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Berkeley and McDowell on Perceptual Experience[1]

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to show that Berkeley's account of perception can be read as sharing important features with a contemporary account developed by John H. McDowell, in particular with conceptualism and disjunctivism – two key components of McDowell's theory of perceptual experience. Conceptualism is a view that perception is structured by concepts (possessed by the subject of experience). Disjunctivism states that the acts of perception are directed at objects without any mediation of an idea or representation, the so-called "highest common factor", in both veridical and non-veridical perceptions. Thus, all perceptual acts are either veridical, or come down to illusions or hallucinations. I take these two components of McDowell's position to confront them with Berkeley's doctrines of abstraction and perceptual illusion. Since it can be shown that the Berkeleyan general ideas (notions) are ways of structuring the content of experience, or "contributions" by "our interpreting minds", and since perceptual errors can be attributed to the interpreting activity of the mind, rather than to the misleading contents of experience itself (ideas), there is more in common between Berkeley and the philosophical tradition that tries to defy the "Myth of the Given" than one may think *prima facie* to be the case.
KEYWORDS: George Berkeley • John H. McDowell • perceptual experience • conceptualism • disjunctivism

Introduction

Can concepts be involved in the immediate perception of objects? In this paper, I address this question by setting Berkeley's theory of perception against conceptualism as represented in the writings of John H. McDowell. My main aim is to venture to show that Berkeley's ideas about perception can be considered as having important features in common with conceptualism. Although conceptualists usually claim to owe their ideas to

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the *International Berkeley Conference: The 300th Anniversary of the Publication of Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, organised in 2013 at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. I would like to emphasize my indebtedness to Professor Miłowit Kuniński (1946–2018) for his useful remarks which helped me in preparing the draft of the presentation back then.

Kant[2], and Berkeley's philosophy shares few, if any, assumptions with Kant's philosophy, identifying parallels between the solutions offered and the difficulties encountered by both Berkeley and McDowell in their application of a theory of perception within a broader philosophical framework may, in my opinion, turn out to be a fruitful enterprise, enriching our historical-philosophical exegesis, on the one hand, and our understanding of issues relevant to contemporary philosophy, on the other.

The article consists of the following parts: first, I point at some apparent dissimilarities between Berkeley and McDowell, such as their diverging accounts of the object of perceptual experience and seemingly different positions in the idealism vs. realism debate. The next part, in turn, deals with the common aspects of Berkeley's and McDowell's theories of perception, in particular with the methodological purport of their theories; for, on both accounts, a theory of perception is regarded as an antidote against skepticism and a solution to the problem of the relation between mind and world. Finally, I discuss two crucial components of McDowell's theory: conceptualism and disjunctivism, and show how they can be employed in an interpretation of Berkeley, considering the latter's accounts of abstraction and perceptual illusion.

Where the Two Theories Seem to Be at Odds

Before focusing on the main theme of this contribution, concerning the involvement of concepts in the perception of objects, I would like to spell out in brief a few reasons for which an attempt to compare Berkeley and McDowell may at first seem to be an altogether misguided enterprise. McDowell's conceptualism – a view that the content of perceptual experiences involves (Fregean) propositions, and so is structured by concepts; and/or that entertaining content-laden representational states requires that perceivers possess the right kind of concepts[3] – may be regarded as, at least *prima facie*, closer to the views represented by philosophers such as Aristotle, Reid, Kant, and Hegel, rather than to the views represented by any of the British empiricists, Berkeley included. Aristotle sometimes identifies perception with a sort of judgment[4].

[2] See: Y.H. Gunther, *General Introduction*, [in:] *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. by *idem*, Cambridge, MA, London, England 2003, p. 1.

[3] On this definition, two versions of conceptualism can be distinguished: content and state conceptualism (the same distinction applies to nonconceptualism, which is the opposite view). See: T.M. Crowther, *Two Conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism*, "Erkenntnis", 2006, no. 65, pp. 245–276.

[4] The identification of perception and judgment can be found in one of Aristotle's remarks he makes in passing in the *Topics*, bk. 2, 111a16 (*The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by

Reid holds that perception, in principle, is accompanied by a judgment, which is not inferred, about the existence of the object perceived[5]. Kant famously states that thoughts unaccompanied by intuitions are "empty" and unconceptualised intuitions are "blind"[6], that is, they have no cognitive significance, no reference to objects. According to Hegel, even indexical reference, expressed by words like "this" and "here", mediates general content, so even perception of particulars should involve concepts[7]. This is not to say that Berkeley denies the involvement of judgment in experience – after all, judgment mediates perception of the spatial properties of objects, such as location and distance, as would become clear e.g. in §3 of the *New Theory of Vision*[8] – but perceiving objects in the proper sense, that is immediately, does not seem to require any conceptual or judgmental mediation at all.

A significant distinction between Berkeley and McDowell pertains to their views on the objects of perception. While McDowell conceives of the objects of perceptual experience as f a c t s, Berkeley claims that we immediately perceive only i d e a s, i.e. sensible objects specific to different sense modalities, and he even goes on to model ideas on sensations, such as pain or pleasure, which are non-intentional mental states[9]. To illustrate the distinction, let us note that, in *Mind and World*, McDowell contends:

J. Barnes, Princeton 1991). This is not exactly Aristotle's view on perception, though. Thanks to Hasse Hämäläinen for drawing my attention to this detail.

5 See: T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, New York 2011, especially Essay II, chapter 5.

6 See: I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by A. Wood and P. Guyer, New York 2011 (A 51/B 75–76). It is, however, far from obvious that Kant would support conceptualism rather than the opposite position; on different readings of Kant's theory of perceptual experience, see: *Kantian Nonconceptualism*, ed. by D. Schulting, Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

7 See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Oxford 1977, especially Part I, chapter 1.

8 "I find it also acknowledged that the estimate we make of the distance of objects considerably remote is rather an act of judgment grounded on experience than of sense". G. Berkeley, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, [in:] *idem*, *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, London and Melbourne 1975, p. 9.

9 "PHILONOUS. Seeing therefore they are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple, or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived, is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain". G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, [in:] *idem*, *Philosophical Works*…, p. 139. The issue is controversial and would deserve more elaboration. Of course, from the fact that certain ideas, such as heat, are accompanied by sensations of pleasure and pain, it does not follow that all ideas are, although this is what Berkeley seems to suggest. According to Katherine Dunlop, Berkeley holds the view that pleasure accompanies experiencing the fittingness of the conjunctions of ideas, in

> In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is that things are thus and so. That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment […] if the subject decides to take experience at face value[10].

For Berkeley, on the other side, the objects of perception vary in accordance with sense modalities, a claim that constitutes one of the main tenets of his philosophy, i.e. the heterogeneity principle[11]. In the *Three Dialogues*, Philonous, Berkeley's spokesman, asks a question, followed by an affirmative reply of Hylas, his would-be materialist adversary, in which he enumerates proper objects of perception:

> You will farther inform me, whether we immediately perceive by sight any thing beside light, and colours, and figures: or by hearing, any thing but sounds: by the palate, any thing beside tastes: by the smell, beside odours: or by the touch, more than tangible qualities[12].

Whereas McDowell's facts can be captured by propositions of the form "a is F", Berkeley's proper objects of perception, as is evident from the above quotation, do not have a propositional structure. Therefore, it might be thought that Berkeley falls into what contemporary philosophers, following Wilfrid Sellars, have called the "Myth of the Given"[13], a fallacy committed by the foundationalist theories of sense experience, which McDowell rejects together with coherentism. Thus, although McDowell claims that empirical beliefs are ultimately grounded in perceptual experiences, he also denies that experiences are constructed from more primitive "material" on which beliefs or thoughts would supervene, or be otherwise causally dependent. But what McDowell rejects seems to be the position that Berkeley would be happy to endorse.

particular the visible and the tangible ones. She stresses that, for Berkeley, "pleasure is evoked not only by the correlations between visible and tangible ideas, but also by the relationships between individual visible ideas in virtue of which they signify tangible ideas". K. Dunlop, *The Role of Visual Language in Berkeley's Account of Generality*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 2011, no. 83/3, p. 555.

[10] J.H. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge MA 1996, p. 26.

[11] See: T.M. Lennon, *The Main Part and Pillar of Berkeley's Theory: Idealism and Perceptual Heterogeneity*, "The Southern Journal of Philosophy", 2011, no. 49/2, pp. 91–115.

[12] G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues…*, [in:] *idem*, *Philosophical Works…*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

[13] The classic text which exposes the "Myth" is Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.

Furthermore, while Berkeley is most often read as an idealist[14], McDowell's position should rather be characterized as encouraging a sort of realism. For while Berkeley identifies the objects of perception with ideas, hence mind-dependent realities, McDowell maintains that we perceive facts, that is, mind-independent "chunks" of reality. Besides, although perception as such consists in the passive intake of information according to both authors, they acknowledge the involvement of an active factor in perception, but identify this factor in different ways. While Berkeley claims that ideas originate from the operations of a spirit or mind – in the case of the ideas of real, as opposed to imagined, objects the spirit is God[15] – on McDowell's proposal, the active factor involved in perception is provided by human conceptual capacities. Also, McDowell, unlike Berkeley, seems to attribute a kind of "activity" to the world itself, when he says that:

> [K]nowledge is a status that one possesses by virtue of an appropriate standing in the space of reasons when […] t h e w o r l d d o e s o n e t h e f a v o u r of being so arranged that what one takes to be so is so[16].

Finally, whereas – again at least *prima facie* – for Berkeley ideas are independent from language, McDowell seems to take it for granted that language endows thought with a proper structure[17]. To substantiate this claim about

[14] According to Phillip D. Cummins, "Berkeley did not opt for naïve or direct realism" (P.D. Cummins, *Berkeley's Ideas of Sense*, "Noûs", 1975, no. 9/1, p. 68.); but, as Margaret Atherton shows, in Berkeley scholarship two competitive interpretations have been at play: the idealist and the realist one, with the idealist interpretation bringing out the skeptical consequences of Berkeley's philosophy. (M. Atherton, *Berkeley's Theory of Vision and Its Reception*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. by K.P. Winkler, Cambridge 2005, pp. 94–124.) In the *Three Dialogues...*, Berkeley seems to defend the realist intuitions. He says, e.g.: "PHILONOUS. You mistake me. I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves. […] What you call the empty forms and outside of things, seems to me the very things themselves. Nor are they empty or incomplete otherwise, than upon your supposition, that matter is an essential part of all corporeal things. We both therefore agree in this, that we perceive only sensible forms: but herein we differ, you will have them to be empty appearances, I real beings. In short you do not trust your senses, I do" (p. 193).

[15] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, [in:] *idem*, *Philosophical Works...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

[16] J.H. McDowell, *Knowledge and the Internal*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 1995, no. 55/4, p. 881 (emphasis added – A.T.).

[17] This is a simplified reading of Berkeley, though. In fact, tight bonds between thought and language would be underlined by the British empiricists, at least by Locke and Berkeley. Also, Berkeley has been read as advancing a conception of language in which the purpose of words is not (necessarily) to convey ideas from one mind to another; rather, language

Berkeley, it suffices to look at the end of the Introduction to the *Principles*, where he recommends to his readers that they separate their ideas from words by means of which the ideas become expressed, and consider them "naked" and "undisguised"[18]. According to McDowell, conceptual capacities have their paradigmatic application in judgments, endorsed propositional contents, and in the Fregean tradition, from which he originates, propositions are expressible in language[19].

A Theory of Perception to Dislodge Skepticism

Regardless of the differences brought to light in the previous section, there are important similarities clearly manifested by the philosophical projects of Berkeley and McDowell. First of all, according to both philosophers, modern philosophy, with its origin in Descartes, prioritizing scientific, method-based inquiry over the evidence of the senses as the point of departure of philosophical considerations on cognition, misconceives the relation between mind and reality, which results in skepticism. Berkeley locates the source of this misconception in "supposing a difference between t h i n g s and i d e a s"[20] and in certain "false principles", adopted by a number of philosophers of his times, which

> […] introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions into the several sects of philosophy; insomuch that the wisest men have thought our ignorance incurable, conceiving it to arise from the natural dullness and limitation of our faculties[21].

can be compared to a calculus with its own intrinsic rules. See: M. Losonsky, *Language, Meaning and Mind in Locke's* Essay, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's* Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. by L. Newman, Cambridge 2007, pp. 286–312; A. Flew, *Was Berkeley a Precursor of Wittgenstein?*, [in:] *Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Ernest Campbell Mossner*, ed. by W.B. Todd, Edinburgh 1974, pp. 153–163.

[18] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles…*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

[19] "Conceptual capacities exercised in a single act of judgment have a semantical or logical togetherness that is, on Geach's picture, to be understood on analogy with the semantical or logical togetherness of the corresponding words, in a grammatically structured form of words that would give expression to the judgment. What I am suggesting is that we can amplify Geach's conception of judgment, and understand experience through a second use of analogy. Geach shows how to model acts of judgment on declarative utterances, and we can model experiences on acts of judgment". J.H. McDowell, *Experiencing the World*, [in:] *idem*, *The Engaged Intellect. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge MA 2009, p. 250.

[20] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles...*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 66.

McDowell, on the other side, identifies the source of the misconception in a certain "way of thinking" which, by imposing inadequate, or perhaps too high, requirements upon the subjects of cognition, in the end leaves them with insolvable dilemmas. As one can read in the Introduction to *Mind and World*:

> It is true that modern philosophy is pervaded by apparent problems about knowledge in particular. But I think it is helpful to see those apparent problems as more or less inept expressions of a deeper anxiety – an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leaves mind simply out of touch with the rest of reality, not just questionably capable of getting to know about it[22].

In order to alleviate the "anxiety", McDowell proposes a theory of perception that aims, on the one hand, to secure the relation between mind and reality, and to sidestep the skeptical challenge, on the other. Remarkably, also Berkeley employs a theory of perception as a remedy for skepticism: it may be claimed that the *New Theory of Vision* was written not only to vindicate the immaterialist metaphysics[23], but also, and more specifically, to defend the account of perception as direct acquaintance with objects in the course of which subjects acquire information about properties of the environment[24]. The latter aim would be achieved in two steps: (1) by rejecting alternative theories of perception, such as the hypothesis of natural geometry, as well as physiological accounts, associating the objects of immediate perception with things like retinal images, processed by the mind into representations of spatial objects, and (2) by providing an account of perception as language, on which ideas of one sense modality, such as sight, would be regarded as signs of ideas of another sense modality, such as touch, rather than representations (i.e. "proxies") of objects.

Now, reading Berkeley in the light of McDowell's account of perceptual experience, and keeping in mind that both accounts attempt to reclaim a "picture" in which there is no gap between mind and world, I suggest that we consider two components of McDowell's proposal: (1) the disjunctivist theory of perception, which rejects the "highest common factor" conception

[22] J.H. McDowell, *Mind and World*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

[23] In §17 of the *Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*, this intention is summarized as follows: "When we have well understood and considered the nature of vision, we may, by reasoning from thence, be better able to collect some knowledge of the external, unseen cause of our ideas […]". G. Berkeley, *Philosophical Works...*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

[24] On diverging interpretations of Berkeley's aims in the *Essay...*, see: M. Atherton, *Berkeley's Theory of Vision…*, *op. cit.*

of experience[25], and (2) conceptualism about the contents of perceptual experience. According to the disjunctivists, objects enter into the description of the content of perception or constitute it[26]. The act of perception can be either veridical and relate to a fact, or a case of illusion or hallucination and relate to an appearance of a fact. The disjunctivists – among them McDowell, Bill Brewer, J.M. Hinton, Paul Snowdon, and M.G.F. Martin – claim that the "good" (i.e. veridical) and the "bad" (i.e. non-veridical) disjuncts do not share their contents, even though perceiving may be phenomenologically indistinguishable from hallucinating or undergoing illusions.

Since the disjunctivists deny that subjective, phenomenological aspects of experience explain perceivers' access to the world; in other words, since they reject the view that our perceptual acquaintance with objects is mediated by something like the Cartesian or Lockean ideas, understood as representational content, they should be sympathetic to Berkeley's rejection of the representative theory of perception endorsed (on a received interpretation) by such philosophers as Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke[27], and being one of the Berkeleyan "false principles" that lead to skepticism[28]. The latter is the case because the representative theory stipulates that the immediate objects of perception, ideas "in" the mind, should picture external material objects which, in many respects, must be taken to be unlike these ideas: for instance, the ideas of colours or sounds (secondary qualities) must be unlike the qualities of objects which cause the ideas of

[25] For a discussion of the highest common factor conception of experience, see the following works by McDowell: *Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge*, "Proceedings of the British Academy", 1982, no. 68, pp. 455–479; *Singular Thought and the Extent of 'Inner Space'*, [in:] *Subject, Thought, and Context*, ed. by J.H. McDowell and P. Pettit, Oxford 1986; *Mind and World*, p. 113; *The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument*, [in:] J.H. McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*.

[26] See: A.D. Smith, *Disjunctivism and Illusion*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 2010, no. 80/2, pp. 384–410.

[27] John W. Yolton argues that this is in fact a misreading of the views of modern philosophers, especially Locke, spread by Thomas Reid. See: J.W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid*, London 1984; *idem*, *Perception and Reality: A History from Descartes to Kant*, Ithaca 1996. Yolton builds on an observation, based on reading Descartes' texts, that for the moderns the term "idea" could refer either to mental acts, or to the objects of mental acts. Taken as mental acts, ideas would not form a "veil" that would sever our mind from the world.

[28] George Pappas specifies four such principles leading to skepticism: (1) "the thesis that there are abstract ideas"; (2) "the thesis that objects consist in material substance with inherent sensible qualities"; (3) "realism regarding the existence of ordinary physical objects and at least some of their qualities"; (4) "the representative realist theory of perception". G. Pappas, *Berkeley and Scepticism*, "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 1999, no. 59/1, p. 136.

secondary qualities and which the ideas of secondary qualities are supposed to represent[29]. The problem is that we cannot know, on this account, what the represented qualities are like.

I have already dealt with conceptualism; to the above characterization it should be added, that the view has been challenged mostly for ignoring salient phenomenological features of experiences, such as their richness or fineness of grain, and for countering our intuitions about the experience of objects as particulars, or about the fact that the perceptual field has a unique and ineffable egocentric orientation[30]. Barring these charges, the main motivation for conceptualism is based on an argument from perceptual reasons. Since we take it that perception justifies empirical beliefs, so the argument goes, and since justification is a rational (or logical) relation, only those items which can be rationally (or logically) related with one another can enter the relation. It is propositions that enter this kind of relations. Accordingly, because propositions are composed of concepts, the content of perceptual experiences must be conceptual[31]. The argument from perceptual reasons can be encapsulated, in somewhat Aristotelian terms, in the claim that insofar as empirical belief is the end of perceiving, concepts must be involved in perception.

But how can conceptualism be combined with the disjunctive theory of perception? Recall that, according to conceptualism, the content of experience is constituted by (Fregean) propositions (or senses); and, on the disjunctivist tenets, the content of experience is constituted by objects. Thus, it may seem that if one wants to retain both conceptualism and disjunctivism, one will have to accept a kind of a two-component account of perceptual content, on which both non-conceptual content (objects) and conceptual content (propositions) are constitutive of experiences. McDowell does not endorse such a close-to-inconsistent account, though; rather, he suggests that there is no need to isolate two components in experience – the object and the content – in that he says:

[29] As a critic of the inconsistencies of imagism, "the thesis that all ideas are iconic – they are images, or at least, l i k e images of what they m i g h t be taken to represent", Berkeley is featured in: T.M. Lennon, *Berkeley and the Ineffable*, "Synthese", 1988, no. 75/2, p. 235.

[30] For an overview of positions and arguments in the debate between conceptualism and nonconceptualism, see: *Essays on Nonconceptual…* and *Kant and Non-Conceptual Content*, ed. by D. Heidemann, London and New York 2013.

[31] The argument is repeated throughout *Mind and World*. It is also developed in: B. Brewer, *Perception and Reason*, Oxford 1999. For its criticism, see e.g. Ch. Larmore, *Attending to Reasons*, [in:] *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. by N.H. Smith, London and New York 2002, pp. 193–208.

> In the conception I am recommending, the need for external constraint is met by the fact that experiences are receptivity in operation[32].
>
> Objects come into view for us in actualizations of conceptual capacities in sensory consciousness [...][33].

By "external constraint" one may understand here (mind-independent) objects, and by "receptivity in operation" – the involvement of conceptual capacities in experience. Accordingly, and crucially, McDowell's idea would be that objects "come into view" – i.e. become the objects of our experience – along with the conceptualized contents of perception. This is due to the fact that, on McDowell's tenets, in experience one takes in "that things are thus and so", and we can see that statements of this form build on singular propositions of the form "this x is F", or "a is F", involving singular object-dependent senses. For McDowell, the contents of perceptual demonstrative reference – "this x" – are still conceptual because they can enter the contents of a judgment based upon the experience of an object referred to as "this x". This idea, however, has made McDowell's view vulnerable to the charge of idealism[34] and of conflating the content with the object of experience, a charge that can easily be raised against Berkeley as well[35].

In what follows, I will confront both conceptualism and disjunctivism, as characterized above, with some of the doctrines of Berkeley. To that end, I will look into Berkeley's accounts of abstraction and perceptual illusions, respectively, as this will allow showing more of the relevant affinities between the two philosophers.

[32] J.H. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 25.

[33] *Idem*, *Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant and Intentionality*, "The Journal of Philosophy", 1998, no. 95, p. 470 (emphasis added – A.T.).

[34] The charge is discussed in: *Reading McDowell...*, by R.J. Bernstein, M. Friedman, C. Wright, and J.M. Bernstein. Friedman writes: "given McDowell's own conception of what impressions of outer sense amount to, I do not see, in the end, how he has fully rebutted the charge of idealism" (p. 35). Wright indicates the way in which to avoid the idealist trap: "McDowell is quite clear, as he had better be if the accusation of Idealism is to be as undeserved as he wishes, that facts are conceptual only in so far as [they are] essentially conceivable" (p. 150).

[35] For Berkeley thinks that the objects we perceptually experience are ideas, but ideas are "in" the mind, so they constitute the mental content of experiences.

Berkeley's Account of Perception in Light of McDowell's Conceptualism and Disjunctivism

1. Berkeley on abstraction

The view that there are abstract ideas, which provide reference for general terms, is one of those "false principles" which, taken jointly with materialism, indirect realism and the representative theory of perception[36], are conducive – according to Berkeley – to skepticism about the possibility of our knowledge of objects. I have no space here to discuss in any detail all the accounts of abstraction considered by Berkeley[37]. But it seems correct at least to note that one could find in Berkeley's texts a positive and a negative account of abstraction. The latter involves a number of arguments against abstract ideas, such as the argument from introspection (§ 10 of the Introduction to the *Principles*), which says that we are not aware of any ability in us to form abstract ideas, or the argument from the inconsistency of abstract ideas (§ 13), which says that we cannot form an idea of an object that would have mutually exclusive properties at the same time, such as a triangle that would be both equilateral and scalene[38]. The positive account of abstraction derives from Berkeley's recognition of the need for general ideas in the scientific discourse, thus, analogously to McDowell's argument from perceptual reasons, it has an epistemological motivation. Noteworthy, Berkeley uses the word "notion" when he speaks of general ideas[39], saying, for example, that:

> […] all knowledge and demonstration are about universal notions […]: but […] it does not appear to me that those notions are formed by a b s t r a c t i o n in the manner premised; u n i v e r s a l i t y […] not consisting in the absolute, positive nature or conception of anything, but in the relation it bears to the particulars signified or represented by it; by virtue whereof it is that things, names, or notions, being in their own nature p a r t i c u l a r, are rendered u n i v e r s a l[40].

[36] Cf. G. Pappas, *Berkeley and Scepticism*, *op. cit.*

[37] For a discussion of Berkeley's criticism of abstract ideas and his account(s) of abstraction, see e.g.: E.J. Craig, *Berkeley's Attack on Abstract Ideas*, "The Philosophical Review", 1968, no. 77/4, pp. 425–437; C.C.W. Taylor, *Berkeley's Theory of Abstract Ideas*, "The Philosophical Quarterly", 1978, no. 28, pp. 97–115; T.M. Lennon, *Berkeley and the Ineffable, op. cit.*; K. Dunlop, *The Role of Visual Language…, op. cit.*

[38] See: G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–71.

[39] On the "notional" knowledge in Berkeley and different contexts of the use of the word "notion" in his writings, see: J.W. Yolton, *The Notions of Berkeley's Philosophy*, [in:] *idem*, *Realism and Appearances: An Essay in Ontology*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 77–98.

[40] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

The process of forming general ideas is contingent upon selective attention to certain characteristics of an object presented to the experiencing subject, and it consists in establishing a relation between a certain particular idea and a range of other particular ideas. The relation is one of representing or signification, like the relation between words and ideas, or the ideas of sight and the ideas of touch. As Berkeley states: "[…] an idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort"[41].

But what kind of ideas can be made general? Berkeley's examples (a triangle, a man) may suggest complex ideas, congeries of the simple ones, but what he emphasizes is particularity, rather than complexity, of the ideas that can be rendered general. But since all ideas are particular, according to Berkeley, perhaps a l l i d e a s whatsoever can, in principle, undergo the process of generalization. Besides, what exactly does this "making particular ideas general" come down to? Although, when carrying out a demonstration in mathematics, one can stipulate that one will, from a given moment onwards, take a particular triangle drawn on a piece of paper as referring to all figures of a certain kind, in experience, in which we tend to make all kinds of general claims about objects, such stipulations hardly ever take place, if at all. Thus, I would venture to propose that insofar as we make use of general ideas in experience, we do not do so at certain arbitrarily fixed points; rather, the process of generalization accompanies our experiences along the way, so to speak.

Now, without going into much detail, I would like to consider two ways of reading Berkeley's positive account of abstraction. On the first reading, Berkeley would hold what one may call an "imagist" theory of general ideas (or concepts). According to it, when one entertains a concept or thought, one has to image a particular object which falls under that concept or which that thought is about. For example, whenever one heard the word "triangle", one would have to picture a particular triangle, as it were, in one's mind. A more refined version of this reading one can find in Andre Gallois's article on Berkeley's "master argument", where the author says:

> We can […] think of a concept as collecting together a class of images associated with it and, by a natural extension, the same concepts collecting together the same images. […] If someone claims that a property could be instantiated, then it seems reasonable to insist that he should be prepared to replace the initial variable in the open sentence 'x is $\mathcal{F}$' with a definite or indefinite description so that a closed sentence which could be true obtains. In other words, he should be able to specify

[41] *Ibidem*, pp. 69–70.

> a kind or kinds of things which, though they may contingently not be, could be *T*[42].

Another way of reading Berkeley's positive account of abstraction would suggest something to the contrary: namely, that entertaining concepts or thoughts does not have to be accompanied by mental imagery at all (though, of course, it may). On this reading, concepts – or notions, a term which would gain more significance in the *Siris*[43] – would not be particular objects existing "in" the mind. Rather, they would be what makes it possible to pick out aspects of objects, a kind of "tools". Berkeley's example with a triangle could thus be read as exploiting the idea of abstraction as perception of aspects. (It is a separate concern what these aspects could be: parts of objects or modes of presenting them, or still something else.) In the Introduction to the *Principles*, § 16, one can read:

> [T]hough the idea I have in view whilst I make the demonstration, be, for instance, that of an isosceles rectangular triangle, whose sides are of a determinate length, I may nevertheless be certain it extends to all other rectilinear triangles, of what sort or bigness soever. And that, because neither the right angle, nor the equality, nor determinate length of the sides, are at all concerned in the demonstration. […] And here it must be acknowledged that a man may consider a figure merely as triangular, w i t h o u t a t t e n d i n g to the particular qualities of the angles, or relations of the sides. So far he may abstract […][44].

If Berkeley's claim that ideas exist "in" the mind can be read as a way of saying that ideas are objects considered in their relation to the mind[45], general

[42] A. Gallois, *Berkeley's Master Argument*, "The Philosophical Review", 1974, no. 83/1, pp. 60–61.

[43] On the evolution of Berkeley's theory of abstraction and the role of notions in it, see an excellent paper by S.C. Rome, *Berkeley's Conceptualism*, "The Philosophical Review", 1946, no. 55/6, pp. 680–686. The author encapsulates the consequences of this evolution, which occurred between the *Principles* and the *Siris*, in seven theses: "(i) notions of ideas are not ideas of ideas, […] (ii) ideas are nevertheless known, […] (iii) ideas are external to the immanent knowledge that we have of them, […] (iv) they are identically the direct subjects of knowledge by notions, […] (vi) ideas are only the objects of acts which are external to their being, […] (vii) ideas are sufficiently complex to permit abstraction from them, […] (v) w o r d s c a n s i g n i f y a s p e c t s o f i d e a s" (p. 685; emphasis added – A.T.). Let us note that Rome's use of the term "conceptualism" differs from the use of the term in the recent debate and in my paper, as it refers to one of the views on the status of general ideas (concepts).

[44] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles...*, p. 72 (emphasis added – A.T.).

[45] It seems that § 49 of the *Principles* may warrant such a reading. There, Berkeley admits that extension and figure are "in" the mind "not by way of m o d e or a t t r i b u t e, but only by

ideas, concepts, or notions can be taken as providing m e a n s for the mind to intentionally, in the sense of Franz Brentano, Kazimierz Twardowski or Roman Ingarden, relate to its objects – particular ideas. Accordingly, Berkeley's positive account of abstraction could be read as approximating McDowell's idea that it is due to concepts that objects "come into view" in perceptual experience; this is because, to put it simply, concepts enable the perception of objects a s endowed with certain specific determinations – concepts, as it were, shed light on some aspects of the objects which we experience.

Interestingly, as Kenneth P. Winkler notices, such a reading would encourage the distinction between the object (idea) and the content of cognition. Winkler points out:

> It is in Berkeley's appeal to selective attention that idea and content […] come apart. One person confronts the idea of Peter and thinks only of him. Another confronts the same idea and thinks of human beings in general – or of boys unaccountably good at chess. Our interpreting minds make their own contributions to content, a contribution that ideas themselves do not fix[46].

Thus, general ideas, or concepts, would provide ways by means of which objects-ideas would become available, or better available (i.e. more determinate), to the mind[47]. And the act of selectively attending to features of objects (ideas) seems to require at least a capacity for discrimination which could play a role similar, though perhaps not identical, to that of McDowell's conceptual capacities.

2. Perceptual illusions

As already noted, what Berkeley's and McDowell's philosophical projects have in common is also an attempt to respond to skepticism, or at least to dislodge the threat it poses. A contemporary theory of perception that promises to achieve this end has been provided by disjunctivism. The dis-

way of i d e a". *Ibidem*, p. 91. The same concern appears in the *Three Dialogues…*, where Hylas asks Philonous what he means by the claim that ideas, real sensible objects, exist in the mind. Philonous responds: "Look you, Hylas, when I speak of objects as existing in the mind or imprinted on the senses; I would not be understood in the gross literal sense, as when bodies are said to exist in a place, or a seal to make an impression upon wax. My meaning is only that the mind comprehends or perceives them; and that it is affected from without, or by some being distinct from itself". G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues...*, p. 197. Cf. K.P. Winkler, *Berkeley and the Doctrine of Signs*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, p. 137.

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 144.

[47] This of course does not imply that we are unaware of the ideas which we do not attend to.

junctivists abandon a number of commitments inherited from the broadly conceived Cartesian tradition, such as: „veil of ideas" and indirect realism, the transparency of the mind, and the infallibility, or authority, of subjective experience. Crucially, they address the argument from illusion, intended at establishing the claim about it being impossible to distinguish between veridical perceptions and illusions on the basis the phenomenological properties of experience alone. According to the proponents of this argument, opposed by the disjunctivists, this impossibility results from the fact that both veridical perceptions and illusions can be phenomenologically identical, and so share a set of properties that provide their so-called "highest common factor".

What is noteworthy is that an argument from illusion thus construed can be attributed to Hylas who, in the Third Dialogue, interrogates Philonous:

> Since, according to you, men judge of the reality of things by their senses, how can a man be mistaken in thinking the moon a plain lucid surface, about a foot in diameter; or a square tower, seen at a distance, round; or an oar, with one end in the water crooked?[48]

Hylas seems to suggest that Philonous's theory lacks proper resources to distinguish between veridical perceptions and illusions, hence it has to accept all perceptions as veridical, quite an absurd demand, which makes the very distinction questionable.

The disjunctivist may appeal to as little as the fact that we do distinguish perceptual illusions from veridical perceptions, which enables us to make sense of the idea that we c a n t h i n k of experience as a kind of "openness to the layout of reality"[49]. Indeed, for McDowell this assumption is crucial in what he describes as a transcendental argument against skepticism, when he says, in one of his articles:

> [T]he idea of environmental facts making themselves available to us in perception must be intelligible, because that is a necessary condition for it to be intelligible that experience has a characteristic that is […] not in doubt. The relevant characteristic is that e x p e r i e n c e p u r p o r t s t o b e o f o b j e c t i v e r e a l i t y. […] [T]he transcendental argument shows that the disjunctive conception is required, on pain of our losing our grip on the very idea that in experience we have it a p p e a r to us that things are a certain way[50].

[48] G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues...*, p. 188.
[49] J.H. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 26.
[50] *Idem*, *The Disjunctive Conception of Experience...*, pp. 380–382 (emphasis added – A.T.).

In other words, maintaining that in experience we c a n indeed be presented with objects and the ways they are proves indispensable to fend off the skeptic's challenge: for the skeptic can claim that what we perceive are appearances only if he presupposes the distinction between the experience of appearances and of real objects, i.e. between illusions and veridical perceptions, but this presupposition will land him in admitting that we can make sense of perceiving objects as they are and not merely as they appear.

But would Berkeley hold a view on illusions similar to the disjunctivist position represented by McDowell? Let me suggest that Philonous's reply to Hylas's objection may suggest a positive answer to this question, as it permits the claim that, on Berkeley's account, it is not the phenomenology of experience alone that ultimately matters when it comes to distinguishing between veridical and non-veridical perceptions. Rather, for the distinction to make sense, we must endorse the view that experience presents us with objects but it is up to us whether we consider the presentation veridical or not. Thus, Philonous's reply reads:

> He is not mistaken with regard to the ideas he actually perceives; but in the inferences he makes from his present perceptions. Thus in the case of the oar, what he immediately perceives by sight is certainly crooked […]. But if he thence conclude, that upon taking the oar out of the water he shall perceive the same crookedness; or that it would affect his touch, as crooked things are wont to do: in that he is mistaken. […] But his mistake lies not in what he perceives immediately and at present […] but in the wrong judgment he makes concerning the ideas he apprehends to be connected with those immediately perceived: or concerning the ideas that, from what he perceives at present, he imagines would be perceived in other circumstances[51].

Since the disjunctivists claim that perception guarantees direct access to what is perceived – a view that Tom Stoneham has called the "simplest model of perception", in which perception consists in no more than a relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object[52] – they have to provide an account of perceptual experience in which this access becomes occasionally frustrated or distorted, resulting in misperception. As one can see from the above quotation, for Berkeley, as much as for the disjunctive theorists of perception, it is "the subject's response to [an] experience"[53] that

[51] G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 188–189.

[52] See: T. Stoneham, *Berkeley's World: An Examination of the Three Dialogues*, Oxford 2002.

[53] This view is advocated by Bill Brewer. Quoted in: A.D. Smith, *Disjunctivism and Illusion*, *op. cit.*, p. 391. The whole piece related to the current discussion reads: "The key

would account for perceptual failures. Underlying such faulty responses can be cognitive deficiencies on the part of the subject, for example her inability to distinguish, in some circumstances, two similarly looking objects from one another; or, as in Berkeley's example, the subject's inability to integrate her perceptions into a broader picture of the world involving knowledge of regularities in nature, or laws of physics, e.g. concerning refraction. Besides, when uninformed, one can occasionally succumb to being misled by objects, as is the case when one takes a white piece of chalk, seen in red light, for a red object.

Concluding Remarks

I have been trying to show that we can find some relevant similarities between Berkeley and McDowell in the area of their accounts of perceptual experience. Since it can be shown that general ideas (notions) are ways of structuring the content of experience, and since perceptual errors can be attributed to the interpreting activity of the mind, rather than to the phenomenological properties of experience (ideas), it turns out – perhaps quite surprisingly – that there is more in common between Berkeley and the philosophical tradition that tries to defy the "Myth of the Given", and that is here represented by McDowell, than one may think at first to be the case.

I shall conclude with a general remark on the distinction between the content and the object of experience. In the case of McDowell, conflating content and object may be conducive to idealism, a corollary unwelcome for the author of *Mind and World*. In the case of Berkeley, it is far from clear whether the distinction between content and object can be applied at all. But if, as Winkler noticed, "our interpreting minds make their own contribution to content"[54] – and this involves the employment of concepts in the mind's dealing with its objects – concepts, as picking out only aspects (or parts) of objects, or as their modes of presentation or senses, could then potentially prevent the mind from its direct acquaintance with the world. As a result, we may end up with a representative theory of perception, or what Brewer

> insight here again has something of a Berkeleyan pedigree […]. The intuitive idea is that, in perceptual experience, a person is simply presented with the actual constituents of the physical world themselves. Any errors in her world-view which result are products of the subject's responses to this experience, however automatic, natural or understandable in retrospect these responses may be. Error, strictly speaking, given how the world actually is, is never an essential feature of experience itself". B. Brewer, *Perception and Content*, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4801/43b869cef22c63fd0e920bf4526aa2c8a4bb.pdf, p. 9 (3.08.2018; in this article, I refer to the online version of the text).

[54] For references, see footnotes 45 and 46 above.

has called a "content view", which "trades direct openness to the elements of physical reality themselves, for some intellectual act of classification or categorization"[55], a form of idealism that both Berkeley and McDowell would be far from eager to endorse.

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[55] B. Brewer, *Perception and Content*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.