

Perception and Givenness*

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1. This essay is written out of—and is intended to provide support for—the conviction that to understand perception, we need to understand self-consciousness.¹
2. Self-consciousness is a certain manner or form of consciousness—specifically, of thinking, where the idea of thinking is the idea of ascribing a predicable. The one who thinks—the subject—ascribes a predicable to the one thought of—the object: he thinks of him that he is *F*. In an act of thinking bearing this form—call it a self-ascription—the subject is identical to the object, and this identity holds in virtue of its form.
3. The idea of this form of thinking contains the idea of its opposite. If the subject of an act of thinking bearing this opposing form is identical to the object, then this identity holds, not in virtue of its form, but in virtue of conditions external to its form. Call an act of thinking bearing this form an other-ascription, and the form it bears other-consciousness.
4. A self-ascription is standardly expressed by the use of a first person device—in English, by the utterance of a sentence with “I” in subject position (“I am *F*”); whereas, an other-ascription is standardly expressed by the use of a third person device—by the utterance of a sentence with a name (“*NN* is *F*”), or a demonstrative (“He is *F*”), or a definite description (“The *F* is *G*”) in subject-position. But it would be wrong to think that the very idea of an ascription—be it a self- or an other-ascription—is the idea of a singular act of thinking; the definitions in §§2 & 3 are merely formal, and say nothing about the quantity of the subject or the object. They leave it open, for instance, that a self-ascription has a plural subject, and an other-ascription a universally quantified object (in which case “We are *F*” would standardly be used to express the former, and “All *F*s are *G*” the latter).
5. Consider a self-ascription whose subject is a specific individual, *NN*. Fregean orthodoxy has it that this act of thinking is an attitude to a subject-predicate proposition whose subject-

* Thanks to Thomas Land, Will Small, and Peter Sullivan for helpful discussion.

¹ What I say here about self-consciousness owes a considerable debt to Sebastian Rödl’s work—in particular, to his book of the same name (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), and to his recent essay “Intentional Transaction”, *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2004): 304-316.

component is a singular mode of presentation of its object.² This proposition is of necessity one that only *NN* can think—for if someone else produced an act of this form, then his act would be one of thinking of a different object, and so would contain a different mode of presentation, and so would be an attitude to a different proposition. Are there such modes of presentation? A non-Fregean view has it that there are not: self-ascriptions meet the characterization given in §2, but that is all.³ Self-consciousness is merely a form. It is not a genus that divides into various specific modes of presentation of the various specific individuals capable of being the subject of an act of this form.⁴

6. Although this essay will consider self-consciousness simply as a form, it will leave open the question of whether it is merely a form. The aim is not to settle this issue, but to bring the idea of self-consciousness into contact with the topic of perception.

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7. Contemporary philosophers of perception endorse a dualism of sensibility and understanding.⁵ They hold that the understanding—thinking—is separable from anything sensibility provides for, such as perception. To endorse the dualism for the case of perception is to hold that the perceiver—the one who perceives something—considered simply as perceiving something, does not think anything. He might think something—but considered simply as perceiving something, he does not.

8. But to consider the perceiver simply as perceiving something is to consider him in an act of thinking of a certain form: either from within self-consciousness, in a self-ascription, or from outside self-consciousness, in other-consciousness, in an other-ascription. And considered from within self-consciousness simply as perceiving something, the perceiver *does* think something.

² See Gottlob Frege, “Thoughts”, in his *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans. P. Geach and R.H. Stoothoff (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). But this orthodoxy has many adherents, see especially, Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. J. H. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

³ This is the (much criticized) view of G.E.M. Anscombe, “The First Person”, (1973), in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind: Collected Philosophical Papers vol. II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981). It is also the (much lauded) view of David Lewis, “Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*”, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 88, no. 4 (1979): 513-543, and the (somewhat neglected) view of Roderick Chisholm, *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981). Chisholm traces the view to the Paralogisms.

⁴ For a conception of self-consciousness on these lines, see John McDowell, “*De Re* Senses” (1984), in his *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁵ A good example is Charles Travis, “The Silence of the Senses”, *Mind*, vol. 113, no. 449 (2004): 57-94. But anyone who separates the understanding from perception counts as a dualist (of some sort; see §§20 & 21); the position is not restricted to “no content” theorists like Travis, but embraces “non-conceptual content” theorists too. And that means almost all contemporary philosophers of perception.

9. To consider the perceiver simply as perceiving something is simply to think of him that he perceives something: it is to think this of him in an act of thinking that is “basic” or “unmediated”, in that it is not the conclusion of an inference. For example, it is to think of him, in such an act, that he sees a pink ice cube. That characterization employs various concepts of things given in perception—call them empirical concepts: a substance-concept (expressible by “ice”), a concept of a common sensible (“cube”), and a concept of a proper sensible (“pink”). It will help for this discussion to abstract away from every aspect of this characterization except that which can be captured by the latter, and to focus on simply thinking of the perceiver that he sees pink.

10. If the act in which the perceiver is thought of as perceiving something is a self-ascription, then it follows, simply from the form of the act, that everything true of the subject is true of the object—for it follows that they are identical. So, if the subject simply thinks of the object in such an act that he sees pink—by saying, for instance, “I see pink”—then it follows, simply from the form of the act, that the object thinks that he* sees pink. (Here the point of the star after the pronoun is to signify that the object’s act of thinking is a self-ascription.⁶) By contrast, if the act is an other-ascription, then it does not follow, simply from the form of the act, that everything true of the subject is true of the object—for it does not follow that they are identical. So, if the subject thinks of the object from outside that he sees pink—by saying, for instance, “He sees pink”—then it does not follow, simply from the form of the act, that the object thinks that he* sees pink, or indeed that he thinks anything at all.

11. There is a temptation to deny or to overlook the feature of self-ascriptions noted in §10. For it is tempting to picture the first ascription in §10 as an attitude to a proposition expressible by saying “I see pink”, and to think that no such attitude could possibly guarantee that the one it concerns thinks anything: the proposition itself does not contain the concept of thinking—so it can guarantee no such thing; and the attitude itself can be taken to any proposition—so it can guarantee no such thing either. But this is to deny or to forget that the first ascription in §10 bears the form given in §2—the form that is self-consciousness—for it is this which gives it the feature being denied or overlooked here. And that it bears this form cannot be denied. For without this, the best that could be said about the ascription is that it is an attitude to a proposition that is expressible by saying: “I see pink”. And that is manifestly insufficient: for all it says, “I” here could be functioning as a demonstrative or as a name, and this needs to be ruled out—and the only way to rule it out is to insist that the ascription bears

⁶ See Hector-Neri Castañeda, “He: A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness” (1966), in his *The Phenomeno-Logic of the I: Essays on Self-Consciousness* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989).

the form. (Of course, as we saw in §5, not everyone thinks that an ascription bearing the form is an attitude to a proposition; but that is for another day.)

12. To endorse the dualism is to hold that the perceiver, considered simply as such—that is, considered simply as perceiving something—does not think anything. But what could it be to endorse this? On pain of unintelligibility, it could not be to hold that the perceiver, considered simply as such from within, does not think anything—for no one who knows what it is to think from within could intelligibly hold this. It could be to hold that the perceiver, considered simply as such from outside, does not think anything. And there can be no objection to an enquiry that considers the perceiver simply as such in this form—call it science. But this would be very different from an enquiry that considers the perceiver simply as such from within—call it self-understanding. And it might be thought that there can be no objection to an enquiry of this last sort.

13. However, to endorse the dualism could be to hold that the perceiver, considered simply as such *in the only form in which he can intelligibly be so considered*, does not think anything. It could, that is, be to hold that the perceiver can intelligibly be considered simply as such only from outside. The subject can intelligibly think of the perceiver from within as having Grave's Disease (say). But it might be thought that he cannot do this in an unmediated ascription: a self-ascription of this predicable can only be the inferential upshot of an other-ascription of the predicable, and a suitable identity-judgment—"He has Grave's Disease; I am him; so, I have Grave's Disease", as the subject could put it. To endorse the dualism, understood in this way, is to hold that perception is on a par with Grave's Disease in this respect—a topic for science, but not for self-understanding.

14. Considered from within simply as perceiving something, the perceiver thinks something. In what follows, the reader of this essay is invited to proceed, not from outside, but from within. For this is philosophy: not science, but self-understanding. So, the reader is invited to think of the perceiver from within. Specifically, he is invited to think of him in this form as seeing pink, and so—in the light of everything said so far in this essay—as thinking that he* sees pink. For the reader sees that, in being thought of from within as seeing pink, the perceiver thinks that he* sees pink. And, in taking up the invitation, the reader is aware that the perceiver is being thought of as seeing pink, in this form. In taking up the invitation, then, the reader thinks of the perceiver as thinking that he* sees pink. He might express the point by saying, of that which he is ascribing to the perceiver from within—namely, seeing pink—that is inseparable from thinking that he* sees pink: he might say "seeing pink is inseparable from thinking that I see pink", or, more generally, that perception is inseparable from

thinking. In saying this, the reader is not proceeding from outside, and noting what holds of the one who is being thought of in this form. He is proceeding from within, and noting what holds of the one who is being thought of in *this* form. Putting together this way of expressing the point with the understanding of the dualism from §13, the reader could say that to endorse the dualism is to hold that perception is separable from thinking.

15. To reject the dualism, so understood, is not to reject the very idea of perception as a topic for science. It is simply to insist that perception can be a topic for self-understanding.⁷ That which is not self-conscious—call it “the animal”—cannot be considered from within. An enquiry into perception on the part of the animal can only be science. But that which is self-conscious—“the self-conscious”—can be considered from within. And that surely affords the possibility of a different form of enquiry into perception. This is not to say that perception on the part of the self-conscious cannot be a topic for science. But it is to say that it surely can be a topic for self-understanding. It is an enquiry of this form in which this essay is engaged—and which the reader is invited to join.

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16. Contemporary philosophers of perception have largely failed to meditate on the idea of the form of thinking in which their own reflection is conducted. This is reflected in some of the things they are apt to say. Purporting to formulate what they take to be their view, they will help themselves to the first person, and say things like this: “On my view, I see pink, but I do not see pink *as* pink”. Here they are attempting to express the supposed thesis that, considered simply as seeing pink, the one who sees pink does not think anything—and they are attempting to express it in a self-ascription, and so in an act that considers its object from within. But thinking of the perceiver from within that he sees pink guarantees that he thinks that he* sees pink. In the self-ascription “I see pink as pink”, the phrase “as pink” is redundant: the part before this phrase already fixes it that the one it concerns, considered simply as seeing pink, thinks of what he sees as pink, precisely because it is an act of considering him simply as such from within.⁸ And because “as pink” cancels out, their initial

⁷ This takes for granted that these two different forms of enquiry have the *same object*. But I record here my view that making sense of this is no easy task; for some recognition of the difficulty here, see Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, chapter 6, and G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, §28 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1963]). A practitioner of either form of enquiry might use the word “perception” to designate his object—but with what right are these uses taken to designate a real unity? A full treatment would need to address this question.

⁸ As it might be put: a self-ascription cannot contain an opaque element. (To put it that way is to proceed from within. Proceeding from outside, the thing to say is that a self-ascription cannot contain a transparent element. From within, everything in the ascription is transparent, and nothing is opaque; from outside, the roles are reversed. The fact that the feature of ascription we are now isolating is canonically referred to as semantic opacity, rather than semantic transparency, is a sign of the privileged place that philosophy has given to proceeding from outside.)

formulation collapses to: “I see pink but I do not see pink”. The subject cannot coherently think of the object in a self-ascription as perceiving something but not thinking something. He can only coherently do so in an other-ascription. “*NN* sees pink, but *NN* does not see pink as pink” is perfectly fine. Indeed, the initial formulation is perfectly fine—but only if in its two uses “I” functions as a demonstrative or as a name (which is surely not what these philosophers want).

17. A chief inspiration for these philosophers is Austin. But unlike in their work, it is explicit in Austin that he is proceeding from outside. He does not get the topic of perception into view from within, by asking (as he would put it): “what do I see”? Rather, he considers “the plain man” and pronounces on what *he* sees. (In a representative passage, Austin writes: “when the plain man sees on stage the Headless Woman, what he sees (and this *is* what he sees, whether he knows it or not) [is] a woman against a dark background with her head in a black bag”.⁹)

18. Proceeding entirely from outside is the mark of scientism in philosophy (its other more frequently noted features are secondary by comparison).¹⁰ Austin’s scientism is explicit in the form of his writing. By contrast, his followers write as if they are getting the topic of perception into view from within. But, as we saw in §16, their commitments ensure that they cannot have it in focus from there. If they want to insist that the perceiver, considered simply as such, does not think anything, then they have to be considering him from outside. It is a good question why they do not appreciate this. It can only be, I think, because they fall into the temptation described in §11: to “look down” on what is thought in a self-ascription, by picturing self-ascriptions simply on the model of propositional attitudes, and thereby denying or (more likely) overlooking the special form they bear, and the consequences of this. They may write in the first person, but we should know them by their commitments—and their commitments show that, on their lips, “I” cannot be functioning as a device expressive of self-consciousness, but only as a demonstrative or as a name.

19. The case of Austin’s followers is an object lesson in the dangers of taking the first person for granted. If there is a moral so far, it is that philosophical reflection on perception must be alert to the form of thinking in which it is itself conducted, and the consequences of this.

⁹ J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 14. Austin’s tract cannot even begin as a critique of phenomenalism, because those he purports to be opposing precisely do get the topic in view from within (compare the passage from Ayer that Austin cites at the beginning of the second chapter).

¹⁰ Hostility to the intentional (and the intensional); reductionism, where the base is whatever natural science is taken as basic; the denial that there can be any knowledge that is not empirical...

(The best way to stay alert to this is never to use the first person, in the body of a philosophy essay.)

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20. It is natural to think of thinking as empirical thinking—thinking that involves empirical concepts, not just in the primary sense introduced in §9, but in the extended sense of concepts that depend for their content on their place within an inferentially articulated system to which empirical concepts in the primary sense belong. But it might seem that the perceiver can think that he* perceives something, without it following that he actualizes any empirical concepts—because he thinks not that he* sees pink, but merely that he* sees something. That fails to capture the specificity of what is perceived, but it might seem there is still a way to do that from within—not by actualizing an empirical concept, but simply by pointing, or perhaps by using a bare demonstrative that merely verbalizes the act of pointing: “I see *this*”.

21. It seems possible, then, to envisage two versions of the dualism: a moderate version, on which the understanding is separable from perception, but only in its guise as empirical thinking, not in that of formal thinking; and a radical version, on which thinking is separable from perception in all of its guises. On the moderate version, the perceiver thinks that he* perceives *something* or (as he would put it) “*this*”, but not that he* perceives (say) pink—only formal concepts, and pointing, are allowed to figure in the basic self-ascription. On the radical version, even thinking this is excluded.

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22. The radical dualism is surely a complete non-starter. It will briefly reappear in §§31-33, but it makes sense to focus on the moderate version.

23. The idea that empirical thinking is separable from perception is fundamental to the idea of the Given.¹¹ What is perceived can coherently be thought of from within in merely formal terms, for instance as that which is perceived, and it can be pointed to—but that is all. The Given is thought to be a myth. Why?

¹¹ For two classic expressions of this idea, see C.I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1929), ch. 2, and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 6. (Lewis embraces the idea, whereas McDowell of course rejects it.)

24. The fundamental reason is semantic, in the broad sense of pertaining to the very idea of an empirical concept: a concept of something given in perception (see §9). That “pink” (for instance) expresses such a concept is something anyone understands, from within. *NN* knows (as he would put it): “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see”. Of course this does not exhaust *NN*’s understanding: he knows that this is the concept of a specific thing he* sees—but what? Well, given the moderate dualism, he can only point: “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see, namely, *this*”, or perhaps “*this quality*” (we can count “quality” as expressing another formal concept).

25. *NN*’s predicament is liable to give rise in him to familiar worries about privacy. “Does anyone else see *this quality*? How do I know? And so, how do I know if anyone else means what I mean by ‘pink’?” This worry spreads to all empirical concepts—not only those of §9, but those of §20, in the light of the picture of how empirical substance enters into those concepts sketched there.

26. It is a central (but not, I think, very well understood) point of McDowell’s that Sellars’s target in his attack on *The Myth of the Given* is the same as Wittgenstein’s in his attack on “private ostensive definition”.¹² Overfamiliarity is likely to have dulled the crucial passage of the latter, but here it is:

“I impress on myself the connection between the sign ‘S’ and the sensation.” — But ‘I impress it on myself’ can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness.¹³

Wittgenstein represents his private linguist as actively wanting to speak a language that no one else can understand; by contrast, *NN* is someone who is worried that this is what he* is doing. But that is surely incidental. “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see, namely, *this quality*”—if what is given is what is Given then it seems that something of that shape is all that the understanding of an empirical concept (in the primary sense of §9) can consist in. Of course that is not sufficient. The quality singled out by that formulation is perceived at the time it is singled out; but he who understands an empirical concept must be able to employ it not merely at this time, but at future times; and that means he must be able at least to think at

¹² See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997 [1956]), §§24-31, where privacy worries are explicitly addressed, and where the target is non-classificatory awareness of determinate repeatables. See also McDowell op. cit., Lecture I.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §258; I have been especially influenced here by G.E.M. Anscombe, “The Subjectivity of Sensation” (1976), in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*.

a future time that (as he would put it) “what I have now is the same quality that I had earlier”. Adding this condition seems to yield the only account of what it is to understand an empirical concept that a believer in the Given can countenance.

27. Wittgenstein is concerned, not specifically with how his hero can know that (as he would put it) “what I have now is the same quality that I had earlier”, but what it is for him so much as to think this. For what does he think, when he thinks this? A manifold was Given: various qualities were present to him at the earlier time; in seeing pink he saw (*inter alia*) an expanse of pink. Which quality does he think of, when he thinks of “the quality that I had earlier”—that of being pink, or that of being an expanse? As it has been specified so far, what he thinks does not determine which. But it needs to do so, for only then can it be what it purports to be—a thought concerning a specific quality given in the past. So, more is needed. Could he fill out what he thinks as follows: “what I have now is the same quality that I had earlier, namely, pink”? No—for if it belongs to his thinking this that he employs that concept, then his thinking this cannot figure in an explanation of what his understanding of the concept consists in, in the manner described in §26, for then the explanation will presuppose the very thing it is meant to explain.

28. Wittgenstein imagines his hero trying to point to some sort of image, in what his hero takes to be his memory, to fill out what he thinks. But this is surely idle. For he needs to think that the image is an image of the right quality; but what is it for him to do that? It cannot be for him to take it to be “an image of pink”—for the reasons just given. It can only be for him to take it to be “an image of the quality that I had earlier”. So, it takes him no further. But then what can he appeal to, short of one of the forbidden empirical concepts?

29. He cannot appeal to anything. For “the quality that I had earlier” needs to signify a form of singling out a specific quality that reaches back into the past—a quality, as it is natural for him to say, that is not given *now* but was given *back then*. But the only resource available to him for singling out any given quality is pointing. And he can only point to what is present to him at the time of the pointing. What he needs is a concept, for unlike an act of pointing, which is necessarily indexed to the time of the act, a concept is precisely a time-spanning form of representation. But the only concepts he can employ with respect to what is given are formal ones, and—as was noted in §20—they lack the specificity needed to home in on determinate qualities. What he needs is something with the time-generality of a formal concept, but the specificity of pointing. Only an empirical concept can meet that need. And that is the one thing he cannot have.

30. Together, the minimal thought of §24—“By ‘pink’ I mean something I see”—and the idea of the Given enforce a certain conception of what it is to understand an empirical concept from within. And this conception collapses when it is thought through. If *NN* tries to understand his* empirical concepts in this way, he will find himself unable to go any further than the minimal thought, and so unable to understand his “empirical concepts” as anything more than mere concept-forms. That is the fundamental reason why Sellars and McDowell think that the Given is a myth. —But what is the alternative?

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31. One response that might seem open to the moderate dualist is to concede that *NN* cannot go any further from within. There can still be an understanding of *NN*’s empirical concepts. But this can only come from the outside. (“*I* can understand what *he* means by ‘pink’—he means something he sees (namely, pink).” But that is all.)

32. The radical dualist must think something like this. For on that view, thinking of the perceiver simply as such from within is foreclosed. So the radical dualist must hold, not merely that *NN* cannot get any further from within, but that he cannot get even that far; even the minimal understanding of §24 is denied to him.

33. Does the response of §31 allow *NN* to have any understanding of his empirical concepts, from within? Well, given moderate dualism, *NN* could get no further than: “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see”. The specific objects of his empirical concepts would, as McDowell puts it, be “merely noumenal so far as the subject is concerned”.¹⁴ And given radical dualism, he could not even say this. Perhaps he could say: “By ‘pink’ I mean something that stands at the end of a relation called ‘perception’”; but what specifically he means by “pink” and every other empirical concept-form would remain wholly beyond his ken.

34. McDowell calls this response “coherentism”, and attributes it to Davidson. But it is surely incoherent. For surely an interpreter, to come out with his pronouncements about what *NN* means by “pink” (for instance), must know (as the interpreter would put it) “what I mean by ‘pink’”. (If he does not know what he* means by it, how can he purport to say of someone from outside what *he* means by it?) But he cannot know this, by his own lights, for his response amounts to a denial of the possibility of any such self-understanding (the best he could know is “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see”, and that is insufficient).

¹⁴ McDowell, *op. cit.*, p. 17, n. 14.

35. McDowell thinks philosophers are prone to “oscillate” between The Myth of the Given and coherentism. Each is surely hopeless, for the reasons we have seen. But, as is well known, he thinks there is “a way to dismount from the seesaw”.¹⁵

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36. Following Sellars, McDowell recommends a thoroughgoing rejection of the dualism. In its moderate version, the understanding is inseparable from perception, but only in its guise as merely formal thinking. As it might be put: the form of perception is inseparable from the understanding, but its matter is supplied by sensibility alone—and because of this what is seen can show up in perception only as something that can be pointed to, as “*this*”. And that makes an understanding of empirical concepts from within impossible.

37. It was the impossibility of thinking of the perceiver from within as perceiving something, in anything more than formal terms, which sparked off the oscillation. Once it is granted that the understanding is inseparable from perception in its guise as the power of empirical thinking—thinking that bears both form and empirical matter—this impossibility will lapse. *NN* can think, simply, that he* sees pink (and so on). In seeking to understand his empirical concepts, he will no longer be restricted to pointing to the Given. And the hope is that, with that, his proneness to fall into The Myth of the Given, and subsequently to recoil into coherentism, will lapse too.

38. But will it? To reject the dualism is to think that (as the one who rejects it would put it): “seeing pink is inseparable from thinking that I see pink”. McDowell presents that as innocent, and perhaps it is. But it seems to leave the self-understanding of empirical concepts looking suspiciously circular. *NN* knows (as he would put it) “By ‘pink’ I mean something I see”. Of course that is not sufficient. But now it seems he must go on like this: “namely, something I see in an act of seeing that is inseparable from an act of thinking that I see pink”. His understanding seems to take him, not to something other than the concept in terms of which to understand it, but back to the very concept he wants to understand.

39. Loops of this kind are a central concern of Anscombe’s. Following Hume, she sees a class of concepts—call them contractual concepts—as being “naturally unintelligible”, because they give rise to this kind of loop. There can be no understanding of such a concept

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

in terms of something other than itself, precisely because it just is a concept of something that is thought of through this very concept. She mentions as examples “marrying, making a gift [and] swearing an oath”. But she sees that the point generalizes far beyond concepts of contract, to encompass at least all concepts that bear what she calls the “form of description” of intentional action.¹⁶ And she worries that all of these can be nothing but empty forms, precisely because they do not admit of an understanding in terms of something other. But she seems to agree with Hume that not all concepts are like this; empirical concepts are “naturally intelligible”, in that they do admit of such an understanding.¹⁷ (She seems to try to exploit concepts of this sort in order to explain how contractual concepts can inherit some of their substance, and thereby be saved from complete emptiness.¹⁸)

40. But now it seems that empirical concepts are themselves “naturally unintelligible”. The understanding of the concept expressed by “pink” which anyone has from within is that it is the concept of something that he* thinks of through this very concept. The same goes for every empirical concept in the primary sense. And if these concepts are indeed empty for this reason, then it is hard to see how the rot can fail to spread to all empirical concepts in the extended sense, given the picture of their connectedness sketched in §20.

41. Is this a place for thought to come to rest? It seems rather to be a third pole in an oscillation that now looks more like a pinball machine than a seesaw.

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42. Let us take stock. We considered a radically dualistic conception of sensibility and the understanding, which extrudes the latter entirely from perception. That is a form of *empiricism*. And “intuitions [sc. perceptions] without concepts are blind”, in the sense of being outside of their subject’s unmediated self-consciousness. The understanding must be inseparable from perception—but to what extent? We contemplated a moderate dualism, on which it is inseparable only in its guise as formal thinking. That is *transcendental idealism*, in that it sees thinking as inseparable from the formal aspects of perception, but not from its material, or empirical, aspects.¹⁹ And it has the consequence of making it impossible to understand empirical concepts from within. So, we were led to reject the dualism altogether,

¹⁶ See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1963]), §47.

¹⁷ Anscombe notes that for Hume it is not only empirical concepts that are “naturally intelligible”; “the activity of meaning in which they are employed” is too—and she takes issue with the second of these claims; see her “Rules, Rights, and Promises” (1978), in her *Ethics, Religion, and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers vol. III* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 95. But she seems not to dispute the first.

¹⁸ See especially her “On the Source of the Authority of the State” (1978), §II, and her “On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*” (1969), both in her op. cit.

¹⁹ See Stephen Engstrom, “Understanding and Sensibility”, *Inquiry*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2006): 2-25.

and to see thinking as inseparable from perception's material as well as its formal aspects. That means that it is not only social institutions (the objects of contractual concepts) that are inseparable from acts of thinking of them through their concepts; the "whole expanse of the sensible world"²⁰ has the same character. This is *absolute idealism*. It appears to be both necessary for securing empirical content, and to destroy it altogether. —Of course, it is the idea that empirical concepts must be "naturally intelligible" that holds the negative element of that appearance in place. And that idea just is The Myth of the Given—if the intelligibility is to come from within—or coherentism—if not. If the temptation to think that "naturally unintelligible" concepts must be empty is real, that is surely a sign of the hold that these two positions have on the philosophical imagination.

²⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ¶167.