

# Can the Content of Perception Be Conceptual?

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## 0 Introduction

In his work on perceptual experience, Matthew Boyle (2005, 68-85; 2016; M.S.a; M.S.b) has worked to reanimate a Kantian conception of perceptual experience in contemporary philosophy. In large part, these efforts can be seen as following the pioneering work of John McDowell (1994, 2009). However, while clearly influenced by McDowell, Boyle (M.S.a) has recently distanced himself from him, rejecting McDowell's conception of experience as having conceptual content. In this paper, I'll argue that, while there is an important insight in Boyle's critique of McDowell's conceptualism, he goes too far in the other direction in response, ending up with a view that falls prey to what McDowell calls, drawing a phrase from Wilfrid Sellars (1956/1997), "the Myth of the Given." The proper response to Boyle's criticism of McDowell's conceptualism, I'll argue, is not to abandon conceptualism entirely, but to go for a modally upgraded conceptualist conception of perceptual experience, which I'll call "the agentive conception of perceptual experience," in which the content of experience is to be specified not only in terms of the set of conceptual contents (understood as acts of judgments) that are in *actuality* in one's having an experience, but also the set of conceptual contents that are in *potentiality*.

## 1 McDowell's Conceptualism, Boyle's Non-Conceptualism

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes a distinction between two aspects of empirical cognition. On the one hand, there is the passive having of *intuitions* through which particular objects are brought into view, and, on the other hand, there is the active employment of *concepts* through which one achieves a general grasp of the objects one has in view. On what is perhaps the "standard model" of thinking about this distinction in analytic philosophy, owed largely to C.I. Lewis (1929), we think of this distinction in terms of there being, on the one hand, a non-conceptual given element in experience, and, on the other, a conceptual element that we bring to bear on this non-conceptual given. In *Mind and World*, John McDowell (1994) suggests an alternate way of thinking about the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts, one in which "conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity [. . .] [rather than] exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity" (1994, 9).

On McDowell's view, our conceptual capacities, the very same capacities that are operative in acts of judgment, are operative in experience. It is only in virtue of these conceptual capacities being operative in experience, he claims, that experience is able to stand in rational relations to the acts of judgment that we are able to make on its basis. The distinction between experience and judgment is not to be understood in terms of a distinction between two different kinds of content but in terms of two different ways in which we are related to the operation of our conceptual capacities. In experience, we are *passive* with respect to the operation of our conceptual capacities, whereas, in judgment, we are *active* with respect to their operation. By accommodating our passivity in experience in this way, McDowell aims to articulate how it is that experience provides us

with constraint that is external to what we *actually* judge, so that our acts of judgment are not conceived of as “moves in a self-contained game” (5), but not external to what is *judgeable*, so that experience can stand in rational relations to the judgments that we are able to make on its basis. McDowell thus ends up endorsing the view that experience delivers to us judgeable contents, things that we can accept or reject.<sup>1</sup> What we do, in making judgments on the basis of experience, is accept or reject the contents delivered to us in experience, judging that things are or are not the way our experience represents them to be. The only kind of content, on this account, is conceptual—indeed, propositional—content.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>McDowell writes,

*That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment. It becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take experience at face value, (1994, 26).

Now, McDowell does not himself explicitly use the Fregean phrase “judgeable content” in *Mind in World*, but Alva Noe explicitly does so in laying out an account of this sort:

“[T]he content of perceptual experiences are what Frege [1987] 1980 called ‘judgeable contents’ (or ‘thoughts’ [1918-1919] 1984). In perception you ‘entertain’ a judgeable content in the sense that the experience puts the question of whether the content holds into play. To have an experience is to be confronted with a possible the way the world is,” (2004, 189).

<sup>2</sup>This, at least, was McDowell’s view in *Mind and World*. However, largely due to pressure from Charles Travis (2013), McDowell came to revise his view some years later. Travis objects to the claim that experience—that which is delivered by our sensory capacities—has representational content, content that could be expressed by a sentence of the form “Things are thus and so.” Travis proposes the following alternative, which he finds in J.L. Austin:

[R]ather than representing anything as so, our senses merely bring our surroundings into view; afford us some sort of awareness of them. It is then for us to make of what is in our view what we can, or do, (2013, 30).

In response, McDowell claims that “Travis is right about the letter of the thesis that experiences represent things as so, but he is wrong about the spirit,” (2009, 267). McDowell thus responds by attempting to revise his view in such a way that he is able to agree with Travis that experiences do not themselves represent things as so, but maintain the core idea developed in *Mind and World* with which Travis vehemently disagrees: that experiences have conceptual content and only in virtue of having such content do they rationally enable us to represent things as so. He does this by saying that experiences have what he calls “intuitional content” which, while distinct from propositional content, is still conceptual. Now, it is hard to say exactly what McDowell means when he speaks of “intuitional content.” Indeed, I’m not sure if anyone fully understands the distinction between propositional and “intuitional” content, as McDowell is trying to conceive of

Mathew Boyle, though once a champion of McDowell's conceptualism about perceptual experience (Boyle 2005), has come to reject the view that experience has conceptual content (Boyle, M.S.a).<sup>3</sup> On Boyle's current account, judgments have conceptual content, and experience puts us in position to make judgments, but experience does not put us in position to make these judgments in virtue of having the same kind of content that is had by these judgments. The only sort "content" that perceptual experience has, if it is to be said to have "content" at all, is that of the particular objects in their myriad aspects that we have in view in experience, and these objects and their aspects are not to be understood as conceptual.<sup>4</sup> Boyle's argument for this claim, which clearly bears the mark of Charles Travis's thinking (especially Travis 2013b), hinges on drawing a distinction between the generality that is characteristic of concepts and the particularity of the objects with which we are presented in experience. A concept, the thought is, is general in the sense that it only partially determines how an object to which it applies must be; there is always a range of cases of objects all differing from one another in some respect but each being such that the concept applies to them. The particular objects that we have in view in experience are always fully determinate; each object is just the way that it actually is in every respect in which an object can be some way or another. Since, in experience, what we have

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it, and this, I suspect, is because McDowell is trying to conceive of this distinction in a way that it cannot be fully understood (Boyle, who is as good a candidate as anyone to understand a given view of McDowell, says, "I am not sure I fully understand [McDowell's] revised view," (11)). Given these difficulties (and for reasons of space), I have left out a discussion of McDowell's later view.

<sup>3</sup>Boyle frames his critique of McDowell as a critique of McDowell's *representationalism*. However, given the way in which McDowell uses the phrase "represent things as so" in the debate with Travis, such that this phrase is no longer applicable to his revised view which is still a target of Boyle's, I do not frame Boyle's critique this way. Boyle's real target, I take it, is McDowell's conceptualism.

<sup>4</sup>"Concept" and "conceptual" here should be understood as pertaining (what Kant calls) *empirical* concepts. Except in the sense that they conform categorical concepts, fundamentally the concept of object that can be determinate in various respects. Boyle downplays this sense.

in view are fully determinate particular objects, the content of experience does not consist in general conceptual contents. Let me spell out this argument, as it figures in Boyle's thinking.

Following Kant, Boyle thinks of a concept as a rule to which something must conform if it is to be counted as among the things to which the concept applies. Schematically, we can think of a concept *X* as a general rule that specifies what a given object can, must, and cannot do and be insofar as it is to be an *X*. In applying some set of concepts to an object we take it to conform to a certain set of general rules. For instance, in taking a particular object—a particular cardinal, say—to be a red bird, we apply a certain set of concepts to it, taking it to conform to a certain set of rules. In taking it to be a bird, we take it to be able to do what birds generally do, to have roughly the bodily features that birds have, to not be able to do any of the things that birds constitutively don't do, and so on. Likewise, in taking it to be red, we take it to be such that it cannot simultaneously be blue or green, that when illuminated, it will show up as being red, but that, even when not illuminated, it will remain red, and so on. To grasp an object, to have a grip on what it is, is for it to conform to the rules to which it is taken to conform. Of course, an object can break a rule to which we take it to conform. For instance, if we take something to be a cardinal and then it starts rapidly pecking at a tree, doing something that cardinals don't do, it breaks one of the rules to which we took it to conform in taking it to be a cardinal. That just means that we took it to be something that it isn't, and so we need to rethink what it is, taking it to conform to a different set of rules, for instance, the set of rules constitutive of the concept *woodpecker*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The capacity through which we do this, determining which things conform to which rules, is, according to Kant, the capacity to judge (cf. Kant 1781/1998, B171/A132, 268).

A concept, so understood, is essentially general. One intuitive way into understanding what it is for a concept to be such is to start by thinking about how a concept can always be made more specific. For instance, the concept *bird* is a general concept, and the concept *cardinal* is a specification of this general concept. For each specification of a given concept, the rules to which something must conform in order to be such that the concept can be properly applied to it are stricter. For instance, the rules that constitute the concept *cardinal* are stricter than the rules that constitute the concept *bird* in the sense that every object that fails to conform to the concept *bird* also fails to conform to the concept *cardinal*, but not every object that fails to conform to the concept *cardinal* fails to conform to the concept *bird*. For instance, a particular woodpecker, being such that it rapidly pecks at trees, fails to conform to the concept *cardinal* but does not fail to conform to the concept *bird*. In this way, the concept *cardinal* can be understood as a specification of the more general concept *bird*. But the concept *cardinal* is still further specifiable; for instance, *northern cardinal* is a specification of it, and, further still, *northern cardinal on a tree in Pennsylvania*, and so on. Since concepts are always further specifiable, a concept always only partially specifies what it is to be an object to which it applies; there is always room for the objects to which the concept applies to differ from one another in some respect and still all conform to the rules that articulate the concept. Further specifying the concept will rule some of these objects out, but it will always leave room for further specification. The same point goes for color concepts like *red*, *crimson*, *grayish crimson*, and so on. While we might lack terms in our language for further specifications of some concept along a certain dimension (be it color, shape, texture, or whatever), it is part of what it is to be a concept that this specification does not, in principle, end. A concept is essentially general.

Unlike concepts, objects are not general. Objects are essentially particular. Particularity is not to be understood as extreme specificity (cf. Travis 2013b, 127). It is not that, somewhere along the line of classifying something as being a *cardinal*, as being a *northern* cardinal, as being a northern cardinal *on a tree in Pennsylvania*, we eventually classify it as being *this* cardinal. Something's being *this* cardinal is not its being a certain very specific sort of cardinal. This is shown by the fact that the very sense of the word "being" when we speak of something's "being" a northern cardinal as opposed to something's "being" this cardinal is different; the former expresses predication and the latter expresses identity.<sup>6</sup> There is, as Boyle says, "a basic ontological difference between a thing and a concept," (19). Here's how Boyle puts this difference:

Any actual thing is wholly determinate; it is such that, for any coherent question we may ask about it, there is a determinately correct answer. Any concept, by contrast, only partially determines objects to which it applies while leaving further questions open: yes, this is green, but is it a light or a dark green (etc.)? (19)

So, unlike a concept, which can always be made more specific and so always only partially determines what it is to be an object to which it applies, an object, in the myriad aspects with respect to which it might be classified (for instance, color, shape, texture, and so on), is always fully determinate. This particular cardinal is a fully determinate object, fully determinate in myriad aspects with respect to which to which it may be classified. It might be classified as a bird, as a cardinal, as a northern cardinal, and so on. In classifying it as any of these sorts of things, we take it to conform to a certain set rules. But the cardinal itself, which is correctly classified through the application of some concept just

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<sup>6</sup>This is, of course, an observation of Frege's that is crucial to his distinction between the logical categories of "object" and "concept."

in case it actually conforms to the rules that articulate that concept, is not a concept. It is a particular thing, not a general set of rules to which particular things may or may not conform. Likewise for the colors of the various features of its body. The actual color of this feather on its wing might be classified as red, crimson, grayish crimson, and so on. But the actual color of the feather, though it determines the correctness of the application of any color concept, is not itself any such concept. The fully determinate color that the feather actually is does not have the generality that is had by the color concepts that correctly characterize it.

Having made this basic ontological distinction, it is a short step to rejecting McDowell's conceptualism about the content of perceptual experience; we need only say that what we are given, in perception, are not general conceptual contents but, rather, particular objects, fully determinate in the myriad aspects with respect to which they might be conceptually classified, where this potential conceptual classification has no definite end. Boyle claims that this is indeed what we ought to say by raising what he calls the "What Content?" objection against conceptualism. He asks "Can we, for ordinary cases of perception, specify what plausible content the relevant perceptual experiences could have?" (12). For instance, in looking at this cardinal, is the content of our perceptual experience the conceptual content that is expressed by the sentence

This red bird.

or

This scarlet and crimson bird.

or

This scarlet-crested, red-oranged-beaked, and grayish-crimson-winged bird?

The issue is that, for any set of conceptual contents that we might be able to specify as the content of our experience, there are always more determinate conceptual contents that could be the content of a judgment that we are in a position to make, given our experience. But requiring that all of these conceptual contents already be contained in experience “builds an implausible and unnecessary determinacy into unreflective perception,” (13). Boyle concludes that conceptually classifying things, though it is something that our experience enables us to do, is not something that our experience already does for us. Though we have the ability to conceptually classify an object and its various features in virtue of being presented with it in experience, we need not, and, indeed, should not, think of that object as already being so classified in our experience. Our perceptual experience simply brings particular things into view; “It is then,” as Travis says, “for us to make of what is in our view what we can, or do,” (2013, 30).

On Boyle’s positive account, we have conceptual capacities whose possession in part consists in the ability to non-inferentially apply them to particular things which which we are presented in experience that conform to them. Part of what it is to possess the concept *red*, for instance, is to be able to apply it non-inferentially to particular red things, such as this crimson feather on the cardinal’s wing or the scarlet crest on its head. According to Boyle, we need not think of this ability in terms of an intermediary step where a particular red thing, determinately colored in just the way that it is, is generally represented in experience as falling under the concept *red*, which then enables us to non-inferentially apply the concept *red* to it. Rather, we can think of our ability to non-inferentially apply the concept *red* as an ability to subsume particulars with which we are presented in experience, in their full particularity, under the general concept *red*, (22). So, in having the class of abilities that is constitutive of what it is to possess the

concept *red*, we have the ability to apply this concept, when presented with this particular cardinal in experience, to the crimson feather on its wing, the scarlet crest on its head, and so on. Our perceptual experience itself need not in any way classify both of these features of the cardinal *as being red* in order for us to be able to do this. Our experience just presents with the cardinal's bodily features, colored in just the way that they actually are, which, given our perceptual and conceptual capacities, puts us in a position to non-inferentially apply the general concept *red* and a whole host of other color concepts to them.

## 2 What Content? A Conceptualist Response

Though Boyle initially presents his view as an alternative to a view in which perception is taken to have content, he concludes by saying the following:

Perception may be said to be contentful in the broad sense that it presents objects in a way that makes them available for classification; but it does not have content in the narrower representational sense: it does not present things present things *as* classified in any way whatsoever (26).

If perception can be said to have "content," using the word "content" in this broad sense that Boyle specifies here, we must draw a distinction between two very different kinds of content—perceptual content and conceptual content.<sup>7</sup> Perceptual content consists in the presentation of fully determinate particulars in perceptual experience. Conceptual content, by contrast, consists in general rules to which we might take particulars, presented to us in perceptual experience,

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<sup>7</sup>I am construing the issue in these terms to highlight the fact that this is a different distinction than the one that late McDowell (2009) draws between what he calls "intuitional content" and propositional content. McDowell distinguishes intuitional content and propositional content as two distinct forms of *conceptual* content, two different ways in which conceptual contents can be unified. McDowell thus retains a thoroughly conceptualist account of perceptual experience.

to conform. Perceptual content, the presentation of particulars in their full determinacy, is thus categorically distinct from the conceptual content that we bring to bear in taking the particulars with which we are presented to conform to general rules.

Now, I think there is a genuine insight in Boyle's critique of McDowell's conceptualism. But it seems to me that he goes too far in the other direction, ending up with a view of the sort in that McDowell is most intent to reject, one in which our conceptual capacities are "exercised on an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity" (1994, 9).<sup>8</sup> On Boyle's view, we are presented in experience with non-conceptual particulars; in applying concepts to the things with which we are presented, what we are doing is "bringing to bear a rule for classification that is not to be found in what is given," (21). Additionally, our being presented with these non-conceptual particulars is not mediated by any conceptual representation; he tells us that "sensible intuitions present us with aspects of the actuality of some concrete individual [...] without relying on any general representation to achieve this presentation," (19).<sup>9</sup> Finally, our being presented with these non-conceptual particulars puts us in position to apply concepts to them, making judgments that, when all goes well, constitute

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<sup>8</sup>Recall, this characterizes a view of the sort advocated by C.I. Lewis, and it is hard to see how Boyle's view could be anything other than a view of this sort. Indeed, I have a hard time seeing how Boyle's view is not identical in structure to that of Lewis, who is one of the primary targets of both Sellars and McDowell. See, for instance, Lewis (1929, 49-52). This surprising similarity will be brought out in what follows. (As a side note, Jim Conant has informed me that McDowell had in fact not read Lewis at the time of writing *Mind and World*, so McDowell does not know that Lewis is one of his main targets. But McDowell had, of course, read Sellars, and takes his target to be Sellars's target, so, by transitivity, Lewis is in fact one of McDowell's main targets. McDowell later (2015) comes to realize this fact.)

<sup>9</sup>Now, I must note that these episodes are not conceived of as Boyle as *fully* non-conceptual. In being intuitively presented with a determinate particular, this particular is "conceptualized" as an "object in general," which Boyle glosses as "the sort of thing that admits of classification in the manifold respects in which we can classify," (24). But the notion of a "concept" of an object in general involved here is so radically different than the notion of a concept like *bird* or *red* that Boyle suggests even calling it a "concept" can be misleading.

acts of knowledge. Accordingly, Boyle's view seems to be one in which having an episode in which we are immediately presented with a fully determinate non-conceptual particular justifies, warrants, or, in some other way, rationally grounds our acts of applying general concepts to it. Such a view is would be one in which "the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere" (McDowell 1994, 7), and that is just what McDowell calls, drawing a phrase from Wilfrid Sellars (1956), "the Myth of the Given."<sup>10</sup>

Of course, it is cheap talk to simply say that Boyle's view of perceptual experience falls prey to the Myth of the Given, for one could simply deny that there is anything problematic about the class of views that McDowell would classify as such.<sup>11</sup> What I want to do now is show just what the problem is and do so on Boyle's own terms. As we've seen, Boyle objects to view that experience has conceptual content by raising what he calls the "What Content?" objection to such a view. Recall, this objection is posed by asking the following question: "Can we, for ordinary cases of perception, specify what plausible content the relevant perceptual experiences could have?" Now, the target of Boyle is a

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<sup>10</sup>I will not here go into the difficult question of how what McDowell calls "the Myth of the Given" relates to what Sellars calls "the Myth of the Given." Doing that would require taking a stand on what Sellars means when he uses the term "the Myth of the Given," and this is an issue on which there is no clear consensus, even among scholars of Sellars. So, my use of the term "the Myth of the Given" here should henceforth be understood as what *McDowell* is speaking of when he speaks of the "Myth of the Given", whether or not this is exactly what Sellars is speaking of when he uses that phrase. As such, I'll also phrase things in a way that is not entirely in line with Sellars's way of speaking about the Myth of the Given and myths in general. For Sellars, I take it that the problem with the Myth of the Given is not simply that it is a *myth* (after all, as Sellars demonstrates in EPM, myths are able to serve a crucial function in philosophy), but that it isn't able to do the work that it is supposed to do *qua* myth. McDowell, by contrast, often speaks of the fact the "Myth" is "mythical" as expressing just what is wrong with it (cf. McDowell 2009, 256). Following McDowell, I too will speak in this way in what follows, but I want to note explicitly that I don't think this way of speaking is properly Sellarsian.

<sup>11</sup>This is essentially what Travis (2013b) does, saying that "reason reaches, and had better reach" far enough for there to be "rational relations between the non-conceptual and the conceptual," (143).

view of perceptual content that is committed to the claim that we can *specify* the content that perception has. Boyle's claim is that there is no plausible account of this specification that can be given by the proponent of such a view. I take it that Boyle is right to press this objection against the McDowellian views to which he objects. However, it cuts equally hard in the other direction against the view with which Boyle himself ends up.<sup>12</sup> In drawing a distinction between perceptual and conceptual content, Boyle ends committed to the claim that there is *no way at all* to specify the content that perceptual experiences have, since perceptual content can only be specified in terms of conceptual content, yet, on Boyle's view, it cannot be understood in terms of conceptual content. This leaves us in the precarious spot of taking there to be determinate particulars with which we are presented in perceptual experience, where being presented with such particulars puts us in a position to apply concepts to them, but being completely unable to say, in any given case, what these particulars are. This, I am about to claim, makes it impossible to understand how any act of applying concepts to particulars in experience could be a rational one.<sup>13</sup>

To take a particular case, suppose you are perceptually presented with a

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<sup>12</sup>Of course, Boyle would (and does) say that this objection cannot be raised against his view, since his view is one in which perception does not have "content," not, at least, in the sense of the term used in his articulation of the objection. Nevertheless, he maintains, by the end of the paper, that "Perception may be said to be contentful," and it is this more general sense of "content" with respect to which I am raising this objection here.

<sup>13</sup>I said in an earlier footnote that I have a hard seeing how Boyle's view is not identical in structure to that of Lewis (1929), and the critique that I'm about to press against Boyle is likewise identical in structure the one that McDowell presses against Lewis:

If something is noted, it is noted as instantiating this or that concept, and as soon as a concept is in play, both of Lewis's two elements, conceptual activity and reception of the given, are on the scene; we have failed to isolate the element of givenness. By Lewis's own lights, it is impossible to state the supposed ultimate warrant for a bit of empirical thinking. [. . .] How can we credit something we are committed to seeing as inexpressible with the sort of justificatory function Lewis wants to attribute to getting a bit of the given? (2015, 647)

particular cardinal. What is it with which you are presented? At first glance, it might seem that answering this question is easy. As I've just said, you're presented with a cardinal. But to answer this question in this way is to specify what it is with which you're presented *relationally*, by specifying a particular act of a conceptual capacity that you are in a position to make, given this presentation.<sup>14</sup> To say that you're presented with a cardinal is to say that you're presented with something such that, being presented with it, you are able to judge that it is a cardinal. You might likewise specify it as something such that, being presented with it, you're able to judge that it is an animal, that it is a bird, that it is red, that it has a scarlet crest, that it has crimson wings, and so on. It might seem that saying such thing is a way of saying what it is with which you are presented. On Boyle's account, however, any such specification that goes by way of the expression of conceptual contents, since these conceptual contents are essentially general, cannot function as a proper specification of the essentially particular thing with which you're actually presented that enables you to apply these concepts to it. Conceptual contents that can be expressed with words like "bird," "cardinal," "red," "scarlet," and so on, in virtue of their generality, cannot be said to belong to the essentially particular content of the perception. So, once again, how can this content be specified? It seems to be a systematic feature of the account that it cannot be. No words will do. But that, I'm claiming, is a problem.

Boyle takes it that, in perceptual experience, there is something with which we are presented: a concrete particular, completely determinate in the myriad aspects with respect to which something can be determinate. Being so presented, according to Boyle, puts us in a position to apply concepts to it. But we cannot

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<sup>14</sup>It could also be considered

say, in any given case, what it is with which we are actually presented (apart, of course, from the very abstract specification “a concrete particular, completely determinate in its myriad aspects with respect to which something can be determinate”). Yet, if we can’t even say what it is with which we are presented, how can we say how it is that, in being so presented, we are, in the epistemologically relevant sense, *in a position* to make a judgment? Perhaps, as a matter of fact, when we have a perception in which a particular cardinal is presented to us, we *do* judge that it’s a cardinal. But Boyle’s account makes it impossible to understand how this could be a *rational* doing. That is, Boyle’s account makes it impossible to understand how, in being presented with a particular cardinal, we are presented to in such a way that our judgment that it is a cardinal with which we are presented is an act that issues from our recognition that it is *correct* to so judge.<sup>15</sup> Even if Boyle wants to say that subsuming the particulars with which we are presented in perceptual experience under general concepts should be understood, not broadly inferential terms, but in terms of “an exercise of a classificatory skill in relation to a particular object” (22), his account makes it impossible to understand how the consciousness of the successful exercise of such a classificatory skill could be internal to its successful exercise. That is, his account makes it impossible to understand an act of perceptual judgment as the exercise of a rational—that is to say, self-conscious—capacity.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, Boyle does not think that his view precludes us from being able to think of perceptual judgment as the exercise of a rational capacity. So it is worth

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<sup>15</sup>This way of speaking of what it is for a judgment to be rational follows Boyle’s own way of thinking about what it is for a belief to be rational. On Boyle’s (2009) account, following that of Rodl (2007), one’s believing that *p* is to be understood as the exercise of a rational capacity insofar as one’s believing that *p* is grounded in one’s representing *p* as to-be-believed (23).

<sup>16</sup>In equating rational capacities and self-conscious capacities here, I am drawing in large part from Kern (2017). I take it that Boyle would not object to this equation.

looking at the one thing he explicitly says to insist that we are still able, on his account, to think of perceptual judgment as the exercise of a rational capacity. He writes,

Conceiving of perception as nonrepresentational in this sense does not require us to suppose that our warrant for perceptual judgment is inaccessible to rational scrutiny. We can certainly subject our warrant to scrutiny, in two respects: we can examine the perceptually-presented case more carefully, and we can reflect on the reliability and frailty of the skills, (23).

Let me consider these two respects in which Boyle thinks we can subject our grounds for perceptual judgments to rational scrutiny in turn. First, it is not clear what it can be to “examine the perceptually-presented case *more carefully*,” if it’s not clear what it is to “examine the perceptually-presented case” *at all*. As we’ve just pointed out, on Boyle’s account, we are systematically unable to say what any given “perceptually-presented case” actually is, and this precludes us from being able to understand how any judgement we make upon being perceptually presented with such a case could be a rational one. If we cannot think of ourselves as being able to rationally make judgments upon being perceptually presented with such a case at all, it’s hard to see what examining the case “more carefully” could do, or what it could even be.<sup>17</sup> Second, though we certainly can reflect on the reliability of our classifying skills, this does not itself enable us to bring the right sort of rationality into the picture. To see this, consider a case that McDowell (2010) brings into consideration in order to criticize Robert Brandom’s (1994, 2014) view of perceptual judgment on which it is nothing other than the exercise of a reliable disposition to respond to an environmental stimulus of a certain type

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<sup>17</sup>Boyle construes the issue here as if it’s a matter of degree, but the issue here is not over whether we can be *sufficiently* rational in forming perceptual judgments; the issue is over whether or not we are able to understand an act of perceptual judgment, on Boyle’s account, as rational at all.

with the application of a concept to it. The case is that of a chicken-sexer who, when handed a male chick, is reliably inclined to say “male,” and, when handed a female chick, is reliably inclined to say “female,” but the feature to which he is responsive in having these inclinations is not perceptually manifest to him. Insofar as the chicken-sexer knows that his inclination to say “male” is reliably correlated with a chick’s being male, it is rational for him to judge, upon having such an inclination, that the chick is male. So, the chicken-sexer is rational in making this judgment, but the rationality at work here is not of the right sort for the exercise of his classificatory skill to count as perceptual knowledge. Rationality is not at work *in* the exercise of the classificatory skill; it is external to the exercise of the classificatory skill. He simply finds with the inclination, and then, knowing that having such an inclination is a reliable indicator of the fact that the chick is male, rationally infers that the chick is male.<sup>18</sup> So, while, on Boyle’s account, we might be able to maintain that judgments formed on the basis of the exercise a classificatory skill can be “subject to rational scrutiny” in *this* sense, this is not the relevant sense of rationality that is required to have an adequate account of perceptual knowledge. The relevant sense of rationality

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<sup>18</sup>In his dissertation, Boyle (2005) discusses a very similar case—that of blindsight—in very similar terms. He says, of the individual with blindsight:

Her perceptual beliefs simply come to her—or rather, inklings about how things stand in her environment come to her, and if she knows on other grounds that these inklings are reliable, these inklings may give her reasons for belief. A blindsighted person’s justification for belief is thus structurally different from the justification available to an ordinary perceiver: whereas facts (or seeming facts) present themselves to ordinary perceivers, blindsighted persons are presented only with their own inklings, their own impulses to take things to be true. (81)

Here, Boyle maintains, with McDowell (1994), that the content of experience is conceptual, indeed, propositional. In experience, I am presented with facts of seeming facts of the sort “Things are thus and so” and “I can ask myself whether I have reason to believe what my senses seem to be telling me,” (82). In objecting (I think rightly) to this conception of what is given in perceptual experience, Boyle leaves himself, in his later work, without a conception of perceptual experience that enables him to draw the distinction between ordinary perceivers and those with blindsight that he draws here.

must be *internal* to the exercise of the classificatory skill. This is the sense of rationality that I am claiming Boyle's account of perception make unintelligible.

I take it that the problem I've presented here for Boyle should not be alien to Boyle. Indeed, I take it that it is the very problem that he himself presents for what he calls "additive" theories of perception (2016, 543-544). We can thus put the problem with Boyle's view in Boyle's own words: the problem is that "our capacity for perception has been conceived in such a way that its actualizations cannot present us with reasons of the sort that canonically explain judgment," (2016, 244). Boyle has conceived of our capacity for perception in such a way that what its actualizations present us with are completely determinate non-conceptual particulars. Being presented with such particulars, I have claimed, cannot provide us with reasons of the sort that canonically explain judgment. We cannot think ourselves as being able, upon our being presented with such particulars, to make judgments whose rationality is owed to our being so presented; any attempt to specify what it is with which we're presented so as to be able to say how it is that our being so presented to supplies us with a reason for judgment will amount to "bringing to bear a rule for classification that is not to be found in what is given," (21). So, there is no way of making sense of what is given to us in perception as rationally grounding our judgments. Boyle's story, which supposes that there is, is a myth.

### **3 Intuitions and Concepts as a Modal Distinction**

I've claimed that, while Boyle's criticism of McDowell's conceptualism does indeed go through, he takes a wrong turn in rejecting conceptualism entirely, falling prey to what McDowell calls "the Myth of the Given." This might seem

to leave us at an impasse. On the one hand, it seems that, if we are to do justice to the determinateness of what is given to us in perceptual experience, the content of perceptual experience *cannot* be conceptual. On the other hand, it seems that, if we are to avoid the Myth of the Given, the content of perceptual experience *must* be conceptual. Let me now say, all too briefly, how I think we can find our way through this apparent impasse.

Let us start by considering how Boyle actually presses the “What content?” objection against McDowell. Boyle has us imagine that he is looking at a particular book on his desk, and he says the following about his experience:

There is a tremendous amount that I *could* say about the book on the basis of visual perception, but on reflection it does not seem obvious that my visual experience of the book must (purport to) register some or all of these points independently of my considering the question of the shade of the book, its placement and orientation on the desk, etc. I see the book, and in virtue of having it in plain view, I am *in a position* to answer any of these questions as they occur to me. [...] I look down at the book: all the features I have named, and many others, are visible to me. *Visible*: that is to say, in virtue of seeing the book, I *can* take notice of them. But it does not follow that, simply in perceiving the book, some part of me already *has* registered some set of features of the book, which registration I may judge to be veridical or not, (12-13).

In this passage, Boyle puts emphasis on “could,” “in a position,” and “can.” These expressions are all modal operators of a particular variety; they are *agentive* modal operators (Mandelkern et. al., 2017). These particular ones express the modal status of *ability*. What Boyle is doing here is drawing a modal distinction. He is claiming that neither he nor his experience *actually* registers answers to all the questions about the book that *can* be answered about the book, given his experience. His experience *enables* him to make a whole bunch of judgments about the book, answering a whole bunch of questions about it; but it does not

follow from this, he claims, that his experience somehow *already actually contains* the contents of all of these judgments, proposing answers to all of these questions for him. That, he says, “builds an implausible and unnecessary determinacy into unreflective perception,” (13). I think he is right. And I think this is a problem for the particular version of conceptualism proposed by McDowell. But this is only a systematic problem for the conceptualist insofar as she is precluded from being entitled to make use of the statuses of agentive modality in specifying, in conceptualist terms, the content of experience. And I don’t see why she is precluded from being so entitled. On this line of thought, what is inadequate about McDowell’s conceptualism is not that it takes the contents of experience to be *conceptual*, but, rather, that it takes the conceptual contents that constitute the content of experience to all be of a single *modality*—actuality. So, Boyle’s criticism, as I hear it, simply calls for a modally upgraded conceptualist view rather than a rejection of conceptualism altogether. I’ll call the modally upgraded conceptualist view, which I’ll lay out now, “the agentive conception of experience.”<sup>19</sup> In a slogan, *perceptual content is agentively modalized conceptual content*.

On the agentive conception of experience, the distinction between the passive having of intuitions and the active applications of concepts should not be understood in terms of a distinction between two kinds of content. We need not draw Boyle’s distinction between perceptual and conceptual content. With McDowell (1994), we can maintain that the only kind of content we need in or-

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<sup>19</sup>This agentive conception of experience might also be called a “hylomorphic” conception of experience. Aristotle identifies the matter of a substance with what it is in potentiality and the form of a substance with what it is in actuality, and so we might think of the distinction between what one has in view and what one judges in having those things in view as a distinction between the “matter” of an experience and its “form.” I avoid this terminology because I don’t think it adds anything helpful and it is potentially unhelpful.

der to give an adequate account of perceptual experience is conceptual—indeed, propositional—content: the content of acts of judgment. However, unlike McDowell, who, in Fregean fashion, thinks of propositional contents as forceless judgeables to which we attach positive or negative force in acts of judgment, we should think of propositional contents as themselves acts of judgment, actualizations of the capacity to judge.<sup>20</sup> We can then think of the distinction between the passive having of intuitions and the active applications of concepts in terms of two *modal statuses* that acts of judgment can bear in perceptual experience: judgments can be in *potentiality* or in *actuality*. Boyle insightfully points out that we cannot identify the content of experience with the contents of the set of judgments that we actually make, nor should we think of experience as containing, in actuality, the contents of all the judgments that we can potentially make. But it does not follow from this insight that we need to appeal to a categorically different kind of content than the content of judgments in order to comprehend what is given to the experiencing subject; we need only to appeal to this modal distinction.

The suggestion, then, is that we understand the content of an experience that we have, not only in terms of the set of judgments that we *actually* make in having that experience, but also in terms of the acts of judgment that we are *able* to make in having that experience. This is suggested by way Boyle himself glosses what it is for something to be visible.<sup>21</sup> What it is for a feature an object

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<sup>20</sup>Though I don't wish to endorse the details of his account, I am following the general approach to propositions offered by Hanks (2011, 2015) here. The basic idea of such an account is that, rather than thinking of what it is for two people to make the same judgment in terms of their both judging the same judgeable content, we can think of what it is for two people to make the same judgment in terms of their both tokening, in their respective acts of judgment, the same general act type. Thinking of acts of judgment in this way, the type/token distinction does the work that the content/act distinction has been traditionally employed to do.

<sup>21</sup>Boyle emphasizes the whole word "visible" in the passage quoted above, but the emphasis should really be on the suffix *-ible*. Just as, for something to be edible is for one to be able to eat

to be visible to me—for me to “have it in view”—is for me to be able to attend to the object take notice of how it is with respect to that feature, applying concepts to it that classify it in that respect. What it is for the color of a particular bird to be visible to me, for instance, is for me to be able to attend to it and register, through the application of color concepts to it, what color it is. This registration is conceptual through and through. Looking at the cardinal, I am able to judge that it is red, that its crest is scarlet, that its wings are a grayish shade of crimson, and so on. The “and so on” here is meant to express a recognition of the fact that, for any set of judgments that I *actually* make, in having a certain perceptual experience, there are always more that I am *able* to make, attending to various things that I have in view and seeing how they are in various respects. The set of judgments that are in potentiality, in having a certain perceptual experience, always extends beyond the set of judgments that are in actuality. Recognizing this fact amounts to recognizing an aspect of the *form* of perceptual experience. It need not and should not amount to thinking of perceptual experience as having a distinctive kind of *content*, distinct in kind from the content of the judgments that one makes or is able to make in having an experience. The only kind of content there is, on this account, is propositional content—the content of acts of judgment.

Though the only kind of content on this account is the content of acts of judgment, this account preserves the sense in which perceptual experience provides us with constraint from outside our activity of judging. There is no threat of our acts of judgment becoming “moves in a self-contained game” (McDowell, 1994). There would be such a threat if the only thing that enabled us to make judgments were other judgments that we’ve made, but, on the account here, this

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it, for something to be visible is for one to be able to see it.

is not so. Of course, other judgments that we've made *can* enable us to make a judgment. For instance, if I judge that there are 17 green jelly beans on the table, I am thereby able, in virtue of having made this judgment, to judge that there is a prime number of green jelly beans on the table. Perception, however, is a different way through which we can come to be able to make a judgment. When I see a green jelly bean on the table and thereby judge that it is green, it is not simply other judgments that I've made in virtue of which I am able to make this judgment. Rather, it is having the visibly green jelly bean in view that enables me to judge that the jelly bean is green. So, the source of my judgment traces back to something that is not a judgment but, rather, a having in view. Still, on the account I'm offering here, what it is for me to have the jelly bean in view just is for me to be able to attend to it and make judgments about it, and what it is for the jelly bean that I have in view to be visibly green just is for me to be able to judge, in attending to it, that it is green.<sup>22</sup>

I've said that one is able to make a judgment in virtue of having some things and their features in view, but what it is that one has in view, in having some things and their features in view, is to be specified by way of what it is that one is able to judge in having these things and their features in view. This might make it seem that there is a there is a strange sort of circularity in this account. Andrea Kern, who endorses an account of perception that is quite similar to the one I'm offering here, claims that, indeed, there is such a circularity in the account. She writes,

A certain kind of circularity is indeed a feature of the capacity con-

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<sup>22</sup>The notion of the jelly bean being "visibly" green is to be understood relative to the perceiving subject. In general for an X to be visibly F to some subject S is for S to be able to judge, in having the X in view, that it is F. This way of formulating things gives us something of analogue of McDowell's "intentional content," which has a form of unity that is not that of judgment, but, by contrast to McDowell, it is understood entirely in terms of the content of judgments.

ception of knowledge. For the capacity conception of perceptual knowledge explains how it is possible for someone to make a judgment with a particular empirical content by appealing to a sensory experience, the content of which is partly determined by precisely those concepts that make up the content of that judgment, (2017, 190).

I take, however, that there only seems to be a circularity insofar as we fail to distinguish between two genuinely distinct priority relations that obtain when we provide an account of something that makes central use of the modal statuses of potentiality and actuality. On the one hand, there is priority in the *general account* of a potentiality. On the other hand, there is priority in a *particular actualization* of a potentiality. In the former sense of “priority,” actuality is prior to potentiality. In the latter sense of “priority,” potentiality is prior to actuality.<sup>23</sup> So, though there is a priority relation running from actuality and potentiality and a priority relation running from potentiality to actuality, there are two senses of “priority” here, so there is no circularity in the account.

To get these two opposing priority relations in view, start by considering

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<sup>23</sup>I’m teasing out just two of the dependence relations that Aristotle discusses in Θ-8 of the *Metaphysics*. The sense in which actuality is prior to potentiality is what Aristotle himself calls “priority in account.”

At all events it is clear that [actuality] is prior in account (for it is because it can be active that what is capable primarily is capable, for example, I mean by able-to-build what is capable of building and by able-to-see what is capable of seeing and by visible what is capable of being seen; and there is the same account also in the other cases, so that it is necessary for the account and the knowledge of the one to precede the knowledge of the other (1050a 12-18, Mankin 10).

The sense in which potentiality is prior to actuality—the only sense in which this is so, according to Aristotle—is, he takes it, one of the senses in which something can be said to “prior in time.” He says,

I mean this, that prior in time to this man who is already in actuality and the wheat and the seeing, are the matter and the seed and the able-to-see, which are potentially man and wheat and one seeing, though not yet actually (1050a 19-22, Mankin 10).

Now, I take it that Aristotle in fact mistakes priority in the actualization of the potentiality for simply priority in time, since, as we’ll see below, the relevant sense of priority is so clear in cases in which there is also priority in time.

how we might give an account of animal's activity in terms of the capacities that it has which, in living the life that it actually lives, it actualizes in some concrete set of cases, thereby doing the concrete set of things that it actually does. On the one hand, the only way to specify the set of capacities that the animal has is to specify the acts that the animal is able to do just insofar as it has those capacities. For instance, if we say that a cardinal has the capacity to fly, we must refer to the actualization of that capacity, the act of flying, in order to specify the capacity of which we're speaking. What the capacity to fly *is* can only be specified by reference to what it is a capacity *to do*—in this case, fly. So, in giving an account of the capacity—specifying what the capacity is—actuality prior to potentiality. On the other hand, when we consider something's doing something that it is able to do in a particular case, its actually doing this thing in this case depends on its being able to do it. For instance, in a particular case of a cardinal's flying, the act of flying depends on the cardinal's having the capacity to fly. This is particularly clear if we consider a case in which the cardinal is not flying and then flies. Just insofar as the cardinal has the capacity to fly, the act of flying is in potentiality; then, in actualizing the capacity to fly and actually flying, there is a transition from the act of flying being in potentiality to its being in actuality. So, potentiality is prior to actuality here. Now, as I mentioned, this is an especially clear case since there is a transition from potentiality to actuality.<sup>24</sup> But, even when there is no such transition, we can understand there to be the same priority relation. Consider a cardinal's simply flying through the air. Insofar as the cardinal's act of flying is the actualization of its capacity to fly, the actuality of the cardinal's flying depends on the cardinal's having the capacity to fly, for only insofar as

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<sup>24</sup>I take it that Aristotle himself mistakes priority in the order of the act with temporal priority for this reason.

the cardinal has the capacity to fly can it be actualizing it, and that is what it is doing.

These two dependence relations obtain just the same way in the case of perceptual experience. In giving an account of what a particular experience is, which in part consists in saying what it is that is one has in view, we can specify what it is that one has in view only by reference to the acts of judgment that are in potentiality in having those things in view. When we say that one has in particular cardinal in view and is thereby in a position to judge that it is red, that its crest is scarlet, that its wings are grayish-crimson, and so on, we specify what it is that the experiencing subject has in view by referring to the judgments that the subject is able to make in having these things in view. Saying that actuality is prior in account to potentiality here—that what one has in view can only be specified by reference to the set of judgments that one is able to make in having things and their features in view—amounts to saying that the only content that figures in the account is conceptual content—the content of acts of judgment. On the other hand, when we consider a perceptual judgment that someone actually makes in a particular case, the act of making a judgment depends on one's being able to make the judgment, where this ability is specified in terms of one's having certain things in view. This is particularly clear in a case in which one has something in view but does not notice it, and then, in virtue of attending to it, comes to notice it. For instance, consider a case in which one looking at a cardinal but not attending to the particular shade of red of the cardinal's wings, and then, in drawing one's attention to that feature of the cardinal, comes to judge that its wings are grayish shade of crimson. Here, like in the case of the cardinal's being able to fly and then flying, there clear is a transition from the act of judgment being in potentiality to its being in actuality. However, once again,

even if we do not think of a case in which there is a transition from having in view to judging, we can still say, in a case in which one sees that the cardinal is red, one's judging that the cardinal is red depends on one's having its color in view. In perceptual judgment, we judge in virtue of having things in view; we don't have things in view in virtue of judging. Perception, at least for us finite beings, is *receptive* rather than *creative*.

#### 4 Conclusion

In *Mind and World*, McDowell thinks of the content of perceptual experience as a set of propositional contents that are given to us to judge. Boyle rightly objects to this conception of perceptual content on the grounds that, given all of the judgments that we are able to make in having the perceptual experiences we have, it is implausible to think that our perceptual experience somehow contains a content for each such judgment. However, he goes to far in, on these grounds, rejecting conceptualism altogether. I hope to have shown how, by centrally employing the statuses of agentive modality in giving an account of perceptual content, we can maintain conceptualism while accomodating the truth in Boyle's objection to McDowell's conceptualism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>I have not, however, laid out the entirety of the agentive conception of experience here. Having only spoken in terms of ability and actuality, I have left out the logical dual of ability: *compulsion*. Bringing in this modal status, we understand the content of perceptual experience not only in terms of the set of judgments that one is *able* to make in having in view what one does and those that one *actually* makes, but also those that one is *compelled* to make, given what is clearly in view. Having something *clearly* in view, not only *enables* one to make certain judgments, but *compels* one to do so. Though compulsion coincides with actuality, we only get the full account, in its full modal flavor, once we bring in this dual modal status. Spelling out the agentive conception of experience as involving both the modal statuses of ability and compulsion, however, must be a task for another day. A preliminary sketch of such an account and how it relates to the account of perception articulated by Robert Brandom can be found in Simonelli (Forthcoming).

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