

MCDOWELL, SCEPTICISM, AND THE ‘VEIL OF PERCEPTION’<sup>1</sup>

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McDowell has argued that external world scepticism is a pressing problem only in so far as we accept, on the basis of the argument from illusion, the claim that perceiving that *p* and hallucinating that *p* involve a highest common factor—something which functions, in the manner of the classical ‘veil of ideas’, as a perceptual intermediary. McDowell traces the power of this argument to disputable Cartesian assumptions about the transparency of subjectivity to itself. I argue, contra McDowell, that the reflections to be found in, paradigmatically, Descartes’s *First Meditation* are better interpreted as offering a causal argument for scepticism that depends upon a naturalistic conception of sense experience. This is more powerful than the argument from illusion, since it requires no commitment to a highest common factor in perception, nor to the transparency of the mental. The availability of this alternative route to scepticism raises serious problems for McDowell’s quietism, which aims to earn the right to avoid, rather than answer, the sceptic. Since the appeal to externalism about content cannot settle the matter, I conclude that there is, at present, an unsatisfactory stand-off between the sceptic and McDowell’s position.

Introduction

Let us understand the problem of the external world in its most radical form as the problem how we can have reason to believe that there is an external world on the basis of sense experience. Such scepticism undermines the role of experience in providing rational justification for beliefs about the external world. We come to find it puzzling how experience ever does, or ever could, provide us reason to think that our external world beliefs are true. This form of scepticism challenges not only knowledge but, more radically, the idea that we have *any reason at all* to believe that there is an external world having the features that we pre-theoretically believe it to have. For convenience, I shall henceforth use the term ‘scepticism’ to refer to this problem and the term ‘experience’ to refer to sense experience.

In the present paper I shall be concerned to examine a popular view which identifies the motivation for scepticism with the traditional Argument from Illusion and a subsequent commitment to a ‘veil of ideas’ theory of perception. The assumption underlying this way of thinking is that scepticism results from a commitment to an indirect realist (or what is also called a representative realist) theory of perception on the

<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from audiences at Tufts University, Macquarie University, and the Philosophy Department at the RSSS, ANU. Special thanks to Stephen White. I’d like to thank the reviewers of this journal for their comments on a previous draft.

basis of the Argument from Illusion. Since John McDowell has presented the best account of this kind that I know, I shall be examining his writings on this topic in some detail. My general goal will be to show that this popular view tends to misrepresent the power and attraction of scepticism. In particular, I want to argue that the appeal of scepticism is independent of the question whether we advocate either a direct or indirect realist position in the theory of perception. I shall present a version of the sceptical argument which depends upon a naturalistic conception of experience that can, but need not, be understood along the lines of the 'veil of ideas'. So even if we could entitle ourselves to reject the Argument from Illusion and the 'veil of ideas' that is its corollary, that would not be enough to overcome the persuasiveness of scepticism.

In a concluding section, I examine McDowell's quietist response to scepticism and show that it does not go far enough in undermining the sceptical position. I argue that McDowell's strategy of simply showing that a sceptical conception of experience is not inevitable does not show that it is not reasonable and persuasive. And that is all the sceptic needs to remain a threat.

The importance of this work lies in rehabilitating a sense of the intuitive power of scepticism and in showing that we, or at least many of us, are inclined to accept a naturalistic conception of experience that is inherently sceptical in the sense that reflection upon this conception inevitably leads to scepticism. The paper does not aim to refute scepticism but to try to convince you that it is a much more serious problem than you might have thought. I shall leave for another occasion the question how best to respond to scepticism, so derived.

## I. Scepticism and the 'Veil of Ideas'

### A. McDowell and *The Argument from Illusion*

If we consider sceptical reflection that takes as its starting point our sensory experience of the world, then it is commonly believed that in order to derive scepticism in this way the sceptic must be committed to the doctrine of a perceptual 'veil of ideas'. A representative of this view is Richard Rorty who, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, argues for

the traditional line . . . that Descartes' doctrine of representative perception was a sharp and perhaps disastrous, break with the scholastic tradition of direct realism.

In Descartes' conception—the one which became the basis for 'modern' epistemology—it is representations which are in the 'mind'. The Inner Eye surveys these representations hoping to find some mark of their fidelity . . . . Such an inner arena and its inner observer . . . permit[ted the seventeenth century] to pose the problem of the veil of ideas, the problem which made epistemology central to philosophy.

[Rorty 1980: 49 note, 45–51.]

This diagnosis of scepticism has some claim to be called the 'traditional line' because it has been held by a number of prominent thinkers including Ayer, Bennett, Kenny, Putnam, Reid, and McDowell. The 'veil of ideas' theory holds that in ordinary perceptual experience we are 'directly' aware of sensory 'ideas' or representations in the mind. Since the perception of external objects (e.g. houses, people) is mediated by the awareness of

these mental entities interposed between subject and world (e.g. sensory 'ideas', sense-data), this is a form of what is commonly called *indirect realism*. A perceptual experience about how things are in the external world must be based on an inference from the deliverances of this direct awareness, though this inference is often also claimed to be ordinarily automatic, and minimally conscious, if at all.<sup>2</sup> For present purposes I will not raise questions about the character of the inference involved. Nor will it matter very much whether the perceptual intermediary is understood in empiricist fashion as an unconceptualized item, or in rationalist fashion as a representation with a propositional content. In either case, if all one is directly aware of in perception are 'ideas in the mind', then the slightest reflection upon this fact must raise grave doubts about their relation to anything beyond the mind or whether there is anything beyond the mind for them to be related to. The traditional line is surely right to claim that holding such a view about perception makes scepticism inevitable. The question I want to raise is whether this account does full justice to the power that sceptical thinking can have.

In a series of seminal papers, John McDowell has articulated a version of the traditional line, according to which the traditional sceptical reflections of, say, Descartes's meditator are to be understood as a recital of the Argument from Illusion. Of course, many arguments in the history of philosophy might deserve this title. But McDowell is interested in a specific argument, which turns on explaining cases of phenomenally indistinguishable deceptive and non-deceptive experiences by positing *something in common* to them within the scope of one's perceptual awareness. This he calls a *highest common factor* [1982: 472]. We may represent it as follows:

- (i) Any experience of an object may be phenomenally indistinguishable from dreaming or hallucinating that object.
- (ii) In dreaming or hallucinating an object one is not aware of a real or existent object.
- (iii) In order to explain such phenomenal indistinguishability we must suppose that one is perceptually aware of something in common to perceiving an object and dreaming or hallucinating the same thing. Call this a sensory 'idea' of an object.
- (iv) Therefore, in experiencing an object one is 'directly' aware of a sensory 'idea' of that object, which forms a defeasible basis for judging that there is an object there.

For convenience, let us call this, simply, the Argument from Illusion.<sup>3</sup> The argument is supposed to make attractive the positing of what, in traditional terms, is called a 'sensory idea' as that which one embraces 'within the scope of one's consciousness' in cases of phenomenally indistinguishable perceptions, dreams and hallucinations [McDowell 1982: 471]. We are supposed to be brought to see that even in non-deceptive cases we are aware of something less than the relevant external fact. McDowell remarks that 'the argument effects a transition from sheer fallibility . . . to a "veil of ideas" scepticism' [ibid.: 472]. It

<sup>2</sup> By 'Direct Realism' I understand a conception of perception that allows for the immediate awareness of worldly objects, one that is *not* mediated by the awareness of entities interposed between mind and world. On this view, one can be (and typically is) non-inferentially aware of external objects.

<sup>3</sup> This argument can be uncontroversially traced back at least to Bishop Berkeley. It received a well-known formulation in Ayer [1940: chap. 1].

motivates the idea of an intermediary entity, or a *highest common factor*, between the perceiver and the external world that inevitably plays an essential epistemic role, serving as the only empirical basis for inferences to the world beyond. Given the extremely shaky nature of these inferences, coming to be convinced of the truth of the 'veil of ideas' on the basis of this argument is tantamount to accepting the sceptical conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

Yet we must ask, how strong is this argument? No doubt the existence of phenomenally indistinguishable cases of deceptive and non-deceptive experience may tempt one to posit a highest common factor in order to explain this fact. But *must* we explain the fact in this way? On McDowell's view, positing a highest common factor only *seems* compelling and inevitable given the background of a Cartesian conception of subjectivity. For Descartes, the mind is a self-standing 'inner space', the existence and intrinsic nature of which is independent of the external world, an inner realm that is completely and infallibly transparent to itself. McDowell explains:

We arrive at the fully Cartesian picture with the idea that there are no facts about the inner realm besides what is infallibly accessible to the newly recognised capacity to acquire knowledge.

[1986: 150].<sup>5</sup>

Only in the context of the view that the mind's contents are wholly and infallibly accessible to itself does the failure to detect a difference between two appearances imply that they are the very same—an admission that forces us to accept a 'veil of ideas' theory of perception and its sceptical consequences.

But now the question arises why we must accept this Cartesian picture of inner infallibility and transparency? Certainly it seems quite implausible. Simple facts about memory gaps or lapses, mismatches between action and words, dreamless sleep, semiconscious or fully unconscious states, and various failures of self-knowledge about, say, one's deeper emotions or desires: all of these basic facts of our mental life make it extremely problematic to adopt the view that mental contents are, in general, infallibly and transparently known. For reasons such as these, McDowell can resist conceiving the inner in general according to the Cartesian picture, whilst conceding that the doctrine of infallibility (though not transparency) may be plausible *with respect to one's own sensory experiences*, those one might express by saying how things phenomenally seem to one.

By rejecting the Cartesian conception of the inner, the way is open to explain the kind of phenomenal indistinguishability at issue in the Argument from Illusion by other means. McDowell's response to this Argument is to re-conceive the inner in order to make room for the possibility of inner fallibility and internal facts of which one is not aware. Once we give up the thought that appearance states are transparent to the mind, then we are no longer forced to posit something in common to explain phenomenally indistinguishable deceptive and non-deceptive experiences. Now facts about the inner that need not be

<sup>4</sup> If we cannot justify the inference from the direct awareness of 'ideas' (or sense-data) to the indirect awareness of external objects, we surely cannot justify the further inference from experience to a belief in the external world.

<sup>5</sup> McDowell criticizes Burnyeat [1982] for suggesting that the innovation in the Cartesian conception of the inner—something that distinguishes modern from ancient scepticism—is simply a matter of acknowledging 'a range of infallibly knowable facts' [1986: 152].

available to introspection can serve to constitute the difference between these phenomenally indistinguishable mental states. Subjects can simply mistake being in one state for being in the other.

This move makes available a *disjunctive* account of appearances. On this view:

an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone.  
[McDowell 1982: 472].<sup>6</sup>

On the disjunctive account phenomenally indistinguishable states need have nothing in common apart from the fact that the subject cannot tell them apart. From the first-person perspective, a *mere* appearance can be phenomenally indistinguishable from a non-deceptive appearance even though in the first case, there is nothing that appears, and in the second, what appears is an actually obtaining external fact or state of affairs. In the latter cases, perceptual objects are, as McDowell puts it, ‘immediately present to the mind’ [ibid.: 140]. However, since one is a fallible detector of such states, they can be confused with phenomenally indistinguishable states in which one has an *illusion* of entertaining a perceptually demonstrative thought.

On McDowell’s account, the propositional content of a non-deceptive experience is object-dependent in so far as it intrinsically depends upon the presence of the object that is ‘manifest’ or ‘open’ to it. In contrast to the Cartesian conception, inner and outer realms are conceived as ‘interpenetrating’. In order to determine which disjunct obtains in any particular case, one must apply ordinary empirical procedures, such as relying on other sensory modalities or the testimony of other observers, to determine whether how things seem is a case of perceiving how things are [1986: 150]. On a disjunctive account, then, one can infallibly know how things *seem* to one whilst only fallibly knowing whether how things seem is a case of actually perceiving that things are thus and so [ibid.: 149].

It is worth noting that McDowell’s disjunctive conception of experience presupposes a strongly externalist theory of content. The very possibility of empirical content depends on the fact that some or other of our experiences *must* be non-deceptive in the sense that the relevant objects figure in them. These are cases in which the actual presence of the objects of perception enters into our understanding of the relevant experiential content. Non-deceptive experience plays, as McDowell puts it, a ‘primary role’ in the availability of empirically contentful thought quite generally, that is, in cases of *both* non-deceptive and deceptive experience.<sup>7</sup> On this view, unless there are in fact *some* actual cases of veridical perception then we could not enjoy empirically contentful thought at all, so there can be no threat that we are *always* suffering from illusions, dreams, or hallucinations.

In sum, McDowell’s initial response to scepticism is diagnostic, tracing it to the Argument from Illusion and an underlying dependence upon a misguided Cartesian account of the inner. In its place he articulates a disjunctive conception of experience in the context of a re-conception of the inner as, in general, neither infallible nor transparent. The basic idea is that

<sup>6</sup> Austin’s denial that we are perceptually aware of any one kind of thing anticipates the disjunctive account of experience [1962: 14].

<sup>7</sup> McDowell speaks of the ‘primacy . . . [of] the veridical case’ [1986: 152].

scepticism looks urgent only in the context of a visibly dubious assumption, which imposes a certain shape on the space of epistemological possibilities.

[1995: 888]

McDowell is not attempting to answer the sceptic. His response is a form of quietism, an attempt to earn the right not to have to provide an answer. We shall return to the question of what a satisfactory quietism might involve. The present question is whether we should accept his diagnostic claims.

*B. The Possibility of Phenomenally Indistinguishable  
Non-deceptive and Deceptive Experiences*

According to the traditional line, the power of scepticism is identified with the persuasiveness of thinking that in perception we are confronted with a 'veil of ideas'. McDowell's work provides a simple way of defusing such scepticism by undermining the argument that seemed to force us to posit a 'veil of ideas' in the first place. As we have seen, on McDowell's view, the apparent power of the Argument from Illusion is really dependent upon a prior commitment to a Cartesian conception of subjectivity. Without a commitment to Cartesian 'inner space', the argument wholly turns upon the thought that we must explain the fact of phenomenally indistinguishable perceptions, dreams, and hallucinations by positing a common inner item as the object of awareness, i.e. a highest common factor. But we have seen that there is no requirement to posit a highest common factor in these cases. They can be explained simply as those in which distinct experiences are mistaken for one another under certain circumstances. It is an Austinian commonplace that the same thing can, under different conditions, appear different and different things can, under certain conditions, appear the same.

If we accept the traditional line, therefore, responding to scepticism is no more difficult than rejecting the Argument from Illusion and with it the 'veil of ideas'.<sup>8</sup> As McDowell puts it,

Without the 'highest common factor' conception of experience ... the traditional problems [including scepticism] lapse.

[1982: 479]

But I now want to argue that scepticism cannot be avoided so easily. The traditional line, as McDowell presents it, misrepresents both the power and the resources of sceptical reasoning.

Ironically, the alternative account I offer is inspired by McDowell's own discussion of the objectification of subjectivity. As he explains, since the rise of modern science, treating the mind in terms of distinct efficient causal states is part of 'a plausible aspiration to accommodate psychology within the pattern of [mechanistic] explanation characteristic of the natural sciences' [1986: 152]. McDowell links this objectification of subjectivity to

<sup>8</sup> The traditional Argument from Illusion certainly played an important role in motivating sense-data theories in early twentieth-century discussions of perception, but it is debatable how important this line of thought was before that century. Gary Hatfield [1990: 298], for one, has suggested that the popularity of the traditional line is to some extent a product of a misguided tendency of early twentieth century philosophers to read sense-data theories back into the *Meditations*.

the Cartesian ‘discovery’ of a self-standing inner realm. However, I take this process to be even more intimately related to scepticism than McDowell supposes. It shows that the mind, when it is *naturalized* according to a scientific conception of nature, is pictured as a realm of events, states, and processes in efficient causal relation to the external world. My claim is that experience, understood in the context of this causal model of the mind, is the main source of the power that scepticism has, a fact that has been obscured by the traditional emphasis on the ‘veil of ideas’.

## II. The Causal Model of Experience

### A. Descartes’s First Meditation

At this point it is worth returning to the sceptical considerations that we find in Descartes’s *First Meditation* since they are the touch-stone for modern sceptical thought.<sup>9</sup> I want to argue that the traditional line misrepresents the sceptical considerations present in the *First Meditation* and that this is related to its failure to provide an adequate account of what is motivating scepticism.

As you will recall, the meditator quickly passes over considerations of ordinary perceptual illusions (e.g. seeing a square tower in the distance as round) on the ground that whilst *some* of his perceptual beliefs are doubtful, nevertheless, ‘there are many other [such] beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible’ [AT VII: 18]. Reflection upon perceptual illusions does not function, as the traditional line would have it, to suggest that in perception we are confronted with intermediaries between mind and world. On the contrary, the initial consideration of perceptual illusions can be more plausibly understood as helping to shift attention to perceptual beliefs about *near and familiar objects under optimal conditions of observation*, i.e., those that we are quite certain are based on non-deceptive experiences. The meditator does not suggest or imply that he is committed to a ‘veil of ideas’. There is no indication that in perception the meditator takes himself to be aware of anything less than external objects themselves.<sup>10</sup> So I conclude that the meditator’s intuitive conception of experience, reflection upon which seems to lead inevitably to scepticism, is *not* best interpreted according to the ‘veil of ideas’. What, then, is the meditator’s conception of experience?

In order to answer this question let us consider the following remark about dreams,

<sup>9</sup> The relation between scepticism and Descartes’s *First Meditation* is complex. Elsewhere, I have argued that the paradigmatic sceptical doubts of the *First Meditation* are really doubts about the possibility of Cartesian ‘certainty’, since they are conditioned by the meditator’s quest for what is ‘completely certain and indubitable’ [AT VII: 18]. But the text also contains the material for a deeper scepticism—one that Descartes refrains from seriously entertaining—concerning the *rational justification of belief* [Macarthur: 2000].

<sup>10</sup> Recent scholarship on the theory of ideas in the seventeenth century seems to support this reading by raising further problems for those who ascribe a ‘veil of ideas’ view to Descartes. Yolton [1984] is representative of a revisionist interpretation of many early modern theories of perception formerly thought to be versions of indirect (or representative) realism as, in fact, versions of direct realism. While I have doubts about the general applicability of this strategy (e.g. to Locke), it is plausible that the sensory ideas of Descartes are *not* to be thought of as the objects of perception. On Yolton’s view, Descartes’s sensory ‘ideas’ are interpreted instead as *acts* of perceiving.

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake.

[AT VII: 19]

The thought is that something the meditator calls 'experiences' are shared by both dreams and waking experience. It seems, then, that dreams are understood as a kind of perceptual illusion in which we are caused to have the same 'experiences' as we ordinarily enjoy in perception, only that in these cases they are not caused by external objects. This naturally leads us to think that what must distinguish phenomenally indistinguishable perceptions and dreams is their *causal origin*, something determined on the basis of other experiences, e.g. remembering having woken up, and the coherence of perceptual experience in contrast to the relative incoherence of dream experience. This conception of experience, which is largely implicit in the *First Meditation*, is made fully explicit in the *Third Meditation* where the meditator speaks of his

habitual belief . . . that there were things outside me which were the *sources* of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects.

[AT VII: 35; my emphasis]<sup>11</sup>

These remarks demonstrate that the meditator is committed to what I shall call a *causal model of experience*,<sup>12</sup> according to which perceptual experiences can be decomposed into two components: (1) an inner component which we might call *subjective experiences*, which can be expressed by saying how things sensorily seem to one; and (2) the efficient causes of such subjective experiences, which we normally believe to be appropriate external objects. On the causal model, perceptions, hallucinations, and dreams are thought to involve the very same kind of subjective experiences; the differences between them being simply a matter of causal origin. The principle at work here is that the same effect can have various different efficient causes. The logical distinctness of efficient cause and effect, qua natural occurrences, implies the logical distinctness of subjective experience and external world.<sup>13</sup> We can go further and say that subjective experiences are *autonomous* in so far as all subjective experiences could, in principle, be just the same even if there were no external world. That is, their collective existence and nature does not depend upon the external world that is generally believed to bring them about. This, of course, has important consequences for our conception of how we acquire concepts of mind-independent physical objects, a point which I shall return to later.

Here is a sketch of how the causal model of experience functions in the meditator's sceptical reasoning. The meditator enjoins us to focus upon our experience of near and familiar objects—the fire, a dressing-gown, a piece of paper, one's own hands—*not* to

<sup>11</sup> I understand the controversial term 'resemblance' to indicate that both the content of experience and the way the world is can be expressed in terms of the very same proposition.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term 'model' in order to suggest that this is an intuitive conception that we appeal to in reflecting upon experience. It makes no claim to be a complete account of experience nor to provide an analysis (or necessary and sufficient conditions) of experience. The relation of the causal model of experience to our actual sense experience is akin to that between an architectural model and the building it is a model of.

<sup>13</sup> Here it is important that subjective experience is described in existentially non-committal terms, employing the seems-locution or something equivalent.

convince us that perception is epistemically mediated by 'ideas', but rather to put pressure on what we suppose are *best cases* of non-deceptive perception. If experience is to play its ordinary reason-giving role we must suppose that it can be relied on to yield mostly true beliefs, especially in the cases where we are most confident of its power to do so.

But what accounts for the reliability of experience in these best cases? It is almost inevitable that one appeals to causal relations between external objects and subjective experiences to answer this question. So, on the present account, the meditator's consideration of best cases in which we are certain that our perceptual beliefs are true can be understood as uncovering an implicit *causal reliability assumption* upon which our empirical knowledge and beliefs are epistemically grounded. The meditator comes to think of himself as assuming that, in these best cases, he is caused, in the right way, to have subjective experiences by the external objects that these same experiences appear to be about.

Once we realize that our of epistemic practices rest on this unargued causal assumption, they seem particularly fragile. The discovery the difference between the scientific and the manifest images of the world provides a further, and important, motivation to fear that there might be a systematic but, in principle, undetectable mismatch between appearance and reality. The meditator notes that while there is no question that he has had various subjective experiences as of external objects, there *is* a question about the truth of his 'habitual belief . . . that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas' [AT VII: 35]. We can thus understand the sceptic's hyperbolic doubts as *alternative causal hypotheses* rationally motivated by, and aimed at challenging, the assumption of a reliable causal connection in those cases in which we are most inclined to think that it must hold. Of course, if it fails to hold in these best cases, it fails generally, since best cases are representative of all cases.

The idea that we must find some way of deciding between the sceptic's alternative causal hypotheses is an intuitive requirement on our entitlement to think of our experiences as reliable. If we cannot provide a non-question-begging defence of the causal assumption in these best cases of perception then it seems we cannot *ever* do so.

The sceptical doubts are effective because they provide an alternative account of the complete course of subjective experiences which explains how it could be that the beliefs based on such experiences might be undetectably yet systematically mistaken. To provide such an explanation of undetectable global error is their main function. When we consider subjective experience as a whole, there is no non-question-begging way of discovering causes external to it; hence no possibility of vindicating the assumption in question. The sceptic imagines continuous dreams and global hallucinations that are indistinguishable *in principle* from the entire course of subjective experience.

The naturalness of the causal model of experience and the apparent intelligibility and reasonableness of the sceptical scenarios of the *First Meditation* go hand in hand. It is because the causal model of experience is both an intuitive and an inherently sceptical conception of experience that scepticism is a worse problem than we might think.

Let us leave the explication of the *First Meditation* there. Note that I am not claiming that the causal model of experience is something we are, in fact, ordinarily committed to. I am claiming that it can *seem* that we are ordinarily so committed. Nor am I claiming that the causal model of experience is a necessary condition for generating sceptical hypotheses. The causal model is better thought of as one particularly important basis for

scepticism within modern philosophy. Its importance depends upon the fact that the causal model of experience is the view of experience endorsed by scientific naturalism—a view that has been increasingly important since the seventeenth century and is now the orthodoxy within Anglo-American philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

### B. Two Ways of Understanding the Causal Model of Experience

As I have so far characterized it, there are two importantly different ways of understanding the causal model of experience, depending upon whether one thinks of subjective experience as the *object* or as the *means* of perception. One way of understanding subjective experience is as the direct object of perceptual awareness by means of which one becomes mediately aware of external objects. This is a 'veil of ideas' reading of the causal model of experience.<sup>15</sup> But note that the fact that subjective experiences are inner effects does not imply, though it may encourage, the view that they are themselves immediate objects of perceptual awareness.

We can *also* think of subjective experience as the *means*, not the objects, of perceptual awareness. On this alternative understanding, subjective experience is understood as *intentional*, as being directed at the external world; and the representational content of subjective experience being given by a that-clause, which describes how the external world is represented by it. The fact that subjective experience represents the world as containing this or that external object leaves it an open question whether such objects really exist. On this reading, we need not concede that every act of awareness *must* have an 'object' in any sense more robust than the notion of an *intentional object*, the representational content of the awareness. An intentional object as such is not an entity of any kind, physical, abstract, or otherwise. To be the intentional object of an experience is simply to be the object of a subject's perceptual awareness. And, of course, such an 'object' may or may not exist.<sup>16</sup>

The possibility for this understanding may be missed because it is mistakenly supposed that representationalism inevitably commits one to an 'indirect' or representative theory of perception. But this is simply not the case. *Any* account of perception, including direct realist theories, must accommodate cases of hallucination, cases in which we are aware of experiences without being aware of any external object since there is no external object to be aware of. On the direct realist reading of the causal model of experience, the sceptic does *not* think of subjective experiences or their representational contents as internal

<sup>14</sup> The definition of scientific naturalism is controversial. Broadly speaking, I understand it to involve two main themes: (1) a scientific conception of nature; and (2) the idea that philosophy is continuous with science. Although scientific naturalism in this sense has only been an orthodoxy in analytic philosophy since the writings of Quine, the idea of a scientific conception of nature has been a powerful presence in philosophy from well before that time. For present purposes, what matters is that the causal model of experience represents an attempt to understand perception in terms of the causal explanations of nature provided by the natural sciences. For a more detailed discussion of scientific naturalism, see the Introduction to *Naturalism in Question*, ed. M. De Caro and D. Macarthur, forthcoming from Harvard University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Locke [1689: Bk. 4, Chap. 11] and Hume [1748: Sect. 12, Part 1: 152–3] both discuss the 'veil of ideas' reading of the causal model of experience and each recognizes its inevitable sceptical consequences. However, several of the considerations they adduce for the sceptical character of experience do not depend upon their further allegiance to what Reid called the way of ideas.

<sup>16</sup> For a recent defence of this insubstantial conception of intentional objects see Tim Crane [2001].

entities (i.e. objects in a more substantial sense) of perception. They are, rather, the *means* by which we perceive what we do.<sup>17</sup>

Two further points flow from distinguishing these two readings of the causal model of experience. The first is that supposing we had an independent argument to show that the ‘veil of ideas’ cannot be sustained, the direct realist understanding of the causal model of experience would still be available. For example, it has been argued that the ‘veil of ideas’ doctrine is phenomenologically implausible on the ground that a faithful description of ordinary experience does not typically seem to involve any inference, nor any objects other than spatio-temporally continuous mind-independent objects. Such phenomenological considerations are not decisive. For one thing, the ‘veil of ideas’ is also motivated by a phenomenological fact, namely, that deceptive and non-deceptive experiences can seem to be the same from the first-person point of view. But even if they were decisive, the important point is that that would not block scepticism in so far as the direct realist understanding of the causal model of experience remains available.

The second point is that we cannot treat the causal model of experience as involving a highest common factor in McDowell’s sense. One might be tempted to think that subjective experiences, on this reading, are a highest common factor, but that would be a mistake. The very idea of a highest common factor is paradigmatically meant to pick out something that we are conscious of in (seeming) perception which is common to deceptive and non-deceptive experience alike, interposed between the experiencing subject and the external world; something that *cannot* be identified with an external object or state of affairs. But, according to the direct realist version of the causal model of experience, when one is not suffering from an illusion then what one is aware of is, precisely, an external object or state of affairs. That is to say, even though there is something in common to deceptive and non-deceptive experience, namely a subjective experience with the same intentional content, it is *not* to be thought of as a common object of perceptual awareness intermediary between mind and world.

In considering subjective experience it is important not to confuse autonomy with indirectness. The sceptic is committed to *the autonomy of subjective experience*: the claim is that the entire course of subjective experience could, at least in principle, be just what it is even supposing that the external world it purports to be of is radically different in nature or does not exist at all. But he need not be committed to *the indirectness of experience*: the claim that external objects are only indirectly perceived, that is, by way of the immediate awareness of some intermediary entity.

The important conclusion we can now draw is that the motivation for scepticism is untouched by simply taking a stand on the debate between direct and indirect realism in the philosophy of perception. A direct realist version of the causal model of experience is no less susceptible to sceptical undermining than the ‘veil of ideas’. Even if we reject the Argument from Illusion and give up any commitment to the ‘veil of ideas’, the inherently sceptical causal model of experience remains in full force. The reasonableness of this form of scepticism resides in two commitments: firstly, the commitment to there being autonomous subjective experiences; and secondly, the commitment to the idea that there is

<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, Thomas Reid [1863] argued that sensations are not the objects but the means of perception.

an efficient causal gap between the mind and the world. Together these commitments constitute the causal model of experience, which, upon sceptical reflection from the first-person perspective, undermines the reason-giving role of experience.

Some might be inclined to respond that this line of thinking cannot be right since scepticism relies on questioning the propriety of an inference from appearance to reality, the very thing that a genuine direct realism denies. Yet this response trades on an ambiguity concerning the nature of the inference that is in question. One might think that one must posit an inference in order to explain the content of perceptual experience. Or, instead, one might suppose that there must be an inference from the content of experience to a judgement (based on that experience) that things in the world are thus and so. What direct realism denies is that one's experience, considered by itself, typically involves an inference from an awareness of sense-data, 'ideas', etc. to external objects. One's experience can be of (or, better, as of) the external world 'directly'. But the sceptic is primarily interested in a different inference, that from the content of experience to a judgement about the existence of some state of affairs: say, from 'I have a visual experience as of an oak tree in the park' to 'There is an oak tree in the park'. It is important to note that direct realists recognize a distinction between the non-inferential awareness that *p* and the perceptual judgement that *p*.<sup>18</sup> To move from the first to the second requires *endorsing* (the truth of) the content of the relevant experience. Since such endorsement is an inference, there is an inferential component to all perceptual judgement, even on the direct realist theory. And, of course, it is just such endorsements (or inferences) that the sceptic challenges.

### C. Is McDowell's Quietist Response to Scepticism Adequate?

Although the traditional line errs in identifying the primary source of scepticism as a commitment to a 'veil of ideas' conception of perception, it admittedly comes close to the truth. On the present account, scepticism depends upon a commitment to the causal model of experience which *can*, but need not, be interpreted along the lines of the 'veil of ideas'. It follows that the motivations for the causal model of experience, reflection upon which gives rise to scepticism, go beyond the motivations for the 'veil of ideas' and, in particular, beyond those provided by the Argument from Illusion. Nevertheless, I see it as a virtue of the present account that the 'veil of ideas' can be accommodated as *one* form that the causal model of experience can take.

In closing I should like to consider further McDowell's quietist response to scepticism and to show that unless we successfully undermine the sceptic's claim of reasonableness we inevitably fail to respond adequately to the sceptical problematic.

We have seen that McDowell's discussion of the Argument from Illusion has the dual purpose of showing that the reasons one can marshal for the 'veil of ideas' doctrine are not overwhelming and, furthermore, showing that there is conceptual space for the

<sup>18</sup> This might be missed because the perceptual verbs are typically factive. Expressions of the form 'I see (hear, feel . . .) that *p*' usually imply that it is the case that *p*. However since our experiences can be misleading or deceptive to a greater or lesser extent, a conception of experience is available that involves no acceptance on the part of the subject. As McDowell himself puts it, experiences are better thought of as 'invitations' to accept propositions about the external world; and, of course, one can decide to refuse an invitation [Smith 2002: 278].

disjunctive picture of experience, something that did not seem possible given certain Cartesian assumptions about the mind. McDowell thinks of this response as a form of Wittgensteinian quietism where the aim of the quietist is not to answer the sceptic but to earn the right to refuse to offer an answer [1994: 113; 1995: 888]. What is it to earn the right to refuse to answer the sceptic? I take it that would be to show that there is something defective about the sceptical problem itself. Supposing that could be shown, then there would be no longer any requirement to answer the sceptic. The residual task would only be to explain why the problem initially seemed to require an answer.

On the face of it, this seems a promising line to take. Too often responses to scepticism fall disappointingly into one or other of the two camps of refutation or indifference. The long line of unsuccessful refutations leaves one feeling that there is something inherently misguided in this strategy. But in contrast to those who simply turn their back on the problem, it at least has the virtue of taking seriously a question of the first philosophical importance. Wittgensteinian quietism promises a more fruitful path through this well-trodden terrain, for it offers a way of taking scepticism seriously without attempting to provide another disputable refutation of it. However, even if we overlook McDowell's misdiagnosis of the sceptical argument, it can be questioned whether McDowell has done enough work to earn the right to turn his back on the sceptic.

Clearly, McDowell is right to think that if we *start* with his disjunctive conception of experience then the sceptic's reflections cannot so much as get off the ground. The point at issue is whether simply offering a disjunctive conception of experience in the context of a re-conception of the inner allows us to avoid scepticism. For McDowell it is enough to show that scepticism is not *inevitable*, that it is not rationally forced upon him by argument. To this end he argues that the Argument from Illusion can be reasonably resisted.

But, as we have seen, even if we reject the 'veil of ideas', the causal model in its direct realist version remains a compelling conception of experience. If this form of the causal model is exploited by the sceptic in raising his problem then the mere availability of the disjunctive account does not defuse the power of scepticism. Rather, it presents us with a stand-off between the sceptic's causal model of experience and McDowell's disjunctive account. And one might think that the sceptic wins a stand-off.<sup>19</sup> In so far as the sceptic's causal model remains a reasonable, or no less reasonable, option then there can be no lasting comfort in a question-begging adoption of a scepticism-blocking disjunctivism. It is worth observing that the impasse in which two opposing theories or beliefs are equally reasonable leads us, according to ancient sceptical tradition, to withhold assent to *both*. Scepticism, at its deepest, shows that reason does not provide us the grounds for deciding what to believe as we had thought. One of Hume's lessons is that although we can, and do, avoid scepticism, we cannot do so on the basis of reason. This predicament, in which reason is cancelled, or rendered impotent, by the sceptical employment of reason moved Kant to speak of scepticism as a 'scandal . . . to human reason in general' [1787: B xl. fn].

Part of the explanation for the dilemma is an underlying stand-off between two contrasting conceptions of the intentional content of perception, an object-dependent

<sup>19</sup> Crispin Wright arrives at a similar conclusion: 'A draw . . . [is] all the sceptic needs' [1985: 444].

(externalist) account and an object-independent (internalist) account<sup>20</sup>—each of which can plausibly form the basis of global versions of content externalism and internalism respectively. Even philosophers convinced that most intentional states depend on external conditions, often have trouble accepting that the same holds for sense experience. Especially in the context of scientific naturalism, it seems intuitively plausible that if two subjects are physically indistinguishable in all internal respects then they must share the same experiences.<sup>21</sup> And as the recent literature demonstrates, once the sceptical argument has been formulated, there is as yet no convincing refutation of scepticism based on an appeal to content-externalism.

Both internalist and externalist views of perceptual content can plausibly claim to capture central aspects of our ordinary concept of perception and neither has a fatal flaw that shows the other is clearly preferable.<sup>22</sup> The externalist believes that we could not even form concepts of mind-independent physical objects without at least some veridical perception. The internalist follows Descartes in thinking that such concepts can be innate or else we acquire them on the basis of our subjective experiences themselves, whether or not they are veridical. True, one might charge the internalist with making a mystery of the relation between empirical content and the external world, since he denies that having concepts of external objects requires any relevant causal constraints. But, on the other hand, the externalist faces the problem of explaining the connection between empirical content and *veridical* perception.<sup>23</sup>

Note that we cannot simply brush aside content internalism on the grounds that it is Cartesian, for this at least is one idea that we might think that Descartes got right. We must distinguish *its* credibility from that attaching to the much more obviously misguided Cartesian ideas of infallibility and transparency that McDowell successfully dismantles. In so far as we continue to find the causal model of experience intuitive or natural or reasonable, we will continue to find the internalist approach to intentional content, especially experiential content, gripping. That helps explain why scepticism remains a serious problem.

McDowell might protest that since nothing *could* satisfy the sceptic's demand for reasons or justifications which does not beg the sceptic's question, the quietist is entitled

<sup>20</sup> Burge [1991] and Putnam [1999] join McDowell in defending an object-dependent account of perceptual intentionality. Alternatively, Segal [1989] and Fodor [1980] join with Searle in defending an object-independent account.

<sup>21</sup> It is true that McDowell's recent work, notably *Mind and World* [1994], has been concerned to challenge scientific naturalism in favour of a more liberal naturalism—one that makes room in the natural order for irreducible reasons, meanings, and values. However, his criticism of scientific naturalism is largely aimed at its claim to provide an exhaustive conception of nature. Apart from that, there is little or no direct criticism of scientific naturalism. Partly for that reason, I do not think McDowell has not done enough to undermine the attractions of the naturalistic conception of experience.

<sup>22</sup> It might be claimed that those who defend an object-independent account of perceptual intentionality cannot capture the particularity of perception, the fact that perception is of *particular* objects. But Searle shows that the causal model of experience has the resources to meet this challenge. See Searle's [1991] responses to McDowell and Burge.

<sup>23</sup> As Stroud [1968] pointed out long ago, a transcendental argument from the possibility of empirical content seems either to rest on an implausible verificationism or, at best, establishes that we must *believe* that we have veridical experience—something that falls short of establishing that we do, in fact, enjoy veridical experiences.

to beg the sceptic's question. Let us agree that there is no possibility of answering the sceptic on his own terms, in the form of argument for a non-sceptical conclusion from considerations that the sceptic allows us. Nevertheless, a satisfactory quietism needs to do more than to show that a non-sceptical way of thinking is *available*. As we have seen, that leaves the sense that scepticism is *also* available as an equally reasonable option. What we require is a genuine *dissolution* of the sceptical threat to reason.

One possibility would be to show that the sceptical conclusion can be lived with, that we do not know nor do we have good reason to believe, that the external world exists but that our ordinary relation to the world is untouched by this admission. Since few philosophers in the analytic tradition have attempted to show this, let alone done so successfully and in detail, let us consider other possibilities.<sup>24</sup> We might also undermine scepticism by: (1) taking Michael Williams's [1991] lead in demonstrating that the setting up of the sceptical problem rests on one or more false or unreasonable premises, so that it is a good deal less reasonable (or natural) that it first appeared to be; or, (2) we could follow Wittgenstein's method of demonstrating that, despite initial appearances to the contrary, the very posing of the sceptical 'problem' ultimately lacks sense. Since we have, as yet, no convincing demonstration of either kind, and since the naturalistic causal model of experience remains intuitively compelling, the threat of scepticism is as much a problem as it ever was, even without the 'veil'.

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Received: June 2002

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<sup>24</sup> One notable exception is Stanley Cavell. However, as he admits, he has provided 'no more than a schema for a potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism' [1979: 220]. Peter Strawson also attempts to show that the sceptical argument is 'unreal, idle, a pretence' [1985: 19] but his appeal to psychological facts about what we cannot help but believe leaves the power of the sceptical argument fully intact.

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