is right about the necessity of focused attention for demonstrative abilities (and I think he is), then the conceptualist faces a dilemma. Intuitively we experience more than what we focus our attention on. For example, when I focus my attention only on a mug in front of me, I normally still see things like the part of the table on which it stands, the tea spoon in it and the piece of paper behind it. Furthermore, I need not specifically focus my attention on the mug's shape, colour, location, etc., in order to have an experience of these features. But the conceptualist's claim was supposed to be that the experience of an environmental aspect is a matter of the actualization of a demonstrative ability referring to it. So the conceptualist must either deny that we experience aspects of the environment on which we are not focusing attention, or give up the generality of his view - that is, allow that some parts of our experiential contents are not a matter of the actualization of conceptual abilities.¹⁸

This is not the place to discuss whether the conceptualist has a good response to this dilemma; I shall only make a few brief comments which should clarify that the conceptualist has no easy way out.¹⁹ It might be suggested that conceptualists can accept the first horn since phenomena such as inattentional blindness and change blindness seem to indicate that our intuitions about what we actually experience are often

¹⁷ Brewer's construal of the demonstrative abilities which are actualized in experience is significantly different from McDowell's. I am considering only Brewer's construal, since I take it that there are a number of conclusive objections against McDowell's construal.

¹⁸ Brewer (1999 pp.240-1) acknowledges this difficulty and opts for the second horn.

¹⁹ For a detailed rejection of the conceptualist's possible replies see ***.

misleading.²⁰ However, it should be clear that such phenomena do not support the extreme view that we experience only environmental aspects we are *focusing our attention on* (i.e., a view which entails that, for example, I do not really experience the spoon, a part of the table, etc. when I focus my attention on the mug). On the other hand, accepting the second horn conflicts with the conceptualist's motivation. That a subject *experiences* a particular environmental aspect (rather than merely has sub-personal visual information from it) means that this aspect is presented to the subject in experience as being as certain way (otherwise, it is not clear in what sense he is to be said to experience the aspect). But this, in turn, means that the subject should have some grasp of the normative bearing of the experience on what he should believe and do, for he takes it that the specific way things are presented has certain implications for his thoughts and actions (think, in particular, about its implications as to how he should direct his attention, given his present intentions). At this point the conceptualist might argue that although the actualization of the experiential, non-conceptual capacities provides the subject with some grasp of normative links, this grasp falls short of what is needed for the subject to recognize the appropriateness of accepting a proposition as true.²¹ The most reasonable suggestion here seems to be that in such cases the subject only grasps normative links with action and not with propositions. I think the view is generally problematic, but it is also unclear how it could be motivated; there is no obvious reason to think that a subject who recognizes, say, the appropriateness of attending to a certain seen feature (given her current intentions), cannot also recognize the appropriateness of judging that the things are the way which, in her view, made attending to the feature appropriate.

If it can be shown that the conceptualist cannot escape this dilemma, then we can

²⁰ For inattentive blindness see Mack and Rock 1998; for change blindness see, for example, Rensink et al. 1997.

²¹ Brewer takes this route in his 2002 p.21.

conclude that at least some of the capacities in virtue of which the experience has its content - i.e., the capacities which determine the parts of the content that are not due to focused attention - are not conceptual (they are not capacities that can be generally actualized in thought). Furthermore, when we start specifying what kind of capacities these are, it becomes difficult to deny that the same capacities are also involved in determining the content of the experience of aspects we focus our attention on. For, the relevant capacities should surely include things like the capacity to visually discriminate objects, colours, shapes, etc. and one cannot deny that the same capacities are actualized when we focus our attention on an experienced aspect. It is, in fact, natural to suggest that it is in virtue of these capacities that the subject can attend to the aspect and thus also have the ability to think about it demonstratively. This is especially clear when we think about the case in which a subject simply focuses her attention on an object but not on any of its properties. (We can thus see that what I have earlier presented at a separate consideration for distinguishing experiential from conceptual capacities might play a role in the consideration I am discussing now.)

For present purposes, we do not need to decide whether there is a fully developed, conclusive argument for distinguishing between experiential and conceptual capacities. The point here is that there is room for such arguments: that there are aspects of experiential and conceptual contents which seem to require such a distinction, and that there is no obvious reason to object to such a distinction *just because* it allows that non-conceptual contents have a normative bearing, from the subject's point of view, on which attitudes she should endorse towards relevant thoughts.

One might complain that I am leaving it mysterious how the actualization of experiential capacities enables the subject to recognize the relevant normative links. But, in fact, there is no more mystery here than there is in the case of conceptual capacities.

Note, first, that like McDowell and Brewer I am assuming that a subject who has a particular experience recognizes the normative bearing of the way things are presented to him in experience on what he should think and do (and does so simply in virtue of having the experience, rather than in virtue of further thoughts about his experience). Also, like Brewer I assume that the normative link between experiential contents and the relevant thoughts is substantial rather than structural. What is at issue is merely the individuation of the types of capacities in virtue of which our experiences have the contents they do.

Now, the claim that these capacities should be distinguished from conceptual capacities does not imply that there are no close links between the two, or that we can account for the former without any appeal to the latter. In effect, I would suggest that similarly to the way we think of some of the substantial links between a concept and other concepts - e.g., links between a certain shape concept and, say, concepts of various causal interactions, or that of a body, of solidity, etc. - as constitutive of the relevant conceptual ability, we should also think of experiential capacities as partly constituted by their substantial links with relevant conceptual abilities. The relevant links are the ones in virtue of which our experience can be said to be embedded in what is often called ‘a simple theory of perception’: a primitive grasp we all have of how our experiences are related to the way things are in the surrounding environment. Note that both McDowell and Brewer hold that the embeddedness of our experiences in such a theory explains in virtue of what our experiences are, from our point of view, experiences of a mind-independent world.²² I wholly agree with them on this, my objection is merely that the content of the experience need not be conceptual for experience to be embedded in such a theory.

Finally, if one asks what it is about the actualization of such abilities that explains

²² See McDowell 1996 pp.11-2, 31-4 & 54, Brewer 1999 ch.6.

the subject's immediate grasp of the normative bearing of the content, then the reply is that an answer to this question does not raise difficulties which we do not encounter in the case of concepts. In particular, if one wishes to hold that our grasp of thoughts is not epiphenomenal, one should take it to be a basic fact about conceptual abilities that the state one is in when certain abilities are actualized is something which is grasped by the subject as having a certain normative bearing on his thoughts and actions. I am suggesting that the same is true in the case of experience.

V

I have argued that Brewer has not shown that the content of experience must be of a type which can be the content of a judgement if subjects are to recognize their experiences as providing them with reasons for beliefs. What is missing is a reason to rule out the possibility that the capacities in virtue of which an experience has the content it does, though not conceptual, are such that having the experience involves recognition of its normative links with various propositional contents. For if experiential contents are the result of the actualization of such capacities, subjects can recognize the normative bearing of their experience on their beliefs without actually articulating this normative link in thought.

However, suppose we agree that the recognition of an experience as one's reason need not involve the *actual* articulation of the relevant normative relation in thought. There may still be room for arguing that the link between the content of the experience and the relevant propositions must be *articulable* by the subject. And if the link must be articulable, it is not clear that we can hold the view suggested in the previous section. In particular, if one argues for the need to distinguish experiential and conceptual capacities on the basis of the type of considerations regarding focused attention mentioned above, one has to admit that our ability to capture the content of experience by means of

propositions is limited. For experiential content often varies with variation in attention; specifically, focusing attention on a certain environmental aspect normally makes the experience more specific. Consequently, if a subject focused his attention on an aspect that was previously seen but without focused attention, the demonstrative ability to think about this aspect, which the subject gains by attending to it, would often be unsuitable for capturing the exact unspecific character the experience had prior to the shift in attention. (And there are no other conceptual abilities - i.e., non-demonstrative - that are better suited for accurately capturing experiential content).

I end this paper by outlining my reply to this worry: I shall describe what seems to be the main motivation for requiring the articulability of reason-giving relations, and suggest that it does not require that it be possible for the subject to entertain a proposition that accurately captures the relevant experiential content.

What, then, is the motivation for holding that a subject who recognizes the normative link between contents must be *able* to articulate this normative link in thought? McDowell emphasizes that grasping a normative link *as normative* (or, as McDowell would put it, grasping a rational link) entails an ability to reflect on the appropriateness of reasoning or acting according to this link (in McDowell's terminology, an ability to reflect on the credentials of the putatively rational linkages).²³ Such reflections seem to involve articulating (in thought) the normative link in question. So even if recognizing a reason as such need not involve actual articulation of the normative link between the reason and the relevant belief, the subject should have the *ability* to reflect on this normative link and thus the *ability* to articulate this link in thought.

²³ 1996 pp.12-3. One might point out that in the referred passage McDowell speaks about reflection on our concepts and on what we take to be the general normative links between them. But note that he mentions the Quinean character of the view he is expressing; thus I take it that the reflection he is referring to consists in reflecting on a variety of inferences and experience-based judgements in particular cases,

I think McDowell is right about the connection between grasping (or recognizing) a normative link as such and the ability to reflect on the appropriateness of reasoning and acting according to it. A subject who (in principle) cannot reflect in this way, cannot be said to have any grasp of his reasoning or acting as an attempt to do the appropriate thing given the relevant link, and thus cannot be said to grasp the link as normative. It is also uncontroversial that when a subject reflects on a certain normative link, he is articulating certain aspects of it. But is it really necessary that the required ability to reflect on the link involve an ability to entertain propositions which accurately capture the two contents?

It is quite natural to think that reflection on a normative link between two contents, in its most basic form, involves entertaining the relevant two contents (and possibly additional relevant contents) in a way which articulates the normative link between them. When we realize that there are cases in which a subject cannot entertain the two contents - e.g., because one (or both) of them is not available to her at the time of the reflection (as is the case with past thoughts involving perceptual demonstratives, someone else's I-thoughts, etc.), or because one of the contents (or both) is just not a conceptual content - it is natural to require, at least, that the subject entertain a proposition that accurately captures the original content(s). It is thus natural to conclude that the relevant ability to reflect on a normative link between a non-conceptual experiential content and a proposition requires an ability to entertain, while reflecting, a proposition which accurately captures the content of the experience.²⁴ However, it would be a mistake to accept this conclusion.

where what subjects reflect on in particular cases is the appropriateness of their reaching a given conclusion, making a certain judgement, acting a certain way, etc., in the particular circumstances.
²⁴ Such a thought seems to guide Peacocke (1998 & 2001) and Heck (2000) when they attempt to show how the subject can grasp in thought the normative link between a non-conceptual experiential content and the content of a belief based on it.

Consider again McDowell's claim that grasping a normative link as normative entails an ability to reflect on the appropriateness of reasoning or acting according to this link. The line of thought suggested in the previous paragraph seems in place if, when we read McDowell's claim, we have in mind a general model of what reflecting on a normative link involves, and our model is derived from what happens when we reflect in a general manner on the normative link between the content of two beliefs. It seems, however, that reflection on normative links involves different things in different types of cases. And if this is correct, we should pay attention to what we actually take to be our ability to reflect on relevant normative links between experience and thought.

We may start by looking at the type of things we do when we actually reflect on such links. Normally, reflections on what we take to be a normative link between an experience and a certain proposition occur when we have certain doubts regarding the accuracy of the experience, or doubts as to whether the experience was the only thing that influenced our taking a specific attitude towards the proposition, say, accepting it as true. In such cases we consider the aspects which gave rise to our doubt and related aspects which may help us decide whether the experience was veridical and specific enough or whether factors other than the experience influenced us. For example, we may reason about whether our position in relation to the experienced object enables us to see its shape accurately, whether the lighting may be affecting its apparent colour, whether we have been paying enough attention to the relevant environmental aspects, and so on. These considerations need not involve entertaining a specific proposition which captures the *exact* content of the experience, and it seems that, in fact, we do not normally attempt to entertain such a proposition.

The question, however, is whether the possession of abilities to reasons in such ways, regardless of whether the subject can entertain a proposition that captures the exact content of the relevant experience, is sufficient for allowing that the subject grasps

normative links between experience and propositions as such. In other words, would we wish to deny that a subject has such a grasp *only because* he is unable to entertain a thought that captures the exact content of the relevant experience? I think the answer is that the relevant abilities are sufficient, and that this is so because of the way these abilities and our experiences are linked in our primitive grasp of the relation between our experiences and the way things actually are (i.e., in our simple theory of perception in which our experiences are embedded). I shall, rather briefly, mention two aspects of our primitive grasp which seem to explain why the relevant reflective ability need not involve the ability to entertain propositions which (wholly) capture the exact content of the experience.

Note, first, that the relation between an experiential content and simple empirical propositions is normally such that subjects do not question the *general* normative link between the specific contents; e.g., they take it for granted that when they experience an object as having a certain shade of red, if relevant environmental conditions obtain, this [the experienced object] is indeed red. (This is related to the fact that demonstrative concepts and simple observational concepts which are the components of such propositions are partly constituted by the relevant links with experience). Thus, in contrast to cases in which the link between the two contents is not transparent, subjects would not, ordinarily, wish to entertain propositions that capture the two contents in order to examine the general normative link between them. What subjects take to be open to criticism are (implicit or explicit) background assumptions (e.g., regarding environmental conditions, the subject's state, etc.) on which the appropriateness of the relevant thoughts and actions in the specific circumstances depends.

In addition to this, since experience presents things as they are at the present, there is an important sense in which it is constantly changing. Reflection, however, takes time. Subjects thus take it for granted that there is a sense in which the relevant *exact* content is

not available for reflection, and that the ‘materials’ they do have are memories, current experience, general knowledge about the possibilities regarding how things around them may change, and the possibilities of further experiences of the environment.²⁵ Subjects are also aware of how limited their ability to capture the *exact* character of the content in thought is; they are aware both of the limitations of visual memory, and of the deficiency of visual imagery as a means of capturing the richness of an experience and its ongoing interactive relation with the environment. Thus, if they have to figure out what the content of their experience was, they will normally reason (explicitly or implicitly) about what the experienced situation was and which condition could have affected the way things appeared to them. Reasoning in this way can provide the subject with the information he needs, but is not likely to enable the subject to entertain a single (relatively simple) proposition which captures the *exact* content of the experience. However, since such reasoning bears directly upon what subjects take to be the appropriate things to do in the relevant circumstances, there is no further need for them to entertain such a proposition.

Remember that we are assuming here that when the subject has the experience, the content of the experience is grasped by him as having a normative bearing on whether he should accept, reject, etc., certain propositions. Thus there is no attempt here to reduce the subject’s recognition of the normative link to his ability to reason about how various conditions affect his experience (etc.). Still, as mentioned earlier (p.20 above), a subject’s grasp of the normative bearing of a particular experience is partly explained by his background grasp of the way experience is related to the way things are. The points mentioned above, I suggest, explain why, when what is in question is the ability to reflect

²⁵ There are, in my view, significant differences between cases in which the reflection takes place while the subject is continuously experiencing the same environmental aspects and cases in which the experience is discontinuous or the relevant aspects are not experienced any more. For simplicity’s sake, I am ignoring these differences here.

on the normative bearing of our experiences, this background grasp comes to the fore and the exact content of the experience recedes to the background.

My claim, then, is that if this or a similar explanation is plausible, and if I have identified correctly the motivation for an articulability requirement, then grasping the normative bearing of an experience as such does not require the ability to accurately capture the content of this experience in thought. Thus it is unproblematic that a distinction between experiential and conceptual capacities might be associated with limits on our ability to accurately capture experiential contents in thought.

VI

To summarize, McDowell and Brewer argue that a subject can recognize the normative bearing of her experience on her thoughts (and actions) only if the content of the experience is of the type of content which could be the content of a judgement: a content which is the result of the actualization of conceptual abilities. I have pointed out that Brewer, in his argument, simply takes it for granted that only states with this type of content (content resulting from the actualization of conceptual abilities) can be recognized by the subject as having a normative bearing on other conceptual contents (and in a footnote I added that the same is true for McDowell). I then argued that to decide whether this assumption is justified, we must examine the roles played by experience and (clear cases of) conceptual abilities in our mental lives, and I outlined two (probably complementary) ways in which such an examination might lead us to reject the assumption. The question of whether we actually have to reject the assumption was left open; the aim was merely to clarify that it cannot be defended by appeal to general consideration regarding subjects' ability to recognize normative links as such. I ended by arguing that distinguishing experiential capacities from conceptual ones - even if it implies that there are cases in which we are unable to entertain thoughts that capture the

exact contents of our experience - does not conflict with the requirement that the subject be able to reflect on the normative bearing of his experience on his thoughts and actions.²⁶

²⁶ Acknowledgements

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