

McDowell on Reasons, Externalism and Scepticism

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Introduction

At the very least, externalists about content will accept something like the following claim:

(CE) The content of at least some of an agent's mental states is determined, at least in part, by facts concerning that agent's environment.

This formulation of content externalism is very weak, in that most content externalists will want to be more robust—and, of course, more specific—in their construal of the role that environmental factors can play in determining the content of mental states, and will typically take environmental factors to be relevant to the determination of the content of just about *any* mental state. Nevertheless, the virtue of (CE) is that it highlights just what, at root, is being denied by content externalists, and this is the content internalist idea that the content of an agent's mental state is purely determined by non-environmental facts—that is, by facts that are only concerned with what is beneath the skin of the agent. As Hilary Putnam might have expressed the point (but didn't), content just ain't in the head.

Content externalism, if true, is clearly a thesis of vital philosophical importance. Moreover, one would expect content externalism to have *some* anti-sceptical ramifications. In particular, if content is at least sometimes determined, in part, by environmental factors, then it follows that insofar as we have mental states with 'externally' determined contents in this way then there must be an external world. Scepticism about whether there is such an external world is thus met.¹

The more substantive issue, however, is whether content externalism is able to meet the sceptical challenge regarding whether it is possible for us to have *widespread knowledge* about the external world.² Clearly it will have some anti-sceptical import in this regard. For example, if content is at least sometimes determined, in part, by environmental factors, then this will impose a constraint on acceptable forms of sceptical argument of this type by restricting the kinds of sceptical hypotheses that the sceptic can use in such an argument (we will consider two examples in a moment). Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that whatever construal one might endorse of content externalism, it will inevitably lack the resources needed to offer a full resolution of the radical sceptical problem. That is, that whilst content externalist theses might be able to rule-out *a priori*

certain types of radical sceptical hypotheses—and thus certain types of sceptical argument which depend on those hypotheses—it won't be able to rule-out *a priori* all sceptical hypotheses, and thus all sceptical arguments. Accordingly, one cannot answer the sceptical problem by adducing content externalism alone.

For example, Donald Davidson has presented a version of content externalism which licenses the conclusion that 'belief is in its nature veridical' (1986: 314), such that on any plausible interpretation of our beliefs they come out as being mostly true. Clearly, this particular version of content externalism has *some* anti-sceptical consequences, in that if it is true then it rules-out *a priori* any sceptical hypothesis which entails that most of our beliefs are false. Nevertheless, it does not dispose of all radical sceptical arguments. In particular, it is consistent with a sceptical argument that allows widespread truth in one's beliefs but denies that such beliefs meet the relevant epistemic rubric that would suffice to make them instances of knowledge. After all, the sceptic's arguments are focussed on denying us *knowledge*, and whilst denying that our beliefs are mostly true is one way of achieving this, it is not the only way.³

Similarly, even if one agrees with Putnam (1981: chapter 1) that it is a consequence of his content externalism that 'We are brains in a vat' is necessarily false, this only works on some very specific renderings of the brain-in-a-vat (BIV) sceptical hypothesis, such as (for Putnam) where the agent has always been envatted and her vat-experiences are generated by supercomputers. Understand this hypothesis in a different way—such that the agent has only just been envatted, and it is neuroscientists who are generating her experiences (which is, in any case, the usual understanding of the BIV sceptical hypothesis)—and the anti-sceptical appeal of this form of content externalism is neutralised.⁴

So it seems that meeting the sceptical problem behoves us to do more than offer a content externalist account. And, indeed, this is to be expected. Scepticism is primarily an epistemological problem and it would be odd if there were any way to resolve this difficulty that by-passed serious epistemological analysis of the sceptical argument. Thus, the failure of content externalism to wholly dissolve the sceptical problem simply returns us to the *status quo* of regarding any resolution of the sceptical challenge as being primarily a task for epistemology.

Whilst this has been the conventional wisdom in much of the recent literature on this topic, there has been one prominent dissenting voice. In a series of publications, John McDowell has argued that the key to the sceptical problem is an internalist view of content such that, with this internalist thesis rejected and his own externalist account put in its place, the sceptical problem disappears. It is this account of the relationship between content externalism and scepticism that I take issue with here.⁵

1. McDowell on Content Externalism and Scepticism

Superficially, the epistemological position that McDowell develops is very orthodox, in that he grants that knowledge involves an appropriate 'standing in

the space of reasons' (McDowell 1995: 877), a claim that he attributes to Wilfrid Sellars. In doing so, McDowell distances himself from proponents of epistemological externalism, such as reliabilists, who allow that agents can have knowledge simply in virtue of their beliefs standing in a certain kind of relationship with the facts, and thus without having a belief that has a standing in the space of reasons at all. Nevertheless, this superficial orthodoxy masks an underlying radicalism because McDowell's ultimate aim is to re-configure how we should understand the space of reasons. In particular, his claim is that the sceptical problem results from a certain philosophical picture which results in the 'interiorization of the space of reasons' and which generates a 'withdrawal from the external world' (*ibid.*). Once this withdrawal is effected, it then becomes a mystery how we are ever to have knowledge of that external world, just as the sceptic claims. The trick is thus to resist this 'interiorization' of the space of reasons in the first place.

According to McDowell, we are led to this interiorization of the space of reasons by holding that the visual appearance which gives rise to a perceptual belief could be present even though the belief in question is false. It might be claimed, for example, that one can believe that one is currently seeing a chair before one on the basis of the visual appearance of a chair, and yet this is consistent with the chair in fact being absent and the visual presentation in question being the result of an illusion. It is this train of thought which generates what McDowell (1982: 472) calls a 'highest common factor' (HCF) conception of perceptual experience which treats the content of perceptual experience as being what is common to the veridical case of perception and its non-veridical analogues. Accordingly, we conclude that the reasons which support our perceptual beliefs are always 'internal' in the sense that they are never able to entail the truth of what is believed. That is, what is given to us in perception that can count as a reason for believing that the chair is there is only what would have been there anyhow even if we were the victims of a perceptual illusion and the chair was in fact absent.

On this picture there are two epistemically distinct 'realms' which force a bifurcation in our epistemology. On the one hand, there is the 'inner' realm of ideas that bears no essential connection to the external world and from which our reasons for belief are forged. On the other, there is the 'outer' realm of external reality, knowledge of which can only be gained via a shaky inference from our 'inner' reasons. As a result, it is no surprise that the sceptical problem has the dialectical grip that it does, since our knowledge of the external world is now *of its nature* problematized. The theory of knowledge that this picture generates is what McDowell refers to as a 'hybrid' account. Knowing cannot, on this view, be itself an appropriate standing in the space of reasons, but must instead be a combination of an 'inner' justification, which is an appropriate standing in the space of reasons, and an 'outer' fact, which is the fact known. Moreover, McDowell also notes the role that luck plays on this account. Standardly, the function of the justification condition has been to eliminate luck in one's knowledge by distinguishing cases of genuine knowledge from cases of lucky

true beliefs. Nevertheless, on the HCF picture the luck remains, in that the knowing agent may have a counterpart who is being deceived (and so lacks knowledge) and yet their respective standings in the space of reasons are the same. Thus, no matter what the epistemic pedigree of one's beliefs might be in this regard, this will not suffice to eliminate the role of luck in one's knowledge—the world will always be required to 'co-operate'.

McDowell thinks that it is this HCF conception of perceptual experience, and the interiorization of reasons that it generates, that should be rejected. Moreover, he claims that 'without the "highest common factor" conception of experience [...] the traditional problems [including scepticism] lapse' (McDowell 1982: 479). In its place McDowell offers an alternative conception of perceptual experience such that veridical perceptual experience has a different content to its non-veridical analogue. He writes:

But suppose we say—not at all unnaturally—that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, we are to insist that the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer. (McDowell 1982: 472)

The content of the perceptual experience in the veridical case is thus different from the content of the analogue experience in the non-veridical case. Since McDowell holds that all experience is conceptual,⁶ we thus have a robust form of content externalism being proposed here, in that the content of one's (conceptualised) perceptual experience is essentially dependent upon facts about one's environment. In particular, 'outer' facts about whether one's perceptual experience is veridical will determine the content of one's experience.

McDowell thinks that with this alternative content externalist account of perceptual experience in play we can evade the problems posed by the hybrid conception of knowledge, with its open invitation to scepticism. Knowledge is now an appropriate standing in the space of reasons in the full sense of it being *only* a standing in the space of reasons—there is no need to supplement such a standing with a truth condition. More specifically, the reasons that one has to support one's perceptual belief can be *factive* reasons regarding what one perceives. That I see a chair before me can be, for example, my reason for believing that there is a chair before me, where *seeing that P* is factive in the sense that it entails *P*. And in appropriate circumstances—in particular, in cases where one's perceptual experience is veridical—this can suffice for knowledge.

According to McDowell, this account of perceptual knowledge deals with the sceptical problem by denying a crucial element in the sceptical argument, which is that the reasons that we can offer in favour of our perceptual beliefs are only

those reasons which we would have been able to cite anyway even if the beliefs in question were false. On the alternative picture that McDowell recommends, there is no epistemic gulf between our reasons for belief in the 'good' (i.e., non-deceived) cases and the elements of the external world that those beliefs are about. In the good cases, and *contra* the sceptic, that I see objects in the 'external' world can constitute good factive reasons for having the relevant perceptual beliefs, and thus I am able to have knowledge of what I believe. Accordingly, McDowell holds that he is able to explain how we can have widespread knowledge about the external world.

Finally, we need to comment on the oddly qualified way in which McDowell expresses his anti-sceptical account. In the quotation cited above, for example, he does not say that the traditional epistemological problems, such as the sceptical problem, are *answered* on his view, but only that they 'lapse'. Similarly, elsewhere he writes that the

[...] considerations I have offered suggest a way to respond to scepticism about, for instance, perceptual knowledge; the thing to do is not to answer the skeptic's challenges, but to diagnose their seeming urgency as deriving from a misguided interiorization of reason. (McDowell 1995: 890)

In general, McDowell's strategy is explicitly *not* to argue with the sceptic on her own terms, but rather to recommend a different philosophical picture that lacks the sceptical consequences of the traditional picture. It is in this sense that McDowell is often referred to as a quietist.⁷

Presumably (McDowell is never altogether clear on this issue), the distinction that he has in mind here concerns whether we intend our anti-sceptical account to play a dialectical role in an (imagined) debate with the sceptic. Those offering a more robust response to scepticism would on this view be understood as presenting arguments which directly counter the sceptic's opposing arguments, with the net result that what is on offer are grounds for preferring the anti-sceptical account over the sceptical rival. The McDowellian anti-sceptical strategy, in contrast, appears to be stripped of this dialectical role, in that it merely presents a compelling way of looking at the issues so that the presuppositions which give rise to the sceptical problem are removed, but which does not pretend to offer independent grounds which would justify our accepting the scepticism-hostile philosophical picture over its scepticism-friendly alternative. As McDowell expresses the matter at one point, his anti-sceptical argument is 'not well cast as an *answer* to skeptical challenges; it is more like a justification of a refusal to bother with them' (McDowell 1995: 888).

In what follows we will simply grant McDowell this weakened understanding of what is required of his response to the sceptic. Accordingly, all McDowell's anti-sceptical strategy needs to do to be successful is to show that the content externalist account that he offers, unlike the opposing content internalist account, does not generate the sceptical problem regarding our knowledge of the external

world. As we will see, even on this restricted understanding of what counts as a successful anti-sceptical strategy, McDowell's account still fails to pass the test.

2. McDowell *versus* Wittgenstein on the Structure of Reasons

What is central to the McDowellian anti-sceptical picture is the idea that once we have rejected the content internalist presuppositions of traditional epistemological inquiry then we can allow for the factivity of reasons and, in so doing, evade the sceptical problem. One of the key points in favour of McDowell's claim that reasons can be factive is the linguistic evidence that, outside of 'philosophical' conversational contexts at any rate, we do indeed adduce factive reasons in favour of our beliefs. If asked why I think the chair is in the room it seems perfectly acceptable to say that I can see that it is there, and, of course, seeing is factive in that I can only see that there is a chair before me provided that it is true that there is a chair before me. This linguistic data plays in McDowell's favour because it suggests that, just as he alleges, it is only when we are in the grip of a faulty philosophical picture that we find it necessary to 'revise' our intuitive—and partly factive—understanding of reasons and replace it with a non-factive construal.

This is only so, however, provided that we are entitled to take our everyday practice of offering factive reasons at face-value, and I think that there are grounds for doubt in this respect. The first thing to note in this regard is that whilst it is clearly *sometimes* acceptable to offer factive reasons in favour of one's beliefs, there are also cases where offering such factive reasons would be problematic. The obvious example in this respect is the sceptical case. Consider the following argument from ignorance which has become the standard template sceptical argument in the recent literature, where the BIV hypothesis is construed in such a way that content externalism of the Putnamian kind is irrelevant, and 'everyday propositions' are understood as those propositions which we typically take ourselves to know:⁸

- (P1) I cannot know that I am not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis (such as the BIV hypothesis).
- (P2) If I do not know that I am not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, then I do not know any one of a wide range of everyday propositions which I know to be incompatible with the sceptical hypothesis in question.
- (C) I cannot know any one of a wide range of everyday propositions.

For example, it seems that I cannot know that I am not a BIV and thus, since I know that if I were sitting here now then I wouldn't be a BIV (because BIVs don't *sit* anywhere), it appears to follow that I cannot know that I am currently seated.

McDowell's rhetoric about offering a justification for not bothering with sceptical challenges might seem to suggest that he thinks the best way to respond

to this argument is to ignore it. But of course, McDowell cannot *simply* ignore such an argument because, as we noted above, it is incumbent upon his content externalist anti-sceptical account that it at least show that it doesn't, unlike the traditional content internalist account, generate the sceptical problem. Indeed, if one were entitled to *simply* ignore sceptical challenges then there would be no need to adduce McDowell's content externalism in order to meet the problem since one could do *that* within the traditional content internalist picture (this is, presumably, why McDowell talks of offering a *justification* for not bothering with sceptical arguments). It is thus necessary that McDowell explains just how his alternative account of content, and thus of reasons, is able to avoid this sceptical argument, even if he is not further able to present us with additional independent grounds for preferring his alternative account over the rival content internalist thesis that does lead to scepticism.

One can put this point into sharper relief by noting that the sceptical argument just considered is, properly understood, a *paradox*, in that it is a series of apparently uncontroversial premises which, taken independently, we would all be inclined to assent to, but which, taken collectively, entail an unacceptable conclusion. It is incumbent upon *any* philosophical proposal that it does not generate paradoxes in this way, and this alone places a burden on McDowell to explain just how his thesis avoids the sceptical conclusion by highlighting which particular premise is being denied on his view. So whilst one might concede that a legitimate response to the sceptic need not offer supporting grounds which support the anti-sceptical thesis over its sceptical alternative, this does not preclude the proponent of such a response to scepticism from showing that the philosophical picture that they put forward does not generate the sceptical paradox. More precisely, whilst McDowell may not be attempting to advance grounds for rejecting one of the premises of the above argument which are more persuasive than the grounds the sceptic offers in favour of that premise, he had better at least be presenting a philosophical picture which does not have as a consequence one of the problematic premises.⁹

McDowell seems to be aware of this requirement on his anti-sceptical thesis, and his response to the sceptical argument, so formulated, is to claim (*contra* P1) that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all, and indeed know them on the basis of our knowledge of everyday propositions. For example, consider McDowell's response to this formulation of the sceptical argument where it is the sceptical hypothesis that one might be dreaming that is at issue. He begins by noting an objection that Crispin Wright (1985: 443–4) makes to his anti-sceptical view:

Wright's [...] reservation is that "'lifting" the veil of perception' has no obvious bearing on a style of skeptical argument exemplified by the attempt to undermine perceptual knowledge, or even perceptually grounded reasonable belief, on the basis that [...] one lacks sufficient reason to believe that one is not dreaming. (McDowell 1995: 888)

Here is how McDowell responds:

But I should have thought the bearing was quite obvious. Only if the veil is supposed to be in place can it seem that one would need to establish [...] that one is not dreaming *before* one can be entitled to take one's apparent perceptions at face value. Once the veil is lifted, things can be the other way round; one's good reason to believe that one is not dreaming [...] can reside in the knowledge of one's environment that one's senses are yielding one—something that does not happen when one is dreaming. (*Ibid.*)¹⁰

So one can know that one is not dreaming—and thus, by implication, the denial of any sceptical hypothesis, such as the BIV hypothesis—in virtue of one's knowledge of the everyday propositions that make up one's knowledge of one's environment.

Let us grant to McDowell that one can, ordinarily at least, properly offer factive reasons in favour of one's perceptual beliefs and that, as a result (and provided that one is as a matter of fact not subject to a deception), one can have knowledge of what one believes in this respect. In so doing one can concede that one can, for instance, know that there is a chair in the room because one sees that it is there without having to first establish that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, such as the dreaming hypothesis. The issue then solely rests on whether one can subsequently use such knowledge in order to establish that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis. It is this last claim that is problematic. Whilst we do indeed have a practice of sometimes understanding the reasons that we offer in favour of our ordinary perceptual beliefs as factive, this doesn't extend to our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Instead, it seems altogether *inappropriate* to try to support one's beliefs about the denials of sceptical hypotheses by citing factive reasons about what, for example, one sees in one's environment. Indeed, consider G. E. Moore's (1939) famous anti-sceptical assertions in this respect which mirror the line that McDowell takes, where he claimed to know that he had two hands (because he could see them), and thus that there was an external world. It is hard to find anyone who thinks that Moore's assertions were coherent in this regard.¹¹

Indeed, Moore's most trenchant critic in this respect is Wittgenstein, and the critique that Wittgenstein applies to Moore's remarks in his final notebooks (published as *On Certainty*) can be applied to McDowell's more recent anti-sceptical account. Wittgenstein is happy to grant our practice of sometimes offering factive reasons in favour of our beliefs, but he argues that this practice is constrained by the general principle that what counts as a reason for what depends upon what is taken to be more certain:

My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.

That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (Wittgenstein 1969: §250)

So whilst one could ordinarily cite what one sees as a factive reason for holding one's perceptual belief—such as when someone supports their belief that there is a chair before them by saying that they can see it there—this is only permissible because the reason in question is more certain than the belief that it is a reason for. In the case of those beliefs that are as certain as any, however, such as Moore's belief that he has two hands, nothing could coherently be cited as a reason for holding it because there is no reason that could be offered that is more certain than this belief which could play the required supporting role. Wittgenstein writes:

If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (Wittgenstein 1969: §125)

This last remark is crucial. The demand that the reasons we offer in favour of a belief be more certain than the belief at issue entails that there must be some beliefs that stand fast without the agent being in a position to coherently offer reasons in support of these beliefs. Wittgenstein referred to such framework certainties as 'hinges' (amongst other things), and argued that the acceptance of such a framework of hinges was constitutive of all contexts in which reasons are cited:

[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (Wittgenstein 1969: §§341–3)¹²

Moore's initial mistake is therefore to take our practice of sometimes offering factive reasons in favour of our perceptual beliefs and extend it to a belief which one cannot coherently regard as supported by reasons, factive or otherwise.

This is not Moore's only mistake, however, for Wittgenstein further argues that our hinge beliefs are only able to serve this 'framework' role provided they embody a conception of our relationship to the world which is already anti-sceptical, since it is only against a backdrop of certainties of this general sort that a reason can count in favour of anything. If, in normal circumstances, it cannot be taken as given that one has two hands, then nothing can serve as a supporting reason. For if what is most certain in that context is up for doubt then *everything* is now open to question (as Wittgenstein (1969: §613) puts it, a doubt about a hinge would 'drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos'). Indeed, given that

supporting reasons need to be more certain than what they are reasons for, it follows that in such circumstances no reason could ever, even in principle, be offered in response to this doubt. It is in this sense that a doubt about whether or not one has hands is akin to a doubt about whether or not one is a BIV, since in both cases it is a general conception of one's relationship to the world—a conception which is needed if one is to make sense of the practice of offering reasons—that is being called into doubt. This is why Moore's assertion that he knows that he has two hands because he can see them strikes us as so odd. We do not normally make such assertions because the very act of offering reasons presupposes an anti-sceptical framework of certainties of which the belief that Moore is supporting with reasons is part. Accordingly, our practice of offering factive reasons in favour of our beliefs cannot be put into service against the sceptic as Moore (and McDowell) proposes since such a practice already (ungroundedly) presupposes the very anti-sceptical claims that are in dispute.

Of course, there are going to be *abnormal* circumstances in which one's belief that one has two hands will not form part of the framework of certainties. Wright (1985) gives the example of someone stumbling, dazed, from the wreckage of a car accident and declaring (to the emergency services operator, for example) that she knows that she still has two hands because she can see them. Here the presentation of a factive reason is only legitimate because the belief that one has two hands is no longer performing a framework role, and thus we have an example in which one is more certain about the reason at issue (what one sees) than of what it is a reason for.

In general, Wittgenstein maintains that the set of 'hinge' beliefs which stands fast can vary, to some extent, from context to context.¹³ Accordingly, what might count as a suitable reason to offer in support of a belief in one context might be entirely unsuitable in another context specifically because the belief in question now enjoys a 'hinge' status. This means that reasons are not always 'transferable' across contexts. In normal circumstances, that I see a chair before me can act as a reason for believing that there is a chair in front of me. Nevertheless, in circumstances in which a serious doubt has been raised about the reliability (in the relevant conditions) of one's eyesight it would be odd to continue citing such a reason in favour of one's belief (indeed, in these circumstances one might be more certain that there is a chair in front of one than that one sees this chair, perhaps because one was holding the chair all along). And what goes for contexts in which serious doubts are raised about one's eyesight goes for contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are raised and taken seriously. In these contexts it would be strange to offer what one sees as a reason for holding a perception-based belief, since now what one sees lacks the certainty which it needs if it is to play the required foundational role.¹⁴

Moore chooses the example of one's putative knowledge that one has two hands precisely because it is as certain as anything in normal circumstances, and tries to draw anti-sceptical conclusions from this knowledge. Wittgenstein's critique presents Moore with a dilemma, however. Either Moore really is in normal circumstances, in which case he is not in a position to coherently offer

reasons, factive or otherwise, in favour of his belief in this proposition; or else he is not in such normal circumstances, in which case there will be situations in which he can coherently offer factive reasons in favour of his belief, but none where this belief has the kind of status in that context that a claim to know it will carry any anti-sceptical implications. In order for such implications to be drawn the reasons would have to be transferable from this context where the framework was not at issue to a context where it was, but then it would no longer be legitimate to cite the supporting reasons in question.

This point isn't confined to claims about whether or not one has hands—i.e., claims which involve hinge propositions—since the point here about the impotence of one's factive reasons when put to anti-sceptical use is perfectly general. It might be entirely legitimate to cite factive reasons about what one sees in favour of one's non-hinge belief that, for example, the door in one's office (on Earth) has been left open, but no sceptic would be troubled by any subsequent inferential move to, say, the claim that one is therefore not a BIV on Alpha Centauri. Indeed, part of the Wittgensteinian critique of Moore in this respect is that no-one would even *try* to draw anti-sceptical morals from the factive reasons that one can cite in favour of non-hinge beliefs in this way. The only reason why Moore's anti-sceptical strategy has any semblance of plausibility is because of the special role that a proposition like 'I have two hands' plays in one's epistemic practices.¹⁵

We can illustrate this general point with an example that Wittgenstein employs in *On Certainty* (see, e.g., §§182–92). In the context of an historical inquiry I can legitimately offer reasons in favour of my (non-hinge) beliefs in historical matters, such as concerning Napoleon's famous battle at Austerlitz. Some of these reasons will be factive in the relevant anti-sceptical respect in that they will entail that the universe did not undetectably come into existence in the last few minutes replete with the traces of a distant ancestry. Crucially, however, the factive anti-sceptical reasons that I can legitimately adduce in historical contexts of inquiry cannot be transferred to a philosophical context where the truth or otherwise of this sceptical hypothesis is at issue. And, indeed, this is entirely in accordance with intuition. Historians present reasons which support specific beliefs about past events, but they do not thereby offer grounds for thinking that there *is* a past in the first place, even though there can only be specific past events provided there is a past, and even though some of the reasons that they offer in favour of particular historical claims will entail that there is a past.

The Wittgensteinian account of reasons has dramatic implications for any Moorean response to the sceptic, including that put forward by McDowell. For whilst Wittgenstein grants that one can offer factive reasons in favour of one's beliefs, the manner in which he allows this deprives such reasons of having any anti-sceptical force. In ordinary contexts I can legitimately offer reasons regarding what I see in support of my beliefs about an external world, and such reasons can entail facts about that world. Nevertheless, this does not mean that one can respond to the sceptic with such factive reasons, either directly by offering factive reasons in support of one's beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses, or

indirectly by offering factive reasons in support of one's beliefs in other propositions which entail the denials of sceptical hypotheses. This is because I am only able to coherently offer such reasons because in ordinary contexts one is (groundlessly) taking a framework of belief for granted which already excludes the truth of sceptical scenarios.¹⁶ Thus, *contra* Moore (and hence McDowell), Wittgenstein reveals how what underlies the factivity of our reason-giving practices is something congenial, rather than hostile, to scepticism. As he puts it at one point, 'the difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing' (Wittgenstein 1969: §166).¹⁷

McDowell is therefore in a bind. As we saw above, it is incumbent on him to at least show how his content externalist thesis and associated conception of reasons does not generate the sceptical paradox, and this means that it must be a consequence of this thesis that he is able to reject one of the premises of the sceptical argument formulated above. Crucially, however, the very manner in which he tries to reject a premise of this sceptical argument reveals just what is implausible about the strategy that he advances. In particular, what we have seen is that the account of reasons which he claims is a consequence of his content externalism is unable to serve the anti-sceptical role that he sets out for it. Thus, there is no plausible route from the McDowellian account of content externalism to a general response to scepticism about our knowledge of the external world.¹⁸

Of course, McDowell could retreat at this point to an even weaker conception of what is required by an anti-sceptical proposal and simply claim that we just shouldn't take sceptical hypotheses seriously in the first place. But note that if this is the line that McDowell wishes to take then the conclusion we have just drawn from the previous discussion that his content externalism does not hold within it the resources to meet the sceptical problem is even more secure. After all, if one is simply entitled to disregard sceptical hypotheses then one could do that on *any* philosophical picture, even on the HCF conception of perceptual experience that McDowell rejects. Indeed, more specifically, if reasons do not play the anti-sceptical role that McDowell sets out for them (and it seems that they do not), then Wright's complaint was correct after all. The arguments regarding the need to lift the 'veil of perception' and offer a content externalism which allows us to offer factive reasons in favour of our beliefs have no obvious bearing on the sceptical problem at all.¹⁹

3. Scepticism and Epistemic Luck

The anti-sceptical impotence of the McDowellian account is further highlighted by McDowell's remarks on epistemic luck. At root, the sceptical worry relates to how, since we cannot distinguish between veridical cases of perception and their sceptical counterparts, our perceptual 'knowledge' is inevitably subject to luck and thus not genuinely knowledge at all. More specifically, the issue about epistemic luck relates to the *truth* of the belief in question, the concern being that the sceptical challenge highlights how even in the best case it is still to a

substantive degree a matter of luck that one's belief is true given the fact that one cannot rule-out indistinguishable sceptical scenarios in which one's belief is false.²⁰ In terms of the sceptical argument formulated above, the challenge thus consists of showing how we could possibly have knowledge of the wide class of 'everyday' propositions which we take ourselves to know given that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. The task is therefore to offer an epistemology which can explain how our knowledge is, *contra* the sceptic, in the relevant sense 'luck-free'.

According to McDowell, it is this conception of the relationship between knowledge and luck that acts as a spur to adopting the hybrid account of knowledge because it leads philosophers to think of knowledge as a combination of the 'internal', which is immune to luck, and the 'external', which isn't:

The aim is to picture reason as having a proper province in which it can be immune to the effects of luck [...]. The idea is that reason can ensure that we have only acceptable standings in the space of reasons, without being indebted to the world for favours received; if we exercise reason properly, we cannot arrive at defective standings in the space of reasons, in a way that could only be explained in terms of the world's unkindness. The upshot of this interiorization is that knowledge of the external world cannot be completely constituted by standings in the space of reasons. (McDowell 1995: 885)

Nevertheless, as we noted in §1, to endorse the hybrid conception of knowledge is still to allow luck a role in one's knowledge, since on this view two counterpart agents could have beliefs that have exactly the same standing in the space of reasons and yet, because of the non-factivity of reasons, one of the agents is in the 'good' non-deceived case whilst her counterpart is in the 'bad' deceived case. Thus:

The hybrid view concedes that [...] knowledge is partly a matter of luck in the relevant sense, something outside the control of reason; the hope is that this admission of luck is tolerable, because it comes only after we have credited reason with full control over whether one's standings in the space of reason are satisfactory. (*Ibid.*)

So despite the headline claim to be offering an epistemology that is luck-free (in the relevant sense), on the hybrid view luck is returned to the picture via the back door, as it were, and thus the tension with scepticism re-emerges. No matter what the standing of my beliefs in the space of reasons, and even if those beliefs happen to be true, this is consistent with the truth of a sceptical scenario and thus the sceptical problem is not evaded at all. Since I cannot know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it follows that my putative 'knowledge' of the everyday propositions that I take myself to know remains essentially dependent upon a significant measure of epistemic luck regarding the truth of my beliefs and hence, the sceptic will argue, not *bona fide* knowledge at all.

According to McDowell, however, that the hybrid account is unable to fully extinguish the possibility that luck is substantively involved in one's acquisition of knowledge is not the source of the problem with the view. Rather, the failing in this regard is not recognising that there is *no* element of the epistemological realm that is immune to luck—that is, of not allowing the concession to luck to go far enough. McDowell writes:

It seems clear where our suspicions should attach themselves. [...] The hybrid view's concession to luck, tagged on to a picture of reason as self-sufficient within its own proper province, comes too late; the very idea of reason as having a sphere of operation within which it is capable of ensuring, without being beholden to the world, that one's postures are all right [...] has the look of a fantasy, something we spin to console ourselves for the palpable limits on our powers. (McDowell 1995: 886)

Removing this fantasy means, for McDowell, allowing luck to be all-pervasive in our epistemology:

To avoid fantasy, we would need to see our way to accepting that we cannot eliminate what the interiorized conception of reason conceives as a quite alien factor, the kindness of the world, as a contributor to our coming to occupy epistemically satisfactory standings in the space of reasons. [...] When someone enjoys such a position, that involves, if you like, a stroke of good fortune, a kindness from the world; even so, the position is, in its own right, a satisfactory standing in the space of reasons, not a composite in which such a standing is combined with a condition external to the space of reasons. (*Ibid.*)

For McDowell, knowledge is irredeemably lucky through-and-through (i.e., it is not just that one component of knowledge is prone to luck), though it is none the less knowledge because of this. More specifically, that one has knowledge does *not* entail that the truth of one's belief is not substantively due to luck.

What is odd about these remarks is that McDowell ends up allowing that luck plays essentially the same role in our acquisition of knowledge as it did on the hybrid conception, with only the terms of reference having changed in the interim. On the hybrid view one's knowledge is lucky because it demands co-operation from the world in the form of an external condition being met that the agent's reasons do not entail (such that it is still a matter of luck that one's belief is true). Similarly, on the McDowellian view knowledge is lucky because it demands co-operation from the world (i.e., it is still a matter of luck that one's belief is true), the only difference being that on the alternative conception of what constitutes a reason that McDowell offers such co-operation from the world is required at the level of rationality rather than at the non-rational level. The essential dependence upon luck is, however, the same. Accordingly, the sceptic's claim that our 'knowledge' of the external world is imbued with epistemic luck of

a problematic sort, and thus is not genuine knowledge at all, seems unaffected by the McDowellian account.

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the McDowellian account of reasons fails to have the anti-sceptical implications that McDowell intends it to have. For the factive reasons regarding what one sees to perform an anti-sceptical role they would need to yield something that non-factive reasons clearly do not—*viz.*, an epistemic entitlement for one's beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses. This is not possible, however, since these reasons only serve the role that they do in supporting our perceptual beliefs given the framework of hinge certainties which already includes the denials of sceptical hypotheses. In terms of the issue of epistemic luck, factive reasons could only serve an anti-sceptical role if they could be used to show how, in the best case at least, our knowledge was not subject, in any substantive way, to luck after all (i.e., that the truth of one's beliefs was not a matter of luck). But as McDowell admits in his discussion of epistemic luck, no such conclusion is in the offing. Knowledge is (in the relevant sense) irredeemably lucky, and this means that it is always subject to the (in part) undetectable co-operation of the world. Far from presenting us with an alternative philosophical picture by the lights of which the sceptical problem disappears, McDowell is in fact merely proposing a different account of our perceptual knowledge which is no less subject to the sceptical challenge.

McDowell might respond to this charge by arguing that his point is that we should simply accept that knowledge is compatible with a significant degree of epistemic luck regarding the truth of our beliefs, and just such a line does seem to be suggested by some of the remarks quoted above. Notice, however, that if this is what McDowell has in mind then he faces two fundamental problems. First, he needs to explain just what this concession amounts to given that, as we saw in the last section, it cannot plausibly be thought to amount to the claim that we are able to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses on the basis of our knowledge of everyday perception-based propositions. Second, and more fundamentally, even if McDowell is able to offer an explanation of how the compatibility of knowledge with luck of this sort can meet the sceptical problem which was not tantamount to this suspect anti-sceptical move, it would still remain that it is not his content externalism that is resolving the sceptical problem, which was the claim that he originally advertised. After all, the thesis that knowledge is compatible with epistemic luck regarding the truth of one's beliefs—a thesis that bears no obvious connection to content externalism—would, it seems, suffice to meet the sceptical problem by itself, regardless of whether one supplemented it with an externalist account of content and the associated theory of reasons.²¹ In particular, one does not need to reject the HCF thesis in order to make *this* move against the sceptic since one could perfectly well incorporate such an anti-sceptical claim into the hybrid account of knowledge that McDowell rejects (or at least McDowell has given us no reason for thinking otherwise). However one understands the McDowellian picture, then, it seems that his content externalism plays no essential role in his 'diagnosis' of scepticism.

4. Concluding Remarks

The headline news in McDowell's response to the sceptic was supposed to be that it shows us how content externalism can guide us through the sceptical predicament. Closer inspection of the small print reveals, however, that McDowell's content externalism is doing no anti-sceptical work at all. As we saw in §2, McDowell's account of reasons which he claims is a consequence of his content externalism is unable to serve any anti-sceptical purpose. Moreover, as we saw in §3, that this is so is unsurprising once one considers how McDowell allows luck to play essentially the same 'sceptical role in the acquisition of knowledge as the very philosophical picture that he opposes. Thus, despite the rhetoric, McDowell offers us no grounds for thinking that there is a route from content externalism to a one-size-fits-all response to external world scepticism.²²

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NOTES

¹ Although, of course, the issue then becomes whether we are able to know that we have those mental states which have externally individuated contents. In general, the question that content externalism raises is how we are to have any special epistemic access to our mental states where the content of these states is (at least in part) externally individuated. For some of the key discussions of this issue, see Davidson (1987), Burge (1988), McKinsey (1991), Brueckner (1992b), Brown (1995), Boghossian (1997), Davies (1998), Wright (2000) and Pritchard (2002a).

² Content externalism will probably have ramifications for other forms of scepticism as well, such as scepticism about other minds, but I will be focussing here on the specific sceptical issue of whether it is possible for us to have any widespread knowledge about the external world because this is the variety of scepticism that is most obviously affected by content externalism. Henceforth, when I talk about 'scepticism' I will have this formulation of external world scepticism in mind.

³ For more on the supposed anti-sceptical implications of the Davidsonian view in this regard, see Klein (1986) and Williams (1988–9).

⁴ For more on Putnam's BIV argument, and on the general anti-sceptical consequences of the content externalist approach that he and Davidson propose, see Brueckner (1992a), Christensen (1993), Warfield (1998) and Wright (1994). A very different possible epistemological consequence of content externalism—regarding whether or not it is consistent with epistemological internalism—is explored in Chase (2001), Vahid (2003) and Kallestrup & Pritchard (2004).

⁵ Critical appraisal of McDowell's response to the sceptic has been fairly limited, though for two interesting—and very recent—discussions of McDowell in this respect, see Macarthur (2003) and Greco (2004).

⁶ I will not be taking issue with this claim that McDowell makes. He has defended this thesis in a number of places, principally McDowell (1994b).

⁷ See, for example, Blackburn (1998: 157).

⁸ One finds the sceptical argument formulated in essentially this way in, for example, DeRose (1995), Sosa (1999), Vogel (1999) and Pritchard (2002d). For a survey of the recent literature on scepticism, see Pritchard (2002c).

⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee from the *European Journal of Philosophy* for pressing me on this point.

¹⁰ For a development of this line of thought, see McDowell (1986).

¹¹ It is important to distinguish the 'Moorean' response to scepticism that McDowell endorses from the related 'neo-Moorean' anti-sceptical thesis that has been proposed in the recent literature, for example by Sosa (1999) and Pritchard (2002d). There are a number of differences between the two views, but perhaps the most crucial difference as regards the present discussion is that neo-Mooreans typically grant that one cannot coherently offer reasons (factive or otherwise) in favour of one's 'external world' beliefs—in particular, one's beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses—in conversational contexts in which the problem of scepticism is at issue. In this sense, the neo-Moorean response to scepticism isn't *Moorean* at all.

¹² Although the 'hinge' metaphor is the dominant symbolism of *On Certainty*, it is accompanied by various other metaphors such as the following: that these propositions constitute the 'scaffolding' of our thoughts (Wittgenstein 1969: §211); that they form the 'foundations of our language-games' (Wittgenstein 1969: §§401–3); and also that they represent the implicit 'world-picture' from within which we inquire, the 'inherited background against which [*we*] distinguish between true and false' (Wittgenstein 1969: §§94–5). For some recent discussions of Wittgenstein's account of hinge propositions, see Pritchard (2001), Williams (2003; cf. Williams 1991) and Wright (2003).

¹³ Though the general anti-sceptical nature of this framework of certainties remains constant. This is, I take it, the point of Wittgenstein's 'river-bed' analogy (Wittgenstein 1969: §§96–9) which distinguishes between the movements of the waters on the river-bed (the ordinary empirical beliefs), the river-bed itself (the 'hinge' beliefs), and those beliefs that are sometimes part of the water and sometimes part of the river-bed (the shifting sands, as opposed to the 'hard rock', of the river-bed).

¹⁴ A contextualist thesis about reasons thus forms part of the overall Wittgensteinian critique of Moore, though it is worth noting that this type of contextualism is radically different from the kind of *semantic* contextualism that is currently popular in the literature, and which is primarily associated with the work of DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996) and Cohen (e.g., 2000). For more on the Wittgensteinian variety of contextualism, see Williams (1991). I have not the space to enumerate the differences between these two contextualist theses here. For further discussion of this contrast, see Pritchard (2002d: §§5–7; 2002e).

¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous referee from the *European Journal of Philosophy* for pressing me to be clearer on this point.

¹⁶ McDowell sometimes expresses his point by saying that we do not need to adduce a non-question-begging argument in order to cogently support our perceptual beliefs with reasons, where for an argument to be 'cogent' means something like 'rationally persuasive'. For example, he writes that

[...] someone who sees that things are a certain way, has an excellent reason for taking it that things are that way; the excellence comes out in the fact that from the premise that one sees that things are thus and so, it follows that things *are* thus and so. The epistemic positions themselves put their occupants in possession of reasons for their beliefs; those reasons do not need to be supplemented with less cogent arguments from non-question-beggingly available premises. (McDowell 1994a: 201)

So, for instance, whilst the inference from *I see that I have two hands* to *I have two hands* (where knowledge of the premise is meant to support knowledge of the conclusion) is clearly question-begging (since the truth of the conclusion is presupposed in the premise), McDowell argues that it is no less cogent for that. The present discussion grants McDowell this point, at least when the inference is made in appropriate (abnormal) circumstances, but contends that the cogency of such inferences is due to the fact that they take place against a backdrop of shared certainties which already presupposes the denials of the very sceptical hypotheses that would make such inferences questionable (and so lacking in cogency). Accordingly, whilst it grants the in principle cogency of these sorts of inferences, it takes issue with the supposed anti-sceptical implications of them. In particular, it takes issue with the subsequent inference that McDowell makes from *I have two hands* to, say, *I am not a (handless) BIV* (where, again, knowledge of the premise is meant to support knowledge of the conclusion). Whilst the former inference is question-begging in the trivial sense that it ungroundedly takes a framework of hinge beliefs as given, the latter inference is question-begging in the more specific sense that it attempts to adduce the conclusion of an inference which was only cogent because it took place relative to a background of hinge beliefs as a reason for believing one of the very ungrounded hinge beliefs that made the previous assertion permissible in the first place. On the view presented here, then, there is more than one way in which an inference can be question-begging, and the exact manner in which it is question-begging will determine whether or not the inference in question is cogent.

¹⁷ This is not to say, of course, that Wittgenstein was a sceptic, only that there is nothing in his account of reasons which would support an anti-sceptical thesis.

¹⁸ In recent work, Williamson (2000a; cf. Williamson 2000b) has put forward an externalist account of content that also (he claims) has the effect of neutralising the sceptical problem and which shares a number of key features of the McDowellian picture. In particular, like McDowell, Williamson argues that what epistemically supports one's beliefs in the 'good' (non-deceived) case as opposed to the indistinguishable 'bad' (deceived) case is not, *contra* the sceptic, the same. Despite this surface similarity between the two anti-sceptical views, however, the line of critique applied to McDowell here is not directly applicable to Williamson's argument because of how the crucial supporting notion for Williamson is not reasons but an epistemologically externalist notion of evidence as knowledge. Although I have not the space to pursue this point here, I think that the inapplicability of this critique of McDowell to Williamson's account reveals why any content externalist anti-sceptical thesis needs to be explicitly tied to an epistemologically externalist account of knowledge which does not accord reasons any essential role. I discuss the Williamsonian response to scepticism in Pritchard (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Interestingly, in a recent article McDowell notes, in passing, that there are certain affinities between his general position and the Wittgensteinian account of 'hinge' propositions in *On Certainty*. He remarks that his conviction that he is reliable—and hence authoritative—in his judgements about green objects should not be understood such

that the epistemic standing of his judgements in this regard inferentially depends on the epistemic standing of his belief in his reliability, as if they were the conclusions of an argument. Rather they have, he writes, 'a sort of status that Wittgenstein considers in *On Certainty*'. He continues that this conviction is 'held firm for me by my whole conception of the world with myself in touch with it, and not as the conclusion of an inference from some of that conception' (McDowell 2002: 26). These brief remarks are, I think, telling. For one thing, they imply that whilst McDowell might back-up his assertions about green objects by simply offering factive reasons about what he sees, he grants that this practice of offering reasons rests upon a background of certainties which serve a special role. Although McDowell doesn't spell this out, the further Wittgensteinian implication of this is clearly that the beliefs which make up this 'whole conception of the world and myself in touch with it' are not themselves supported by reasons since their standing fast is what allows the practice of offering reasons to have the cogency it does in the first place. Accordingly, one does not counter the sceptic with reasons at all, properly speaking, but merely with one's anti-sceptical convictions. McDowell was in this article responding to Brandom (1995), who was in turn responding to an earlier article by McDowell (1995).

²⁰ It is necessary to stipulate that it is such 'veritic' epistemic luck that is at issue in the sceptical challenge because there clearly are varieties of epistemic luck which are entirely compatible with knowledge possession, such as the luck that one happened to be in the right place at the right time to find out, say, who has been stealing the chocolate biscuits from the canteen. Although it may be in one sense 'lucky' that one gained this true belief, this type of luck does not in itself undermine the possibility of knowledge possession. Just so long as one acquired one's true belief in this respect in the right way, whilst it will be a matter of luck that one has this true belief, it won't be a matter of luck that this belief is true. In what follows when I talk of epistemic luck I will have this particular variety in mind. Similarly, I will understand McDowell's remarks on the problematic relationship between knowledge and luck to be concerned with this specific type of luck. I offer a taxonomy of the various kinds of epistemic luck—and highlight those varieties of luck that are epistemically problematic—in Pritchard (2004; cf. Pritchard 2003). I am grateful to an anonymous referee from the *European Journal of Philosophy* for pressing me on this point.

²¹ Presumably, such a view would meet the sceptical argument formulated above by denying the so-called 'closure' principle on which the second premise depends (essentially, this holds that if one knows a proposition, ϕ , and knows that ϕ entails a second proposition, ψ , then one also knows ψ). This principle was famously denied by Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981), neither of whom made appeal to content externalism in their arguments. For some of the key recent discussions of this anti-sceptical proposal, and of the status of the closure principle in general, see Vogel (1990), Hales (1995), Klein (1995) and Pritchard (2002b).

²² I am grateful to Michael Brady, John Greco, Michael Williams and, especially, Alan Millar for discussion on this, and related, topics. I am also indebted to The Leverhulme Trust for the award of a Special Research Fellowship which enabled me to conduct work in this area. Finally, thanks also go to an anonymous referee from the *European Journal of Philosophy* for a very helpful series of comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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