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Having Experience in View

On the Conceptual and Non-Conceptual Conditions for Viewing the World

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List of contributions

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N'y a-t-il rien de non-conceptuel dans l'expérience perceptive ? Lectures de la dernière philosophie de Putnam

Abstract: This historico-philosophical work aims to reconstruct Hilary Putnam's argumentation on the problem of the conceptuality of perceptual experience. The position Putnam took is not entirely clear: along exchanges with two important interlocutors, McDowell and Block, Putnam revised his arguments in favor of the conceptualism of experience to defend the existence of a non-conceptual phenomenal content within perceptual experience. First, we outline the requisites of conceptualism and the forms it can take. By conceptualism, we broadly mean the thesis that we can only represent the world through conceptual capacities (Brisart & Gauvry, 2017: 11). Thus, every perception engages our conceptual powers. This thesis has an epistemic interest: if we want perception to justify our knowledge claims and be assured of the existence of an external world that conditions the existence of veridical perceptions, it must be conceptual. But does this mean that the entire experience is conceptual? Putnam – *contra* McDowell – moderates the conceptualist thesis, employing two types of arguments, empirical and philosophical. The empirical argument (Jacobson & Putnam, 2016), which we dedicate the second part of this work to, argues that the results of empirical perception tests (change blindness, Landman experience, etc.) contradict McDowell's *a priori* arguments in favor of conceptualism. The philosophical argument – which we present in a third part, shows that experience is endowed with a non-conceptual content – also referred to as phenomenal, which does not undermine the idea that perception can play an epistemic role.

Keywords: Perception; Conceptualism; Non-conceptualism; Phenomenal Content; McDowell; Putnam; Block

Introduction

Qu'est-ce qui justifie d'adhérer à la thèse du conceptualisme de l'expérience perceptive ? C'est la question qui servira de fil rouge à ce présent travail. Par conceptualisme de la perception, nous entendons au sens large la thèse selon laquelle l'expérience de perception est informée par des concepts.

L'examen de cette question sera articulé autour d'un débat qu'ont eu Putnam et McDowell entre 2012 et 2016. Si, dans *Philosophy in an Age of Science* (2012), Putnam reconnaît sa dette envers McDowell en philosophie de l'esprit, il est cependant loin de partager toutes les thèses de ce dernier. Au rang des thèses qu'il a endossé avant de les critiquer, figure le conceptualisme de la perception. Contre McDowell, Putnam suit son étudiant Ned Block et défend l'idée qu'il pourrait y avoir quelque chose de *non-conceptuel* dans l'expérience perceptive (Jacobson/Putnam 2016).

Dans *Mind and World* (1994), McDowell défend le conceptualisme de la perception pour une raison épistémique : si l'on veut que nos expériences de perception puissent justifier nos croyances, alors le contenu de l'expérience doit être d'un même type que le contenu de nos attitudes propositionnelles, à savoir conceptuel. Cette thèse peut être lue comme une troisième voie pour échapper au mythe du donné, cherchant illusoirement à conférer au monde un pouvoir épistémique sur nos énoncés, et au cohérentisme de Davidson – pour qui seule une croyance peut justifier une croyance.

Néanmoins, qu'on ait de bonnes raisons de penser que l'expérience puisse jouer un rôle épistémique vis-à-vis de nos énoncés (c'est-à-dire que nous soyons *cognitivement motivés* par l'expérience à penser X et non que ne soyons seulement *causés* à penser X) n'implique ni que les raisons pour lesquelles nous défendons cette thèse soient valables, ni que la nature de l'expérience doive être réduite à son caractère épistémique.

C'est précisément sur ce dernier point que Putnam est en désaccord avec McDowell : s'il partage l'idée qu'une expérience de perception peut justifier une croyance, il refuse l'assimilation entière de l'expérience de perception à la conceptualité. Il défend, de concert avec Hilla Jacobson, que l'expérience n'est pas tout entière conceptualisée. Sa critique du conceptualisme, présentée dans un article co-écrit avec Jacobson, intitulé *Against Perceptual Conceptualism* (2016), est motivée par des raisons empiriques empruntées en partie à Ned Block, et permet de mettre en question le raisonnement *a priori* de McDowell. Elle nous semble d'autant plus importante qu'elle permet d'éclairer la dernière position que Putnam a adoptée en philosophie de la perception – exposée principalement

dans *Naturalism, Realism and Normativity* (2016) et que nous qualifions de conceptualisme partiel de la perception.

Nous rendrons d'abord compte des réquisits de la thèse du conceptualisme de l'expérience perceptive et des raisons pour lesquelles McDowell défend une telle approche dans *Mind and World* (1994) et *Avoiding the Myth of the Given* (2008) (I), avant d'exposer la critique empirique livrée par Putnam et Jacobson (II), qui justifie d'adhérer à ce que nous appellerons un *conceptualisme partiel* de l'expérience de perception, ou la dernière thèse que Putnam a défendue en philosophie de la perception. Que l'expérience de perception ne soit plus de part en part conceptuelle s'accompagne d'une approche phénoménologique qui implique de faire droit à un contenu phénoménal de l'expérience, aux côtés du contenu conceptuel nécessaire à l'épistémologie de la perception (III).

1. McDowell et le conceptualisme de la perception

1.1 Deux formes de conceptualisme

Si au sens large, le conceptualisme de la perception désigne la thèse selon laquelle notre perception est informée par des concepts (Brisart/Gauvry 2017), il convient de distinguer à la suite de Heck (2000), deux formes de conceptualisme, selon qu'il porte sur le contenu de la perception ou sur l'état perceptif. Heck propose de distinguer le *state-conceptualism* du *content-conceptualism* :

(1) Le *content-conceptualism* ou conceptualisme du contenu est une thèse qui vise à défendre qu'il y a, entre la perception et la croyance, un même type de contenu en jeu. Ce conceptualisme prend la forme d'un propositionnalisme : le contenu, identique dans la croyance et dans la perception, n'est rien d'autre que la forme propositionnelle à laquelle ces modalités mentales peuvent être rapportées – 'percevoir que X' dans un cas, 'croire que X' dans l'autre.

(2) Le *state-conceptualism* ou conceptualisme de l'état vise à montrer que ce qui rapproche l'état perceptif d'une attitude propositionnelle, ce n'est

> pas le 'contenu' mais le fait qu'un tel état dépende ou non de la possession de concepts (Brisart/Gauvry 2017 : 3). A cet égard, le *state-conceptualism* ne joue pas sur le terrain du propositionnalisme de la perception.

Cette distinction appelle deux remarques. D'abord, le *state-conceptualism* est moins engageant que le *content-conceptualism* puisqu'il n'implique pas d'accepter la nature propositionnelle de la perception. Mais d'un même mouvement, cet engagement moindre s'accompagne d'une forme de flou conceptuel puisque nous ne savons pas exactement en quoi consiste cette possession de concepts, si elle ne se manifeste pas de manière propositionnelle. Énoncer que le concept joue un rôle dans la perception, ce n'est guère se prononcer sur la manière dont il joue ce rôle.

Par conséquent, une critique du conceptualisme semble d'autant plus forte qu'elle porte la thèse la moins engageante épistémiquement, à savoir le *state-conceptualism* plutôt que le *content-conceptualism*. C'est tout l'intérêt de l'article que Putnam et Jacobson publient en 2016 : ces derniers proposent, sur le fondement d'arguments empiriques principalement empruntés à Block, une critique du conceptualisme dans sa forme la moins engageante, le *state-conceptualism* – que McDowell a adopté en 2008, après avoir défendu un *content-conceptualism* sur lequel il est revenu. Comme l'écrit Putnam dans une note de bas de page,

> It is worth noting that whereas in his earlier writings McDowell defends both content-conceptualism and state-conceptualism, in his later writings he defends only state-conceptualism. (Jacobson/Putnam 2016 : 22)

Compte-tenu de cette révision de sens accordé au conceptualisme, il convient de préciser en quels termes McDowell a défendu cette approche de la perception.

1.2. McDowell et le conceptualisme de la perception

La raison épistémique du conceptualisme

Si McDowell adopte le conceptualisme de la perception, c'est d'abord pour une raison épistémique. Compte tenu de l'empirisme minimal auquel il souscrit, McDowell défend que l'expérience joue un rôle fondamental dans l'élaboration de nos connaissances. Le conceptualisme de la perception peut être lu comme une réponse à la question de savoir à quelle condition l'expérience est susceptible de nous fournir des connaissances sur l'environnement qui nous entoure.

La nécessité d'une telle réponse vient de ce qu'il n'est pas sûr que la défense d'un réalisme au sens faible, c'est-à-dire de la thèse selon laquelle il existe un environnement extérieur à mon esprit, suffise pour attribuer à la perception ce rôle épistémique : ce qui se passe dans l'environnement peut certes causer nos sensations mais alors nos sensations sont aveugles puisqu'elles n'ont rien de conceptuel (Putnam, 1992). Nous voyons alors mal comment l'activité conceptuelle pourrait porter sur le monde si elle ne reçoit que des sensations aveugles. Ce serait en effet retomber dans les travers du mythe du donné de penser qu'un accès direct à l'environnement garantisse le rôle épistémique de nos perceptions. Que les sensations soient la cause de mes croyances n'implique pas qu'elles puissent justifier mes croyances. C'est donc pour échapper à cette difficulté que McDowell propose de concevoir la perception de façon conceptuelle, afin qu'elle puisse jouer un rôle épistémique et justifier les énoncés que nous formulons sur le monde.

L'évolution du conceptualisme de McDowell

Ce conceptualisme prend deux formes, respectivement exposées dans *Mind and World* (1994) et *Avoiding the Myth of the Given* (2008), que la distinction de Heck permet d'éclairer.

La première forme de conceptualisme défendue par McDowell en 1994 vise à identifier le contenu de l'expérience de perception avec un fait à propos du

monde. La condition de cette identification relève de la propositionnalité de l'expérience de perception – le *voir* étant alors toujours un *voir que*, impliquant que notre expérience soit de part en part conceptuelle.

Néanmoins, dans *Avoiding the Myth of the Given* (2008), McDowell révise son conceptualisme du contenu pour s'en tenir à un conceptualisme des états perceptifs. Cela lui permet d'échapper à la nécessité de la propositionnalité de la perception. Pour modérer son engagement conceptualiste, McDowell convoque une distinction d'obédience kantienne, entre le contenu propositionnel du jugement et le contenu intuitif de la perception. Cette distinction lui permet à la fois de tenir la perception à l'écart de toute propositionnalité et de conserver une forme de conceptualisme nécessaire à l'attribution d'un rôle épistémique à la perception. Il convient de remarquer que si McDowell conserve le terme de contenu, alors même qu'il ne souscrit plus au *content-conceptualism* dont nous avons exposé ci-avant la thèse fondamentale, ce dernier n'a plus le même sens qu'en 1994.

En effet, McDowell introduit en 2008 une distinction entre le contenu discursif – qui n'est rien d'autre que le contenu d'un jugement, et le contenu intuitif, ou contenu de l'intuition. C'est à Kant que McDowell emprunte la notion d'intuition. Pour Kant, l'intuition est : 'le mode par lequel une connaissance se rapporte immédiatement aux objets et auquel tend toute pensée comme au but en vue duquel elle est le moyen' (Kant 2006). Sa nature n'est pas discursive – contrairement au jugement qui, compte tenu de sa discursivité, est articulé – c'est-à-dire propositionnel. C'est ce que défend McDowell, lorsqu'il écrit : 'Now intuiting is not discursive, even in the extended sense in which judging is. Discursive content is articulated. Intuitional content is not' (McDowell 2008 : 12)[1]. Que l'intuition ne soit pas discursive n'empêche cependant pas d'attribuer une conceptualité à l'intuition. La stratégie de McDowell consiste en effet à conserver une forme de conceptualité du contenu intuitif, ce qui revient à supposer que le conceptualisme n'est pas rivé au propositionnalisme. Cette distinction – entre le conceptualisme et le propositionnalisme – justifie

[1] Nous traduisons : l'intuition n'est pas discursive, même au sens étendu où le jugement l'est. Le contenu discursif est articulé. Le contenu intuitif ne l'est pas.

l'interprétation que Putnam livre en 2016, de la révision de sens que McDowell accordât au conceptualisme, entre 1994 et 2008.

La question devient alors celle de savoir sous quel mode intervient cette conceptualité :

> If intuitional content is not discursive, why go on insisting it is conceptual? Because every aspect of the content of an intuition is present in a form in which it is already suitable to be the content associated with a discursive capacity, if it is not — at least not yet — actually so associated. (McDowell 2008 : 12)

Le contenu de l'intuition ne semble conceptuel que dans la mesure où il est propositionnellement articulable sans d'ores et déjà être articulé. Or, c'est cette même conceptualité qui conditionne l'élaboration d'une proposition au sujet d'une expérience de perception.

> [It] is right to say the content unified in intuitions is of the same kind as the content unified in judgments: that is, conceptual content. We could not have intuitions, with their specific forms of unity, if we could not make judgments, with their corresponding forms of unity. We can even say that the unity-providing function is essentially a faculty for discursive activity, a power to judge. But its operation in providing for the unity of intuitions is not itself a case of discursive activity. (McDowell 2008 : 12)

La conceptualité est rendue possible par la synthèse ou l'unité du divers de la sensation. Mais, dans le cas de l'intuition, cette activité synthétique n'est pas discursive. La difficulté du propos de McDowell tient ici à ce que le jugement conditionne cette synthèse sans que la synthèse elle-même ne soit discursive. Autrement dit, il faut être capable de jugement pour que cette synthèse soit opérante et pourtant cette synthèse n'est pas elle-même de nature discursive.

Cette fine différence permet à McDowell de maintenir une proximité entre le contenu de l'intuition d'une part et du jugement d'autre part sans pour autant les tenir pour identiques. Sans s'engager sur la voie d'une description exhaustive de ce que sont ces contenus, McDowell s'en tient à montrer que c'est l'unité donnée dans chacun de ces contenus qui rend possible cette proximité. Cette unité vient dans le cas de la perception de ce que les concepts sont articulés entre eux de manière intuitive, tandis qu'ils le sont de manière propositionnelle

dans le deuxième cas, c'est-à-dire dans le jugement. De part et d'autre de l'intuition et du jugement, c'est l'idée d'une unité articulée qui rend possible de passer d'un contenu intuitif à un contenu conceptuel. La propositionnalité est la manière dont l'unité se manifeste dans le jugement, tandis que l'articulabilité est la manière dont l'unité se manifeste dans l'intuition.

Ainsi, dans l'expérience perceptive, si le contenu est conceptuel, ce n'est pas au sens où ce contenu est d'emblée propositionnel mais seulement au sens où il peut faire l'objet d'un jugement, compte tenu de l'unité dans laquelle l'objet qu'il comporte se donne.

Or, ce qui, empiriquement, justifie que nous passions d'un contenu conceptualisable à un contenu conceptuel de la perception, c'est l'attention que le sujet porte à l'expérience vécue. Le contrefactuel suivant permet de reformuler la thèse de McDowell : pour telle expérience de X, si le sujet avait prêté attention à X, il aurait formé un jugement dont le contenu est identique au contenu de l'expérience, livré dans l'intuition. L'attention ainsi comprise est ce moyen-terme entre la forme de l'intuition susceptible de faire l'objet d'un jugement et le jugement lui-même. En somme, pour McDowell, si tout contenu d'expérience n'est pas conceptuellement articulé, il est toujours susceptible de l'être. Or, c'est précisément sur ce point que porte la critique de Putnam : que le contenu soit susceptible d'être conceptuel n'implique pas que sa nature soit en puissance conceptuelle.

Mais qu'est-ce qui, d'une part, justifie une telle critique et qu'est-ce qui, d'autre part, rend possible de conserver une forme de conceptualisme malgré une telle critique ?

2. Contre le conceptualisme : les raisons empiriques de Putnam

C'est à l'occasion d'une conférence en l'honneur de Putnam, en 2011, que ce dernier avance pour la première fois ses arguments contre le conceptualisme de McDowell – ce qui donne ensuite lieu à la publication d'un article co-écrit avec Hilla Jacobson et intitulé *Against Perceptual Conceptualism* (2016).

Ce texte ne vise pas les raisons épistémiques de défendre le conceptualisme mais plutôt les conclusions qu'en tire McDowell au sujet de la nature de

l'expérience. En effet, malgré sa critique du conceptualisme, Putnam continue de partager avec McDowell l'idée qu'une expérience de perception peut justifier une croyance. Il rejette néanmoins l'assimilation de l'expérience de perception à la conceptualité. Putnam défend que l'expérience n'est pas tout entière conceptuelle – ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle ne peut pas l'être mais seulement qu'elle ne l'est pas nécessairement. Cet article est d'autant plus intéressant que Putnam renoue avec sa méthodologie philosophique première – principalement déployée dans le premier tome des *Philosophical Papers* (Putnam 1975) consistant à convoquer les résultats de la science pour élaborer ses thèses philosophiques. En effet, la critique du conceptualisme s'appuie sur les résultats de tests perceptifs, dont Putnam a eu connaissance grâce à Block. L'incompatibilité du conceptualisme avec les données empiriques nécessite d'abandonner l'approche de McDowell.

2.1. Contenu cognitif et contenu phénoménal de l'expérience

Les expériences sur lesquelles Putnam et Jacobson prennent appui montrent qu'un observateur peut ne pas détecter certains changements qui se produisent dans son environnement visuel ou certaines différences entre deux images qui lui sont présentées successivement. Ces résultats pourraient être susceptibles de recevoir deux explications : soit les observateurs ne voient pas que les traits changent – au sens où ils n'ont pas de représentation phénoménale consciente de ces traits ; soit ils voient ces traits mais échouent à relever une différence entre ceux-ci car tout détail phénoménal ne fait pas nécessairement l'objet d'un processus cognitif qui rende possible de concevoir la différence entre les deux images.

En-deçà de l'explication qu'il convient de donner à ces résultats, le problème qui se pose est celui de savoir s'il est possible d'avoir une représentation phénoménale du changement sans en avoir un accès cognitif. Putnam défend l'hypothèse de la richesse phénoménale. Selon cette hypothèse, le contenu phénoménal est plus riche que le contenu auquel on a un accès cognitif ; la conscience phénoménale des aspects ne peut pas toujours faire l'objet d'un compte-rendu au sens où elle n'est pas toujours accessible.

Pour justifier la validité de cette hypothèse, Putnam s'appuie sur les résultats de l'expérience de Landman (2003) qui consiste à présenter de manière successive à un sujet deux cadrans composés de huit rectangles, orientés verticalement ou horizontalement. La différence entre ces deux cadrans réside dans le changement d'orientation de l'un des rectangles. Il faut avoir à l'esprit que dans l'intervalle temporel entre les deux cadrans où rien n'apparaît à l'image, l'attention du sujet est dirigée vers l'un des huit rectangle grâce à un indice, ce qui augmente ainsi la probabilité que le trait pertinent soit détecté. Les résultats de l'expérience montrent que les sujets ont conscience et accès cognitivement à l'ensemble des rectangles. A l'inverse, les orientations spécifiques des rectangles sont phénoménalement mais cognitivement inaccessibles. Autrement dit, il peut y avoir une conscience phénoménale de quelque chose, ici l'orientation spécifique des rectangles, sans un accès cognitif qui nous permette d'en rendre compte.

Pour Putnam, cette inaccessibilité partielle entre en contradiction avec l'approche conceptualiste de la perception défendue par McDowell, ne serait-ce que parce que ne pouvons pas formuler de jugement au sujet de l'orientation spécifique des rectangles puisque nous n'y avons pas accès cognitivement, et nous sommes pourtant phénoménalement conscients de l'orientation de ces rectangles. De manière positive, cette conclusion empirique permet de supposer l'existence d'un contenu phénoménal non-conceptuel dans l'expérience perceptive.

2.2. Contre le conceptualisme standard

À la distinction entre l'accès cognitif et le contenu phénoménal d'une expérience, Putnam ajoute une critique du conceptualisme sous deux formes, standard et modérée qui vise à conclure que le contenu phénoménal déborde ce à quoi nous avons accès cognitivement.

Empiriquement, il est possible de rendre compte du conceptualisme standard de la manière suivante : pour vivre une expérience dotée d'un aspect P phénoménalement conscient, le sujet doit posséder le concept C, nécessaire à la spécification de P au moment de l'expérience.

Anticipant certaines objections, McDowell défend dans *Mind and World* que ce n'est pas un problème que certains aspects de la perception ne fassent l'objet que d'une conceptualisation démonstrative. Un concept démonstratif est un concept déictique, comme 'cette couleur-là'. Ce type de désignation est mobilisée lorsque l'expérience de perception porte sur une qualité dont le grain est trop fin pour être désigné par un concept général comme le rouge, le vert, etc.

Si l'idée de concept démonstratif est acceptable, il n'en reste pas moins que la possession de ce type de concept dépend du fait d'avoir eu récemment au moins une expérience des traits auxquels on les applique. En effet, le concept est une généralité que des cas particuliers instancient, ce qui requiert de pouvoir reconnaître 'cette couleur-là' à plusieurs reprises pour que soit institué le concept démonstratif 'cette couleur-là', dont le grain trop fin empêche de pouvoir substituer à 'cette couleur-là', le concept de magenta ou de rouge par exemple. Pour l'exprimer de façon concise, à la manière de Putnam en 2016, la thèse conceptualiste repose sur la satisfaction d'une condition dite de reconnaissance telle que pour posséder un concept perceptuel C à un temps T, il faut avoir la capacité de reconnaître les instances qui tombent sous ce concept à T+1. De manière négative, cela signifie que la capacité que nous avons à appliquer une expression comme 'cette nuance-là' et à exploiter son contenu dans la pensée ne peut pas être restreinte à une seule occasion.

La conjonction de la thèse conceptualiste et de sa condition de reconnaissance conduit à la conclusion suivante : pour faire l'expérience de quelque chose qui a un aspect phénoménal P à un temps T, il faut avoir la capacité de reconnaître les instances qui tombent sous C à T+1. Or, les expériences de cécité au changement témoignent de ce que, pour certains aspects phénoménaux, le sujet n'a pas la capacité de reconnaître les instances qui tombent sous les concepts nécessaires à leur spécification à un temps T +1. Pour cette raison, le conceptualisme standard, même sauvé par l'introduction des concepts démonstratifs, doit être abandonné.

2.3. Contre le conceptualisme modéré

Un moyen de résister à cette critique empirique est de modifier la condition de reconnaissance, ce que fait le conceptualisme modéré – c'est-à-dire le conceptualisme révisé par McDowell en 2008. Les expériences de cécité au changement nous invitent à conclure qu'en raison des capacités limitées de notre système d'accessibilité cognitive, à un temps T, il peut y avoir des aspects phénoménaux tels que le sujet ne pourrait pas reconnaître les traits représentés par ces aspects à T+1. Or, tout défenseur d'un conceptualisme modéré pourrait soutenir que cela n'est pas incompatible avec le contrefactuel attentionnel suivant : pour tout aspect phénoménal, *si* le sujet avait focalisé son attention sur le trait représenté à travers cet aspect, il aurait pu le reconnaître à T+1.

Ce qui revient à énoncer la thèse suivante : pour faire l'expérience douée d'un aspect phénoménal P, le sujet doit être capable d'acquérir le concept C au moment de l'expérience. La condition de reconnaissance devient contrefactuelle : être capable d'acquérir le concept C à un temps T requiert que si le sujet avait focalisé son attention sur les traits qui tombent sous le concept C, il aurait reconnu ces traits à T+1.

Cependant, contre cette révision du conceptualisme, l'expérience montre que ces conditions ne peuvent pas être satisfaites : si les aspects phénoménaux conscients ne font pas l'objet d'une attention à T, le sujet ne reconnaît pas nécessairement les traits représentés par ces aspects à T+1. Putnam et Jacobson convoquent l'exemple suivant : si, dans une bibliothèque de livres aux couvertures très colorées, nous déplaçons notre attention d'un livre à l'autre tout en gardant les yeux fixes, nous nous rendons compte que la manière dont une nuance nous apparaît change légèrement lorsque nous commençons à y concentrer notre attention. Cette nuance semble plus saturée, plus vive – ce que William James appelait l'intensité relative de deux sensations (James 1890) en fonction de l'attention portée à leur égard. Il y a donc un effet de l'attention sur la phénoménologie : lorsque l'attention est concentrée à un endroit, le sujet subit un effet d'augmentation du contraste.

Or, pour qu'il y ait conceptualisation, il faut que le sujet soit capable de prêter attention à un trait pour gagner la capacité d'en reconnaître les futures

instanciations, et que les futures instanciations puissent être reconnues, via cet aspect phénoménal, c'est-à-dire l'aspect dont la condition d'instanciation est exprimée par le contrefactuel. Le problème naît de la variation des aspects phénoménaux qui entraîne avec elle une variation des concepts perceptuels démonstratifs. Autrement dit, les expériences attentionnelles tendent à montrer que l'individuation des concepts démonstratifs de perception dépend des aspects phénoménaux par lesquels les traits extérieurs sont représentés – ce qui revient à énoncer qu'un concept perceptuel démonstratif dépend de la spécificité de l'aspect phénoménal et non du trait représenté.

Le problème du conceptualisme modéré tient à ce qu'il présuppose que les aspects phénoménaux ne sont pas modifiés par l'attention. Pour que les conditions de ce conceptualisme soient satisfaites, il faudrait que le sujet puisse avoir eu la même expérience, à titre phénoménale, s'il avait focalisé son attention ailleurs. Or, comme les aspects phénoménaux changent en fonction de l'attention qu'on porte à leur égard, l'instanciation de ces aspects sous un concept est impossible.

Par appel à ce conceptualisme – dans sa forme standard comme modérée, McDowell reste victime d'une forme de mythe du donné, le donné désignant cette fois-ci l'expérience dont on imagine qu'elle ne change pas en fonction des conditions d'attention qu'on porte à son égard. Mais si la conceptualisation de l'expérience dépend d'un contrefactuel qui implique l'aspect phénoménal associé à l'expérience, et si l'aspect phénoménal varie, alors on voit mal comment il est possible de fournir un concept qui permet la reconnaissance des instanciations d'un même phénomène.

À ce stade de l'analyse, deux questions restent en suspens : d'abord, comment attribuer à la perception un rôle épistémique compte tenu d'une telle critique du conceptualisme ? Et, deuxièmement, que le conceptualisme ainsi pensé de McDowell soit mis en question par des résultats empiriques implique-t-il de rejeter toute forme de conceptualisme ?

C'est à ces questions que nous consacrerons la dernière partie de notre exposé – tentant ainsi de défendre un conceptualisme partiel, sous les auspices des dernières thèses de Putnam en philosophie de la perception, défendues *Naturalism, Realism and Normativity* (2016).

3. Le conceptualisme partiel de Putnam et le phénoménalisme de la perception

La thèse que Putnam déploie au sujet de l'expérience perceptive peut être exprimée ainsi : l'expérience n'est pas nécessairement de part en part conceptuelle, ce qui nécessite de faire droit à l'existence d'un contenu phénoménal de l'expérience, sans que cela ne fasse renaître le représentationnalisme dont Putnam s'est explicitement défait depuis 1994.

3.1. Des distinctions conceptuelles nécessaires à la compréhension d'un conceptualisme partiel

Les conclusions auxquelles nous enjoignent les expériences mobilisées en 2016 appellent des modifications conceptuelles que Putnam effectue dans *Naturalism, Realism and Normativity*, parmi lesquelles la distinction entre la sensation, l'aperception, et la croyance perceptive, et la distinction entre le concept et l'attention.

Sensation et aperception

D'abord, la sensation ne doit pas être confondue avec l'aperception. L'aperception est une forme de conscience conceptuelle tandis que l'impression sensorielle est ce qui nous est offert dans une expérience de perception sans être conceptualisée. Cette distinction est reprise à Kant mais il convient de préciser que Putnam ne l'emploie pas tout à fait dans le même sens. Pour Kant, l'aperception désigne la conscience de soi à laquelle nous rapportons les représentations auxquelles nous sommes attentifs. Mais ce que suggère Putnam, c'est que d'une expérience à laquelle je ne prête pas attention, ne suit pas l'idée que l'expérience ne soit rien pour moi (Putnam, 2016: 162). Par exemple, il est possible de se souvenir d'une expérience après l'avoir eue et la rendre conceptuelle à ce moment-là. L'expérience en mémoire est conceptualisée tandis que l'expérience de ce dont on a le souvenir ne l'était pas. Putnam révise également la notion kantienne d'impression, qu'il appelle également et sans

distinction 'sensation' ou '*qualia*' de façon à ce qu'elle ne soit plus par nature conceptuelle. Cette dissociation de l'impression sensorielle et de l'aperception permet à Putnam de conserver l'empirisme minimal de McDowell sans mettre de côté la phénoménalité pure de nos expériences.

Concept et attention

Il convient également de préciser que l'aperception ne se réduit pas à l'attention. En effet, il ne suffit pas de prêter attention pour conceptualiser. Un enfant peut par exemple prêter attention à une sensation sans pour autant être capable de la conceptualiser. L'attention joue un rôle fondamentale eu égard à la phénoménalité de l'expérience : en effet, comme exposé dans la deuxième partie de notre propos, les expériences sont altérées par le degré d'attention qu'on leur porte et non par la conceptualisation de l'expérience. Le caractère phénoménal d'une douleur varie en fonction de l'attention qu'on lui porte tandis que la reconnaissance de la douleur comme douleur, c'est-à-dire sa conceptualisation, ne fait pas nécessairement varier ce caractère phénoménal. Si le modèle mcdowellien de l'expérience sensorielle est erroné selon Putnam, c'est parce qu'il est figé : l'expérience sensorielle est conçue de manière à rester identique alors qu'on lui prête attention, tout comme l'arbre reste le même alors qu'on le photographie.

Cette distinction est vertueuse car elle permet d'échapper à une critique qui a souvent été adressée à McDowell : celle de ne pouvoir attribuer la sensation aux être dépourvues de capacités conceptuelles, comme les jeunes enfants et les animaux. Pour Putnam, l'être humain mature a conscience que la douleur est une sensation déplaisante – ce dont manquent l'enfant et l'animal. Autrement dit, l'être humain mature conceptualise la douleur et la reconnaît comme sensation déplaisante. A *contrario*, l'enfant et l'animal ont des sensations de couleur et de douleur, peuvent leur prêter attention mais ne reconnaissent pas le rouge comme rouge, ni la douleur comme douleur. En termes kantiens, ils n'aperçoivent pas la douleur. L'être humain mature est pourvu d'une conscience dite aperceptive. Pour la conscience aperceptive, la sensation peut être comprise à la manière d'une croyance au sens où elle requiert un ensemble de

concepts et peut faire l'objet d'une proposition, susceptible de recevoir une valeur de vérité, d'être acceptée ou rejetée par le sujet apercevant.

Aperception et croyance perceptuelle

Cependant, et c'est là la troisième distinction qu'il convient de faire valoir, l'aperception – à la différence de la croyance perceptuelle – n'est pas un jugement. En effet, l'aperception se manifeste à un niveau empirique plutôt qu'à un niveau discursif. L'aperception conditionne le jugement – puisqu'elle est ce qui confère à l'expérience sa conceptualité – mais elle reste une forme d'expérience, là où la croyance perceptuelle se situe déjà dans l'ordre des jugements.

3.2. Réformer le sens de l'expérience

Ces trois distinctions conceptuelles permettent à Putnam d'opérer une réforme du sens de l'expérience qui n'a plus nécessairement à être assimilée à la conceptualité ou à la non-conceptualité. Putnam propose en effet une conception renouvelée de l'expérience telle qu'elle puisse prendre plusieurs formes : purement aperceptive, purement sensorielle ou encore enchevêtrée, où l'aperception et la sensation fusionnent à tel point que nous ne puissions plus les distinguer – et qui peut expliquer l'erreur commise par McDowell : celle d'avoir assimilé la sensation à l'aperception.

Par expérience purement sensorielle, Putnam désigne toute expérience perceptuelle qui met en jeu des sensations sans l'aide de l'aperception. C'est le cas par exemple du manque d'attention à la scène qui se présente à nous. Cette conception de l'impression sensorielle rend justice à l'idée d'une qualité de l'expérience irréductible à la conscience conceptuelle que nous en avons.

Par expérience purement aperceptive, Putnam désigne toute expérience non-perceptuelle, dans laquelle les impressions sensibles ne sont pas nécessaires. La conceptualité de l'expérience s'étend au-delà des impressions sensorielles que nous avons. C'est le cas de ce que Putnam appelle des sensations amodales – c'est-à-dire des sensations qui ne sont pas données comme telles

dans l'expérience mais que nous projetons pour ainsi dire, compte tenu des concepts dont nous disposons :

> When my apperception is not of something that produces a sensation but of something "amodal", it is even clearer that an apperception is different from a sensation. Amodal apperception includes awareness of aspects that are "present in absence" such as my awareness of a tomato that I am looking at as having another side. Alva Noë accounts for such apperception in terms of sensorimotor expectations, but he does also mention *shaping by thought* as a possibility. And it is more than a mere possibility, in fact; my awareness of the computer in front of me as a computer does not consist just of "sensorimotor" expectations. (Putnam 2016 : 150)

L'aperception est ce qui fait intervenir la conceptualité à un niveau qui n'est pas celui de la sensation : c'est ce qui me permet de savoir que je fais l'expérience de la tomate alors que je ne fais pas l'expérience de toutes les faces de la tomate.

Putnam ajoute un second exemple, qui porte expressément sur une expérience dépourvue de qualia ou de phénoménalité, par distinction avec les expériences qui font intervenir des impressions sensibles.

> In fact, perceiving something is sometimes not accompanied by any special qualia. Perceiving that I raised my arm intentionally (as opposed to its just "going up") is something I often do, but there is no "quale" of "voluntariness." (Putnam 2016 : 164)

L'aperception, dans cet exemple, est ce qui me permet d'avoir conscience de ce que je fais, même lorsque l'action sur laquelle je porte mon aperception n'implique pas d'impression sensible distincte – comme l'impression sensible de volonté.

Enfin, par expérience perceptuelle enchevêtrée, nous désignons l'expérience sous sa forme mcdowellienne, c'est-à-dire le résultat d'une fusion entre l'impression sensible et l'aperception qui ne permet plus de distinguer ce qui, dans la perception, participe de la conceptualité et ce qui n'y participe pas. C'est une conception que Putnam emprunte principalement à William James et qui requiert la satisfaction de trois conditions : la possession des concepts,

l'aperception comme le fait de rapporter à soi l'expérience qu'on a, et la perception sensible qui livre au sujet quelque chose du monde :

> The connection between conceptualizing and perceiving was already pointed out by William James, in a remark that has influenced me for many years. The remark was that (in the case of "a presented and recognized material object") "sensations and apperceptive ideas fuse here so intimately that you can no more tell where one begins and the other ends, than you can tell, in those cunning circular panoramas that have lately been exhibited, where the real foreground and [where] the painted canvas." As James indicated, the best example of this phenomenon of "fusion" is the recognition, say, the seeing, of an object, when one sees it not only in the minimal sense of "see," in which a cat might be said to see a television set, without having a concept or a protoconcept of a television set, but sees it in the sense in which to see a television set is to *see it and know that what one is seeing* is a television set, the case of a full-blown apperception. In such a case, my perceptual experience has a sensational component—it includes what some philosophers call "qualia" that could also be part of the experience of a child who does not yet have the concept of a television set—but it also includes in a way that is real but hard to describe the fact that *it looks like a television set*, the fact that the concept "television set" is in play. (Putnam 2016 : 225)

Ce que James appelle 'recognition', Putnam l'appelle 'aperception' : l'expérience de perception comprend la reconnaissance du fait que nous percevons telle ou telle chose, ce qui implique de disposer du concept de la chose perçue. Sur ce point, il convient de rappeler que Putnam défend une approche externaliste des concepts, telle que les concepts ne sont pas des présentations mentales mais des signes dont l'usage est fondamental et dépend de l'environnement qui détermine la référence des concepts :

> Concepts are not mental presentations that intrinsically refer to external objects for the very decisive reason that they are not mental presentations at all. Concepts are signs used in a certain way; the signs may be public or private, mental entities or physical entities, but even when the signs are 'mental' and 'private', the sign itself apart from its use is not the concept. And signs do not themselves intrinsically refer. (Putnam 1981 : 18)

Autrement dit, le conceptualisme partiel que défend Putnam à travers cette forme aperceptive de l'expérience de perception repose sur un externalisme

sémantique qui confère aux concepts une dépendance à l'égard de l'environnement. Ce qui vaut à Putnam la conclusion suivante :

> If to see a television set, in the sense in which a master of the relevant part of a language can see a television set, requires concept-possession, and concept-possession requires causal connection to external things, then *seeing* requires causal connection to external things—not just in the trivial sense, that we don't call it "seeing" if no light rays from external objects are striking the eye, but in a much more complicated sense: *seeing, in the sense of perceiving by means of sight, requires a history of language acquisition and language use.* (Putnam 2016 : 225)

La fusion entre l'aperception et l'impression sensible ne peut être comprise qu'à la lumière d'une histoire de l'acquisition et de l'usage du langage.

De cette distinction entre trois formes d'expérience, il est possible de tirer deux leçons. D'abord, la différence qui se joue entre la forme purement aperceptive de l'expérience et la forme enchevêtrée de la perception, permet à Putnam de montrer que le conceptualisme intervient aussi bien dans les expériences qui ne sont pas susceptibles de phénoménalité, que dans les perceptions qui font intervenir des impressions sensibles.

Cette distinction a en outre une conséquence sur la façon de concevoir les différences entre l'enfant et l'adulte : d'une part, un enfant et un adulte peuvent avoir une expérience qui, phénoménologiquement, est susceptible d'être semblable alors même que l'enfant ne possède pas les mêmes concepts que l'adulte ; d'autre part, toute expérience qu'a l'adulte n'est pas nécessairement conceptuelle. Autrement dit, une expérience est possible indépendamment du fait que nous disposions des concepts dont il faut disposer si nous voulons que l'expérience puisse justifie les énoncés que nous formulons à son égard. Ce qui rend possible une telle expérience non-conceptuelle c'est le contenu phénoménal dont elle est porteuse, manifeste dans le cas de l'expérience sensible, que nous distinguons avec Putnam de l'expérience aperceptive.

En somme, Putnam rejette l'idée que l'expérience de perception soit de part en part conceptuelle par appel à ce qu'il y a de proprement phénoménal dans cette expérience. Mais quel statut philosophique réserver alors à cette part phénoménale de l'expérience perceptuelle ? Si la critique de la thèse conceptualiste s'accompagne d'une défense sous-jacente d'une

phénoménologie de la perception, il convient de rendre compte du statut de cette phénoménalité.

3.3. La défense d'un contenu non-conceptuel phénoménal de l'expérience de perception

Pour comprendre la part phénoménale de l'expérience perceptive, nous pouvons faire appel à la notion de contenu. Néanmoins, ce terme n'est pas sans poser problème. La difficulté de la notion de contenu provient notamment du représentationnalisme auquel elle nous rive selon Travis (2012). Par représentationnalisme, il faut entendre l'idée que l'expérience perceptive a un contenu représentationnel, susceptible d'être vrai ou faux. Ce représentationnalisme induit l'idée qu'il existe un intermédiaire entre le sujet et le monde, qui prend souvent le nom de *sense-data* et que les anti-représentationnalistes interprètent comme un voile sur le réel. Néanmoins cette approche du contenu peut sembler réductrice : rien n'interdit en effet que le contenu puisse être d'une nature autre que conceptuelle – ce qui permet d'échapper à la menace représentationnaliste et de conserver une approche réaliste de la perception – suivant laquelle nous percevons le monde plutôt qu'un intermédiaire entre le monde et nous-mêmes.

Contre la réduction du contenu au contenu conceptuel, nous défendons, suivant Putnam, qu'il est possible de ménager une place à l'idée d'un contenu phénoménal non-conceptuel – qui implique de réviser le sens accordé à cette notion.

Par ailleurs, contre ce que laisse entendre la distinction à la Heck du *content-conceptualism* et du *state-conceptualism*, l'approche conceptuelle du contenu que Putnam défend n'implique pas de s'engager dans l'interprétation propositionnaliste du contenu conceptuel. Autrement dit, défendre l'existence d'un contenu conceptuel de la perception – aux côtés du contenu phénoménal – n'implique pas d'adhérer au *content-conceptualism* tel qu'il a été défini dans la première partie de ce travail.

Cette ouverture de la notion de contenu au contenu phénoménal est d'autant plus précieuse qu'elle permet d'échapper à la menace représentationnaliste dénoncée par Travis : en faisant droit à l'idée qu'il peut exister un contenu phénoménal de l'expérience perceptive, nous suggérons qu'il est possible de conserver le réalisme de la perception. Bien comprise, cette notion de contenu permet à la fois de conserver l'approche épistémologique de la perception défendue par McDowell et le caractère phénoménal de l'expérience auquel nous enjoignent les approches de Block et Putnam, sans que cela ne reconduise à un représentationnalisme que Putnam critique depuis les Dewey Lectures de 1994.

Pour éclairer cette approche phénoménale du contenu, nous convoquons la distinction opérée par Crane entre le contenu conceptuel et le contenu non-conceptuel de l'expérience nous semble éclairante. Convoquant la définition du contenu déployée par Siegel (2005), à savoir 'what is conveyed to the subject', Crane sépare la conception phénoménologique du contenu et la conception conceptuelle du contenu :

> There is, I have claimed, something like a 'given' in experience: it is the phenomenological conception of content ('what is conveyed to the subject'). The propositional content of a perceptual experience is also something that deserves the name of 'content'. But it must be distinguished from content in the phenomenological sense. The content in the phenomenological sense is something spatiotemporal, concrete, particular and specific to its subject. The content in the propositional sense is not. There are, therefore, two conceptions of the content of experience, the semantic and the phenomenological. I think that the phenomenological conception has a certain priority, since it is part of what is being modelled. Semantic contents can only be 'descriptions' of this content. (Crane 2013 : 245)

Grâce à la définition de Siegel, Crane fait droit à une approche phénoménologique du contenu qui semble prioritaire par rapport au contenu sémantique de l'expérience. Si le contenu phénoménologique est subjectif, situé, concret et particulier, le contenu conceptuel est objectif, abstrait et général. Suivant l'interprétation que donne Travis de Frege (2013), nous pourrions compléter cette distinction en faisant du conceptuel une généralité qui peut être instanciée par un nombre infini de cas, là où le non-conceptuel, en tant que

particulier, peut instancier un concept. Cependant, par distinction avec Travis, nous suivons Crane pour conserver la notion de contenu et l'étendre, au-delà du conceptuel – à la sphère phénoménale.

Par contenu, il convient alors seulement d'entendre ce de quoi est constitué l'expérience. L'intérêt de cette notion est de rendre compte de la distinction entre l'expérience que nous faisons du monde et le monde lui-même, comme ensemble de ce qui existe indépendamment de l'expérience que nous en avons. Cependant, il faut avoir à l'esprit que l'ensemble de ce qui existe indépendamment de l'expérience que nous en avons n'a aucune détermination indépendante de la manière dont cela nous est livré par l'expérience. L'idée d'un contenu de l'expérience permet à la fois de rendre compte de l'indépendance ontologique du monde – puisque nous distinguons bien l'expérience du monde et le monde, tout en conservant l'idée que le monde ne peut rien être d'autre que celui dont nous faisons l'expérience. Le monde, livré dans l'expérience, est précisément ce contenu, susceptible de faire l'objet d'un jugement s'il est conceptuel, phénoménal s'il n'est pas conceptuel. Pour le dire autrement, l'intérêt du contenu phénoménal de l'expérience est de rendre compte du caractère toujours situé, singulier et concret de notre expérience du monde sans que cela n'impose de mettre à distance le monde du sujet qui en fait l'expérience, au point de faire naître un intermédiaire entre le sujet et le monde. C'est cette relation transactionnelle entre l'organisme et les choses du monde, leurs propriétés, les événements qui se produisent qui constituent le contenu de notre expérience et qui peut prendre une forme phénoménale comme une forme conceptuelle.

L'originalité de Putnam se situe à l'endroit où ces deux contenus sont à ce point enchevêtrés qu'ils ne peuvent plus être distingués : dans le cas de la perception dite aperceptive, le contenu phénoménal et le contenu conceptuel s'entremêlent. Le réalisme direct dont rend compte le contenu phénoménal de l'expérience – qui, bien qu'il soit enchevêtré au conceptuel dans le cas de l'expérience aperceptive en est ontologiquement distinct, permet de sauver les conclusions externalistes de Putnam sans reconduire à aucune forme de représentationnalisme, contrairement à ce dont Travis avait peur. Il faut que le monde existe pour que nous puissions faire les expériences que nous faisons

mais ce monde ne nous est livré qu'à travers les expériences humaines que nous faisons (aussi bien sur le plan phénoménal que conceptuel) – conformément aux principes du réalisme interne défendus par Putnam dans *Reason, Truth and History* (1981) principalement.

Conclusion

Au terme de cette analyse, nous comprenons que Putnam, contre McDowell et de manière cohérente avec des résultats empiriques empruntés en partie à Block, défend une approche semi-conceptualiste de l'expérience. La conceptualité de l'expérience ne provient pas de l'aspect sensible de l'expérience mais de ce que Putnam appelle l'aperception – quand bien même, dans certains cas, le sensible et le conceptuel s'entremêlent. D'un côté, cette fusion, pour le dire dans les mots de James, explique la difficulté qu'il y a à se défaire de l'approche conceptualiste de la perception ; d'un autre, en tant que fusion, elle justifie qu'on puisse distinguer en amont ce qui la constitue, à savoir l'aperception – ou le contenu conceptuel de l'expérience et l'impression sensible, ou le contenu phénoménal, non-conceptuel de l'expérience. En redoublant la distinction élaborée par Putnam entre l'aperception et l'impression sensible par une distinction opérée par Crane entre le contenu conceptuel et le contenu phénoménal de l'expérience, nous défendons que l'expérience perceptive ne peut être pleinement comprise indépendamment de ce qui la constitue phénoménologiquement, sans que cela n'implique de renoncer à ses vertus épistémologiques, compte tenu du conceptualisme partiel.

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Rationality and Reflection

Abstract: The paper discusses considerations that bear on the claim that rationality requires reflection, i.e., self-conscious higher-order mental states that represent the normative status of one's first-order attitudes. Rationality is the capacity to properly respond to normative reasons. The traditional 'reflexionist' view – paradigmatically held by John McDowell – makes (potential) reflection a necessary condition of rationality. Critical examination of this view leads to a rejection, however. Not only would animals and small children be excluded from rationality. It would also make rationality too demanding for mature human beings with ordinary capacities. Apart from some further difficulties, the main problem is exposed in a new argument – the 'argument from entanglement' – which turns on the epistemic dependence of conscious reasoning on unconscious reasoning. A two-layered view of rationality is sketched as an alternative. Interestingly, the link between rationality and reasons can be preserved. It is only the demand for reflection which is problematic. Reflection can still play an important role, even if it is not a necessary ingredient in rationality.

Keywords: Rationality; Reasoning; Reflection; Self-Consciousness; Epistemic Dependence

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at an important traditional epistemological claim, namely, the claim that *rationality requires reflection*. It requires some care to fully characterize this doctrine. This will be done in the next section. As a first approximation, we can say that 'reflection' means a higher-order mental state that self-consciously represents the normative status of one's own first-order attitude of believing or intending something. And 'rationality' means properly responding to normative reasons. (We will not be concerned with so-called structural rationality, i.e., coherence

requirements.) So the traditional view under investigation has it that one can only hold an attitude in response to (normative) reasons if one is capable of self-consciously reflecting on the normative status of this attitude. In nuce, one must be capable of recognizing one's reasons as reasons, as John McDowell - who will be taken as the paradigm contemporary proponent of the traditional view here - puts it. If a subject holds an attitude for a reason, she is capable of recognizing her reason as a reason. The reflective requirement that the traditional view imposes on rationality is a requirement of knowledge about one's reasons. Just to further clarify the notion of a reason: throughout this paper, 'reasons' will always be *normative* reasons, not motivating reasons or explanatory reasons. This does not restrict the traditional view in any problematic way since, after all, the traditional view is strongly influenced by Wilfrid Sellars, and his idea of the 'space of reasons' is of course meant to concern normative reasons, not mere motivations or explanations. The things that determine the normative standing of belief or action are at stake. It should be noted that pieces of evidence can very well be seen as normative reasons in this sense (in the theoretical domain.)[1]

This claim is often combined with other (more or less) traditional views, such as the rejection of non-conceptual representational contents and/or states, or the idea that there is a significant amount of apriori knowledge.[2] But it need not be combined with any of these views. It is an interesting claim in itself. Thinking of rationality (responding to reasons) as something that requires an awareness of reasons as reasons is quite natural and initially plausible. For how could one properly respond to a normative reason without being able to identify it as a reason? It is surely

[1] I have argued elsewhere – in Hofmann (2021) – that pieces of evidence are normative reasons. I see no reason why a traditionalist like McDowell should disagree with this point.

[2] There are further claims in the vicinity that might be part of a traditional cluster of epistemological claims. The idea of rational causation might be part of it, and also the idea of our being responsible for our attitudes. Strictly speaking, then, the paper can be taken as focusing on some central claims of McDowell's view, leaving it somewhat open who else might subscribe to these or sufficiently similar claims.

a reasonable thought to suppose that there is a necessary connection between properly responding to reasons and some self-conscious reflection on one's reasons.[3] The main goal of this paper is to argue that, on reflection, the view is untenable. There must be a way of properly responding to reasons that does not require (the ability of) reflection on one's own reasons. If this is right, we can open the door to acknowledging that, in principle at least, non-human animals are also capable of rationality even if they lack a reflective perspective on their reasons. The traditional view, in contrast, would have to deny any such rationality in non-human animals. Here it becomes clear that the view under investigation has important consequences as to how we conceive of ourselves in relation to other animals. Not the smallest significance.

As I characterized the claim above, it has to do with reflection on the normative status of one's own first-order attitudes (beliefs and intentions, most importantly). A background assumption here is that the normative status of justification is the relevant one, and that reasons and justification are intimately linked to each other. We can state this assumption as follows:

(RJ) The *reasons-justification link*: justification and normative reasons are constitutively linked; justification is grounded in (or constitutively explained by) rationality understood as properly responding to normative reasons.

In effect, the reasons-justification link identifies rationality and justification. A justified attitude is one which is formed or sustained by properly responding to the normative reasons one has. Therefore, to

[3] As already mentioned, John McDowell will be my main proponent of the traditional view. Among the works that I have in mind are McDowell (2011, 2009), and, in particular (2006). While it may not be easy to pin down exactly who else is subscribing to it, there are very good candidates: Matthew Boyle, Andrea Kern, Eric Marcus, Ram Neta, Ernest Sosa (in a qualified sense, at least), for example. For lack of space I will refrain from providing extensive quotes and will not go into (difficult) exegetical questions.

assess one's own first-order attitudes as to their normative status – i.e., justification – amounts to assessing whether these attitudes are proper responses to normative reasons. This makes it possible to state things in the way McDowell does: one must be capable of reflecting on one's normative reasons and of recognizing these reasons as reasons.

I will not question the reasons-justification link. Quite the contrary, I will assume that it is correct. I think it is very plausible and not much in need of independent argument.[4] What I will put into doubt is the reflective requirement. The connection between reasons and justification can be accepted, but not the reflective requirement. This requirement can be put as follows:

(U1) Properly responding to normative reasons requires the presence of self-conscious reflection.

And the way in which self-conscious reflection is supposed to be present can be stated as follows:

(U2) Self-conscious reflection on one's own reasons is the role in which selfconscious reflection is necessary for rationality.

Taken together we get:

(U3) Properly responding to normative reasons requires self-conscious reflection on one's own reasons.

This means that *all* justified attitudes involve self-conscious thinking of some consideration as one's normative reason for the attitude. Together, (U1) – (U3) make up the '*reflective unity thesis*', as we can call it.

[4] Since there are several concepts of justification, it is rather a matter of focusing on one of them – justification as well-foundedness (being held for a normative reasons). It is fairly obvious that this normative status is very important, I take it.

And let us call the proponents of (U1) – (U3) '*reflexionists*'. (Soon we will see that this self-conscious thinking could be actual or merely potential.)

An alternative to the unity view is a *two-layered view* of rationality. This view accepts the reasons-justification link. And it holds that rational responses come in two forms, a reflective and a non-reflective form. Only *sometimes* do we (self-consciously) reflect on our reasons; at other times we treat some consideration as a reason without any (potential or actual) reflection on its status as a reason. Arguably, the non-reflective form is the more basic, more ordinary case. We perceive some facts (states of affairs), and on that basis we treat these facts as reasons for taking an umbrella, deciding to go to the grocery store, or believing that the neighbor is at home, for example. We do not have to recognize – and often we do not recognize – that these facts are reasons for these actions and attitudes. Nevertheless we treat them as reasons for these responses, and we form rational attitudes on their basis. As long as these facts *are* reasons for these responses, and we are aware of them, we can properly respond to them in a *non*-reflective way. As we will see, to demand that we always be in a position to recognize that these facts are reasons is too much to ask for.

Here is the plan for the rest of the paper. I will argue against the unity view and for the two-layered view. Section 2 will prepare the ground by providing suitable conceptual clarifications. In section 3, I will present some preliminary considerations that point at potential difficulties of the reflexionist view. These arguments, however, will not yet amount to a serious counterargument. The real argument against reflexionism will be presented in section 4. This will be the 'argument from entanglement', which turns on the epistemic dependence of conscious reasoning on unconscious inference. Section 5 will consider a possible solution for the reflexionist, but it will also argue that this way out is not tenable. Section 6, finally, will provide a short sketch of the alternative view, the two-layered view of rationality. It will contain a brief discussion of which role can remain for reflective awareness within the two-layered view.

2. Clarifications

Let us now clarify the relevant concepts in more detail. A natural starting point is the distinction between those mental states or attitudes that are *reasons-susceptible* and those that are not. Beliefs, desires, and intentions are the paradigms of reasons-susceptible states. They are states for which there can be normative reasons, and they can be held or sustained for such normative reasons. Correspondingly, they can be evaluated as to their rationality. (Due to the intimate relation between intention and intentional action, action can also be taken to be included, though it is of course not a state.) If these attitudes are properly formed on the basis of normative reasons, they are rational; otherwise they are not rational. This is why Ram Neta calls them 'rationally determinable conditions'.[5] Many mental states, such as perceptual states or pains, are not states for which there are normative reasons; they cannot be held for normative reasons – they are not reasons-susceptible.[6]

Next consider *inference*. There are lots of inferences. An inference might be a step in the early visual system, from one stage in the perceptual hierarchy to the next one, where things are entirely inaccessible to consciousness; or it might be some highly self-conscious reasoning involving the conscious application of rules of inference. The variety of inferences is huge. We can take the term 'inference' as our umbrella term covering all kinds of transitions (or linkings) between premises and a conclusion that are not merely associations. And then we can talk about sub-kinds of inference by specifying the relevant states or attitudes involved. Most importantly, we can consider the case in which a conclusion is a reasons-susceptible attitude. Then we would expect the reasoner to form this attitude on the basis of (normative) reasons.

[5] Cf. Neta (2018), for example.

[6] For the present purposes, it can be left open whether all propositional attitudes are reasons-susceptible. It would depend on whether there are perceptual propositional attitudes.

Therefore, this kind of inference can properly be called '*reasoning*'. So reasoning is the special kind of inference that leads to a reasons-susceptible attitude as its conclusion. And it is at least initially plausible to think that reasoning involves responding to reasons, when things go well. That's the relevant standard or norm of reasoning, it seems: reasoning is fully successful if the conclusion is held or sustained for (sufficiently strong) reasons. Whatever one thinks about other inferences, the phenomenon of forming reasons-susceptible attitudes by treating some consideration as a reason for the attitude is surely a very significant one that is worthwhile being studied. The traditional view is on board with this taxonomy, I take it. The main interest is not in subconscious inferences but in reasoning, understood in this way. As John McDowell would likely put it: reasoning takes place in the space of reasons. The two-layered view can agree with this idea.

When making the distinction between reasoning and inference that is not reasoning ('mere inference') we rely on the notion of a reasons-susceptible attitude: an inference is reasoning just in case its conclusion is a reasons-susceptible attitude. According to an alternative non-normative approach to the notion of a reason, there might be reasons even for perceptual states (non-normative reasons but still reasons). Such an alternative approach, however, would lose the ability to mark the very significant distinction, which pre-theoretically exists, between the way in which a belief or intention or action can be held for a reason that justifies the attitude or action on the one hand, and the way in which a perceptual state might be generated from 'reasons' on the other hand (which are not really normative reasons). That strongly speaks against such an alternative non-normative approach to the notion of a reason. In any case, it is not an alternative that I would like to propose.[7]

For the present purposes we can also focus on the case where the premise attitudes are conscious. This might be called '*conscious reasoning*'. It is the case of inference from some attitude that is (at least

[7] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this issue.

normally) accessible to consciousness to a reasons-susceptible attitude as the conclusion. Forming a belief, desire, or intention on the basis of some other beliefs and some desire or intention is the paradigm of such conscious reasoning, since normally beliefs, desires, and intentions are accessible to consciousness. (That they are accessible to consciousness does not mean that there always is actual consciousness of these attitudes. It merely means that the subject could fairly easily become (immediately) conscious of her attitudes, at least normally.) Conscious reasoning is then distinguished from non-conscious reasoning which has premises that are not accessible to consciousness. We can call this '*intuitive reasoning*'. This terminology is (intentionally) close to the distinction that cognitive scientists have made since many years: the distinction between non-conscious inference on the one hand, which is called 'system 1' thinking, and conscious thinking or reasoning on the other hand, which is so-called 'system 2' thinking.[8]

It is important to note that intuitive reasoning, understood in this way, still counts as *reasoning* since it leads to a reasons-susceptible attitude as its conclusion (a belief, desire, or intention, most importantly). Indeed, this is what we want to say. For a belief that is formed on the basis of premises that are not conscious can still be assessed as to whether it was properly formed on the basis of reasons. These reasons might not be possessed consciously (i.e., in the form of a conscious state). But that does not mean, nor does it entail, that no reasons were possessed and employed. In other words, intuitive reasoning could still be fully successful, proper reasoning that leads to a justified conclusion. There is no reason to exclude this possibility from the very beginning. (And if psychologists like Kahnemann are right, intuitive reasoning is fairly widespread and often - at least in favorable conditions - very successful.)

On the other side of the spectrum, so to speak, we find reasoning that is *self-conscious*. It is self-conscious in that it involves a self-conscious (*de se*) belief or beliefs about this very reasoning, most

[8] Cf., for example, Kahnemann (2011).

importantly, about its premises. The self-conscious belief represents the premises. The subject thus is conscious of her reasons; she reflects on her reasons. However, it is important to note that such self-conscious reflection on one's reasons *need not be based on introspection*. It can also be formed on the basis of *testimony*. One might be told by a knowledgeable testifier that one's reasons are good or bad. Trusting such a testifier can lead to a justified belief or knowledge about one's reasons, i.e., the self-consciousness that is characteristic of self-conscious reasoning. No special commitment to introspection is needed here (though it is very plausible, I think, that in many cases we do have introspective self-consciousness of our reasons). What matters is *that* the subject is self-conscious of her reasons, the *source* of this self-conscious state is left open.

By now, we have made available all the concepts and distinction necessary for entering into the substantive arguments. Let us then take a look at some first arguments.

3. First Arguments

Let us start with an observation that even reflexionists are willing to accept. This is the following observation: It seems very plausible to think that mature humans sometimes form attitudes and act in the light of (conscious) reasons without actually reflecting on their reasons. If so, are they not responding to reasons? Do they not form rational responses in these cases? – Call this observation the '*observation of the missing reflection*'.

This observation is granted by all parties, both reflexionists and proponents of the two-layered view. It needs to be distinguished from a 'partner observation' concerning small children and animals: small children (and some non-human animals) form attitudes and act in the light of reasons (pretty much like humans that have reflection) but, again, without actually reflecting on their reasons. Do they never rationally respond to reasons? Do they lack rationality entirely?

The observation of the missing reflection is endorsed by John McDowell. His response is to go *modal*. This '*modal move*', as we can call it, consists in the following claim: the presence of reflection, in the sense in which rationality requires reflection, is the *potential* to reflect on one's reasons. This potential need not be actualized in all cases, but it has to be there (has to be present).

> Let me stress that what matters is the *capacity* to step back and assess whether putative reasons warrant action or belief. … if the capacity is present without being exercized, we have in view someone who can respond to reasons as the reasons they are. (McDowell 2006: 129; emphasis in original)

Therefore, the observation, as stated so far, does not cause any problem for reflexionism. Reflection is not 'missing' altogether. It is present as a capacity, merely not actualized in some cases (perhaps in many). So to call it an observation of 'missing reflection' is a misnomer. We should rather call it the 'observation of the missing actual reflection'.

Now, we can of course grant that the observation stated above concerns actual reflection. Nothing has been claimed about the potential for reflection yet. But it is equally clear that we will now have to investigate whether the proposed version of reflexionism – call it 'modal reflexionism' – is really tenable. In the end, as I will try to show, it will turn out to be untenable. To anticipate a little, the main reason will be that we are not even able to recognize our reasons as reasons in the relevant kind of cases; we often lack this potential. And so to put up the requirement of reflection even in this modal form is still too much to ask for.[9]

[9] How about liberalizing the reflective requirement by allowing for a time shift? Could it not be sufficient that the subject was able to recognize her reason as a reason *in the past only*? This weakens the reflective requirement even more. A major difficulty, however, is that new reasons come into existence fairly often, and in such a case the relevant fact which is the new reason could not have been recognized as such a reason in the past – simply because it was not any such reason in the past. So the proposal cannot deal with all cases and, therefore, fails. – Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this idea.

To begin, we can ask why having the potential for reflective recognition of reasons as reasons should be important at all. What *difference does it make* whether the potential is present or not? For, in general, a potential might sometimes make a difference, but sometimes not. It depends. It needs to be argued that having a potential for reflection makes a significant difference. For example, a potential to carry a lot of weight makes a difference to whether a bridge is safe. Safety is a modal notion (in this case). But whether a team has won the football match is a matter of actually scoring goals, not of potentials to score goals. Unfortunately, however, McDowell does not offer any considerations or explanations to this effect, to the best of my knowledge. So it remains entirely open whether the modal move is really helpful. If one responds to a reason by forming an attitude or performing an action, and the only way in which reflection is 'present' is the form of a mere unactualized potential, what does this mere potential contribute to the normative status of being rational? What difference does it make? It is far from obvious what the answer to this question could be. So far, then, we lack sufficient explication or information in order to assess the modal move. Further arguments are needed.

A further question arises at this point. If it is the case that the potential for reflection matters, *how* does it matter? John McDowell is quite clear on this point. In his view, one must respond to a reason as a reason (or respond to a reason 'as such') in order to rationally respond to it at all. And responding to a reason as a reason requires the ability to recognize it as a reason. As McDowell puts it:

> The notion of rationality I mean to invoke here is the notion exploited in a traditional line of thought to make a special place in the animal kingdom for rational animals. It is a notion of responsiveness to reasons *as such*. (McDowell 2006: 128)

Or as he puts it elsewhere: perception as a capacity for knowledge is

> a capacity to get into positions in which one knows that it is through one's perceptual state that one knows something about the environment – and so knows that one's perceptual state conclusively warrants one in the belief in question. (McDowell 2011: 42)

The problem with this answer, however, is that there is an *alternative* that McDowell does not consider and that he does not show inferior to his proposal. The alternative is that reflection (actual or potential) might just play the role of a *special kind of possession* of reasons. Why not think that being able to recognize one's reason as a reason is a special way of possessing this reason – the 'reflective way of possessing a reason'- rather than a necessary condition of following the reason. This reflective way of possessing a reason is a self-conscious way, a way that involves self-conscious knowledge that one's reason is a reason for one's response. And having a reason in this special, reflective way might be relevant to further phenomena, such as responsibility for one's attitudes. (This is far from obvious, but surely something that would deserve further investigation.) So the reflection that allegedly is necessary for responding to reasons might not be necessary for responding rationally, but perhaps for responding in a way that makes one responsible (accountable) for the response. Just responding to a reason can be understood as the exercise of a normative competence for holding attitudes that are supported by one's reasons, where the normative competence is constituted by a (cluster of) dispositions. And possession of a reason could simply consist in knowledge or awareness of the fact that is the reason. Since one can know a reason without knowing that it is a reason, no reflective knowledge is necessary for possessing reasons (on this alternative view). (More on this alternative, non-reflective way of responding to reasons will be said below in section 6.)

As a supplementary thought, we can add that the mere *potential* for recognition of one's reason as a reason might be good enough for *being responsible* for the response since often, we can be responsible for something we do by being in a position to know what we are doing, even when there is no actual knowledge of what we are doing. We are in a

position to know it (i.e., we satisfy what is sometimes called the 'epistemic condition' on responsibility), and arguably, that is sufficient for having responsibility (in the sense of accountability).[10] At least, this is an idea that does have some initial plausibility and deserves a further hearing. Nothing in what McDowell has said excludes this alternative view. So concerning the question of *how* reflection is relevant to responding to reasons we end up in an impasse. (Another suggestion as to the role that recognizing one's reason as a reason might play will be discussed later, in section 6.)

If we think further about what role reflection might play, we could note that reflection, as conceived so far, is a *state*, the state of recognizing one's reason as a reason (or the state of being able to recognize it). However, responding to a reason seems to involve some *skill or know-how*. One is competently treating some consideration (that is a reason) as a reason, one transits from premises to a conclusion. This sound very much like the exercise of a skill or know-how, and not like a further state. (Remember the Lewis Carroll problem: adding further states to some states that constitute the premises of one's reasoning would not suffice for making one move on to the conclusion; something else and of a different kind than a state is needed – a skill or know-how.) Although this additional thought does not directly concern the question of whether reflection is necessary for rationality, it does seem to put some pressure on the idea that reflection, understood as a state, is what we need to look at to understand rationality. (In principle, one can say that both are needed, the state of reflection and the skill or know-how. But if the skill or know-how is needed anyway, why is the state needed in addition?)

In any case, we can conclude that the modal move is not immediately successful. So far, then, it remains open whether rationality requires

[10] For a general overview of the epistemic condition of responsibility, see Talbert (2019), sc. 3.3.4. One of the best recent discussions of the epistemic condition in relation to responsibility for attitudes can be found in Malmgren (2019). The kind of responsibility that I have in mind here is not just attributability but rather accountability. – The distinction between these two kinds of responsibility (and a third kind, answerability) has been made by David Shoemaker and Angela Smith. Cf. Shoemaker (2011), Smith (2012).

reflection. We will now move on to a further argument that aims to show that the reflective requirement cannot be upheld since it asks for too much.

4. The counterargument: entanglement

The *argument from entanglement* hinges on the fact that conscious reasoning and non-conscious inference, as characterized above, can be entangled in a way that has serious consequences for the possibility of recognizing one's reason as a reason. We come across this possibility when the premises of conscious reasoning are themselves the conclusions of some non-conscious inferences. The main example is given by perceptual beliefs that are formed on the basis of perceptual states. These perceptual states are not reasons-susceptible states, so an inference that has such a perceptual state as its conclusion does *not count as reasoning* but as inference. This is the case that I will focus on in the following – obviously a very important case since perceptual beliefs are abundant in our human lives. The relevant perceptual states are *conscious* states, let us suppose. Plausibly, we often have epistemic access to the perceptual states that we undergo. There might be non-conscious perceptual states. But we can focus on the important cases in which one's perceptual state is conscious. Then, however, the perceptual state is the conclusion of some non-conscious inference. The perceptual system – let us say the visual system – is involved in the formation of perception, and most plausibly it consists of a hierarchy of inferences that lead from early visual states (with content that is one-dimensional or two-dimensional, perhaps, if David Marr is right) to further visual states and finally to the conscious perceptual state on the basis of which the perceptual belief is then formed. All of the non-conscious inference comprising the earliest visual representational states in the perceptual hierarchy up to the conscious perception is inaccessible to consciousness. So it counts as non-conscious inference; the subject does not have epistemic access to the visual representational states that are the premises of the perceptual

inference. – All of these claims are surely not definitely proven, but they are very plausible and widely accepted, I take it. From now on, we will suppose that they are true, and the rest of the argument can unfold as follows.[11]

We can simply note that whether a reasoning from some *perceptual state* to a perceptual belief will lead to perceptual knowledge depends on whether the perceptual state itself is a genuine perception (the good case) or an illusion or hallucination (the bad case). Suppose that the relevant part or aspect of the perceptual state – say the color that it represents of an object – is non-veridical. Our subject perceives an object to be grey even though it is in fact blue, for example. Then she will form the belief that there is a grey object in front of her, not a blue object. This will of course not be perceptual knowledge, since it is a false belief. If, in contrast, the object is in fact grey and the perceptual state is a genuine perception of the color of the object, i.e., represents the object to be grey, the subject will form the belief that there is a grey object in front of her, and this might very well be perceptual knowledge. The process that leads from the perceptual state to the perceptual belief is of the very same kind in both cases, the good and the bad case. It is just the status of the premise – the perceptual state – which is different. In the bad case, it is an illusion; in the good case, it is a genuine perception. So it follows that we have an epistemic dependence, an *entanglement*. The success of the conscious reasoning *depends* on the success of the non-conscious inference that leads to the premise of the conscious reasoning.[12]

[11] Here, and throughout this paper, I assume that perceptual states are representational states with contents. This is common ground shared with McDowell and other traditionalists who also reject other views of perception, like the sense-date view, adverbialism, or relationalism. – Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this assumption.

[12] One might think of the possibility that even perceptual illusions provide justification for perceptual beliefs, or that they provide even the very same justification as genuine perceptions. This kind of 'dogmatism' is not what McDowell would endorse, however. He is an epistemological disjunctivist, and so he fully accepts that the illusion does not provide

Now we have to look at the consequences of the fact of epistemic dependence. It is not hard to see that the consequences are rather unfortunate for the reflexionist. For whether the subject undergoes an illusion or a genuine perception is not introspectively accessible to her consciousness. The inference in the visual system that she is undergoing is not introspectively accessible. Normally, the subject would just form the very same perceptual belief and, thus, treat her perceptual state as a genuine perception even if, in fact, it is an illusion. In the bad case, she would simply get it wrong. Therefore she is unable to recognize her perceptual reason as a reason in the good case. How could she recognize that she is having a genuine perception in the good case merely on the basis of introspection? (We will come back to testimony as an alternative source soon. Let us consider introspective access first.) Her perceptual state represents the object to be grey. In fact, the object is grey, in the good case. But she cannot access the non-conscious inference that led her to have this perception, and she cannot recognize that it is a genuine perception rather than an illusion. So she is not in a position to recognize her reason as a reason.

Suppose we say that the subject is basing her belief that she is genuinely perceiving the object to be grey on her introspectively formed belief that she is undergoing a perceptual *appearance* as of a grey object. This perceptual appearance (known by introspection, let us grant) cannot be the reason underpinning recognition of one's reason as a reason. Recognizing that one is having a perceptual appearance falls short of recognizing that one is genuinely perceiving. But the reason that the subject is supposed to recognize as a reason is the fact that she is genuinely perceiving the object to be a certain way. Knowledge of one's

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the same justification as the genuine perception. The argument does therefore not rest on assumptions that McDowell would reject. Needless to say that dogmatism has its own problems, and one of them is exactly that the genesis of the perceptual state seems to matter as to its justificatory force. Cf., for example, the discussion of this problem in Tucker (2013).

perceptual appearance is not good enough for that. Thus, appeal to knowledge of one's appearance provides no solution to the reflexionist.

It should be noted that according to reflexionism, justification requires reasons – that is the reasons-justification link that we are supposing here. We also rely on the widely accepted assumption that knowledge requires justification. To recognize that the subject is undergoing genuine perception requires the subject to have a *reason* for believing so. But *introspectively* she is not able to come into possession of any such reason. So either she is in a position to get such a reason from some other source, or she simply is not at all in a position to get it. Introspection is not a suitable source since the non-conscious inference that leads to the perception is not conscious. (Please note that all of this is true of the typical and normal case of genuine perception; nothing extraordinary or abnormal is going on.)

If we consider alternative source of reasons, we can think of testimony. That, however, immediately leads to a problem. Perception is generally held to be a *foundational* source of justification and knowledge, i.e., perception is supposed to provide justification independently of other sources. If we need testimony in order to properly respond to a perceptual reason (since testimony provides the searched-for reason for believing that one's reason is a reason), the *independence* of perception as a source of knowledge is given up. Perception would become *epistemically dependent* on testimony. That would be a highly counterintuitive consequence of the reflexionist view. I take it to be a decisive reason for rejecting this alternative.

The second alternative is background knowledge. The subject might know that she is in circumstance C (good lighting, no impediments to the exercise of perceptual capacities, no hallucinogen drug taken, and the like), and she might know that in circumstances C, her perceptual state is likely an instance of genuine perception. That she is undergoing a perceptual state that represents the object to be grey, finally, is something she could know through introspection. (Though, again, there is a question about which reason one would have for this introspectively formed belief.)

So take together, she might have a good reason to believe that she is in the good case, i.e., that she is genuinely perceiving the object to be grey. So far, so good. However, a closer look soon reveals the fatal shortcoming of this idea. It leads into a vicious regress. For how is she to know that she is in circumstances C? To know about the lighting conditions, for example, is possible only on the basis of perception or of testimony. (Or of background knowledge, but this must end after finitely many steps. Without loss of generality, we can suppose that we are already at the end of this chain.) Again, to appeal to testimony prevents perception from being an independent source. And to appeal to perceptual knowledge just shifts the problem to this other instance of knowledge on the basis of some perceptual state. It can be granted that it is possible to know that one is undergoing a genuine perception on the basis of the just described background knowledge. But the acquisition of this background knowledge is again subject to the reflective requirement, according to reflexionists. This, however, is the very same situation that we began with, just with other contents. The solution is only a solution for the first instance if it is presupposed that there is a solution for the second instance. Thus, the problem is merely shifted from one place to the next one, and so on.

5. A solution: reasons as perceived facts rather than perceptions?

There is one loophole in the argument given so far. We have silently assumed that the supposed reason that the subject has to recognize as a reason is *the perception* (in the good case, where there is a genuine perception). But this is just one option. We could also think that the supposed reason is *the perceived fact*, not the perception of it. The perceived fact is a non-psychological fact: that the object is grey, for example. In contrast, the perception of this fact is of course a

psychological fact. Accordingly, we have two options: psychologism and anti-psychologism about (normative) reasons.[13]

In his writings, John McDowell seems to endorse psychologism about perceptual reasons. He writes as if the *perception* is the reason to which the subject responds by forming her perceptual belief.

> […] [I]t is a perceptual state itself that warrants one in a belief that counts as knowledgeable by virtue of having such warrant." (McDowell 2011: 33)[14]

Psychologism in this sense might be rejected and replaced by anti-psychologism. The reflective requirement itself does not require that we embrace psychologism about (normative) reasons. So for the present purposes, we have to take the anti-psychologistic alternative seriously. And perhaps it will be more promising. Let us see.

Suppose then, as anti-psychologists want to have it, that the reason that the subject is supposed to recognize as a reason is *the perceived fact* (that the object is grey, e.g.). Then she is under no requirement to be able to recognize that she is genuinely perceiving. That was a requirement only on the assumption of psychologism about perceptual reasons. To opt for anti-psychologism, thus, frees us from the unfortunate problem that was stated above. But it does of course lead to another question: how is the subject supposed to be able to recognize her reason – the perceived fact – as a reason for her perceptual belief? Her reason is the perceived fact that the object is grey, for example. How can she recognize that this fact is a reason for believing that the object is grey? (Or that the object has no chromatic color?) – The answer is quite easy to find, it seems. Of course, the fact that the object is grey is a reason for believing that the object is

[13] The distinction is widely acknowledged. See, for example, Alvarez (2016) for the case of reasons for action.

[14] This is just one passage where it becomes clear that the *perception* (*perceptual state*) is the reason, according to McDowell. Throughout the entire text one can find McDowell taking that position.

grey. It is an excellent reason, indeed. And everyone knows this, or at least is in a position to know this. This kind of background knowledge does not seem to be problematic or hard to get at. Let us grant that. (That the object is grey is also an excellent reason for believing that the object has no chromatic color. This can also be granted.) So we seem to get everything we wanted to have. The subject is aware of the fact which is the reason. And she is in a position to know that this fact is an excellent reason for believing what she comes to believe (i.e., that the object is grey). Mission accomplished.

But wait a second. We have been a bit sloppy. In fact, to recognize that the perceived fact (that the object is grey) is a reason for believing p (that the object is grey, e.g.) one has to know *that there is this fact* (that the object is grey) in the first place. So far, however, all we have granted is the background knowledge that, *if it is a fact that the object is grey* then that fact is an excellent reason for believing that the object is grey. This (the known conditional) does not yet settle the question whether it is a fact that the object is grey. So we can ask whether the subject in a position to know the perceived fact (that the object is grey). In other words, we can ask: is there an accessible scenario in which the subject knows this fact? In this scenario, the following is supposed to be the case: the subject knows the perceived fact. So she must have a reason for believing that this fact obtains. Which reason? The perceived fact could only be this reason if she possesses it, and that requires her to know it. (No other fact could help out as a reason here, since nothing in the actual world guarantees that there is such any such further fact.) And indeed, she knows it (in the scenario), as we have supposed. But the problem is that she cannot believe the perceived fact *on the basis of* this reason (the perceived fact), since she would already have to believe (and even know) it in order to believe it (in order to have it as a reason). So it is not possible (in the scenario) that the subject knows the perceived fact on the basis of the perceived fact. (And it is also not possible (in the scenario) that the subject knows the perceived fact on the basis of some other reason, since no such other reason needs to be present.) Thus, there simply is no such

(accessible) scenario in which the subject knows the perceived fact. That is, in the actual world, the subject is not in a position to recognize her reason as a reason.[15]

We can conclude that turning towards non-psychologism about reasons does not help the reflexionist. In ordinary situations where we think we have perceptual knowledge, the reflective requirement makes such perceptual knowledge impossible. That is a decisive reason to reject reflexionism.

6. Sketch of an alternative two-layered view

So far, our results have been 'merely negative' in that we have argued that reflexionism fails to account for perceptual knowledge (in many ordinary cases in which we are very confident to have perceptual knowledge). How about something 'positive'? - Here is a short sketch of the alternative two-layered view that rejects the reflective unity thesis.

[15] Williamson claims that what one knows is one's body of evidence. Cf. Williamson (2000: ch. 9). So if one knows that p, the fact that p is part of one's evidence and, thus, could serve as a reason for some beliefs. We may grant that. But that does mean that the subject is able to use this piece of evidence as a reason for believing p. Arguably not. Knowing requires believing. So one must already believe that p in order to have it as one's evidence. Therefore, one cannot use the fact that p as a reason for which one believes that p (though one could use it as evidence for some other belief). But according to a reflexionist like McDowell, knowledge does require some reason for belief (since knowledge is a standing in the space of reasons, as it were). Therefore, the Williamsonian idea is of no help to the reflexionist. Please keep in mind that according to the – antipsychologistic – approach that we are currently considering, it is the perceived fact – the fact that p – and not the perception of it that is supposed to be the reason for believing p. The problem only arises for *this* candidate reason (the fact that p). To put it in a nutshell, the proposal involves a vicious circularity: a fact that one knows cannot be the reason for which one believes that this very fact obtains (even if it might be part of one's body of evidence by being known). – In his discussion with Anthony Brueckner, it becomes clear that Williamson would deal with the issue by simply giving up the idea that knowledge requires a reason for which one believes. So, in a sense, Williamson pleads for 'immediate perceptual knowledge'. Cf. Williamson (2009).

To be able to reflect on one's reasons when one is relying on them in one's reasoning is a special case, and an especially good case. When self-aware of one's reason's being a reason one knows (or justifiably believes) that it is a reason for one's conclusion. To use it as a reason one need not be self-aware of it in this way. Responding to reasons is not a matter of meta-cognition. Rational attitudes can be formed without such meta-cognition. Rather, what is required is the exercise of a (first-order) *competence* (or know-how or skill). Such a competence can be thought of as a *rational* competence (a normative competence), since it comprises a disposition to respond to facts by forming the attitude that these facts are reasons for. It is a disposition to bring one's attitudes in accordance with these reasons (i.e., the reasons one possesses).[16] Possession of a reason is awareness of it, i.e., knowledge of the fact that is the reason (or genuine perception of this fact).[17] It does not require knowing that it is a reason (for the relevant attitude). Otherwise, as we have seen, we would make it too hard to respond to a reason.

A competence, constituted by a disposition or cluster of dispositions, to respond to a reason by forming an attitude that is in accordance with it explains why one's attitude is in accordance with the reason: it is not a mere accident, since it is the manifestation of a competence. (This is similar to the idea of virtue epistemologists like Ernest Sosa, who think that knowledge is the case where one's true belief is the manifestation of a competence to form true beliefs. The most important difference is that

[16] More on such rational dispositions can be found in Hofmann (2022). Detailed views of such rational, normative dispositions have been worked out by Mantel (2018) and Lord/Sylvan (2019), for example.

[17] Alternative accounts that require merely justified belief are not promising, since they allow for a Gettierized condition. In such a Gettierized condition, one merely truly and justfiedly believes that p - where p is the fact that is the reason in question – (or merely has a veridical hallucination that p). Intuitively, this is not sufficient for possessing the reason that p. One could acquire knowledge of some fact on the basis of mere justified true belief (or of veridical hallucination), which is quite counterintuitive. - That genuine perception (and even non-conceptual genuine perception) is sufficient for possessing a reason has been argued in Hofmann (2018).

here we appeal to accordance with reasons instead of correspondence with reality, i.e., truth.) Plausibly, such competences have to be acquired through experience. We learn to respond to various facts in their reasons roles, basically throughout our entire life. Which kinds of learning mechanisms there are is to some extent an empirical question, and it might be difficult to describe the details (and to avoid any overintellectualization). But it is plausible that we can acquire and have the dispositions that constitute such competences. They provide the ground floor level equipment for our capacity for perceptual knowledge (and perhaps they can be characterized as 'doxastic habits')[18]. When acquiring perceptual knowledge of the ordinary kind, we respond to what we perceive by exercizing perceptual competences that have beliefs in accordance with the perceived reasons as their manifestations (if things go well). We can reliably move from perceivable surface features to non-perceivable, 'theoretical' kinds. Perhaps, we are not responsible for these beliefs (since responsibility, as pointed out above, may require some kind of knowledge of what one is doing, i.e., knowledge of a reflective kind). But this does not mean that we do not believe for reasons. In addition, the problem that the modal move of the reflexionist had to face (cf. section 3) does not recur. The reason is simply that treating a fact as a reason does *not require* being in a position to recognize that it is a reason. Sometimes people have this further feature, but it is not necessary to have it. How often this is the case can be left open. Suffice it say that, in principle at least, testimony could always provide the required knowledge. So it seems that we will have at least some cases in which subjects are able to recognize that their reasons are reasons. Importantly, appeal to testimony would be fine for the proposed non-reflexionist account since the perceptual knowledge does not require reflective knowledge and, thus, perception can be an independent, foundational source of justification. The important point is that the problem that the reflexionist's modal move has to face only arises if one makes reflection a necessary condition

[18] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this suggestion.

of responding to reasons. The proposed dispositionalist account is free of such a commitment, as it should be.[19]

However, one *can* reflectively possess a reason when responding to it. This amounts to reflective reasoning. Such reasoning is not just conscious. We need to distinguish between conscious reasoning and reflective reasoning. *Conscious* reasoning, please recall, is reasoning whose premises are (states of a kind that is) accessible to consciousness (at least normally or typically). Reasoning from perceptual knowledge to some further, more 'theoretical' belief is a paradigm example of such conscious reasoning. *Reflective* reasoning involves a higher-order state, a reflective state, which has one's reasoning or some (normative) aspect of it as its object. In reflective reasoning, the subject knows (or genuinely perceives) a fact f, she treats it as a reason for forming the attitude A (by exercising a rational competence), and she knows that the fact f is a reason for holding attitude A. Epistemically, this is an especially good situation. In such a case, one not only holds a justified attitude A. One also knows that the consideration that one treats as a reason is a reason for one's attitude. Thus, it seems that one is in a position to justifiably self-ascribe the justified attitude. That is, one arrives at a justified belief that one is having a justified attitude A. This amounts to self-knowledge or justified self-belief that one knows or holds a justified attitude. The especially good case of reflectively possessing a reason, therefore, could lead to knowledge that one knows, roughly speaking.[20]

Such higher-order knowledge is not a requirement of having first-order knowledge. It is an optional, special condition that might or might not accompany first-order knowledge. When it is present, the subject can have a justified higher-order belief about the justificatory status of her

[19] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

[20] I acknowledge that this line of thought is merely a sketch of an argument. I intend to spell it out more fully in future work. Let me just point out, however, that it is not the same argument as the one given in Gibbons (2019).

first-order attitude.[21] This is a normatively rich situation, indeed. It is extraordinary in that many instances of first-order knowledge are not of this kind. The two-layered view can acknowledge the existence of the extraordinarily rich situation without having to say that it is present in all cases. That is a desirable result, I take it. Reflection is a further rational achievement, but nothing that pervades all cases of rationality.

The two-layered view can thus allow for a special place for reflection without making it constitutive of rationality tout court. The ground-level phenomenon of holding rational attitudes does not require reflection. One need not be able to recognize one's reasons as reasons. Once liberated from the reflective requirement, rationality can in principle be had by non-human animals and small children, too. This is a further advantage accorded to the two-layered view. So, in sum, we can conclude that the two-layered view is quite promising and deserves to be developed further.

[21] This is similar to what Ernest Sosa calls 'reflective knowledge', though there is some unclarity about what Sosa's 'reflective knowledge' exactly amounts to. One difference it that Sosa thinks that the meta-knowledge somehow makes the first-order knowledge better (Cf. Sosa (2019), for example.) I do not see that this has to be the case. Unless some kind of re-basing takes place, the first-order knowledge (or justified attitude) remains just as good as it is, it seems to me. And what such a re-basing could be, is rather unclear. – For discussion of Sosa's view see Kornblith (2004) and Carter/McKenna (2019), for example.

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Can Modal Facts Be Perceived?

Abstract: It used to be common agreement that modal knowledge cannot be a posteriori, even if there are actual modal facts. This general agreement is now under question. In particular, there is the view that modal facts can be perceived. Strohminger (2015) has argued that people directly perceive possibilities when they perceive abilities and dispositions, and Legg and Franklin (2017) maintain that mathematical necessities can be directly perceived in diagrams. I want to agree with the old thesis that modality can only be known a priori. Thus, I consider here these perceptualist positions and argue that, even if they are right that we do *perceive facts that* are modal, we cannot *perceive that* they *are modal*. Modality belongs in perception in the sense that modal facts can be perceived. But to realize that perceived facts are necessary or contingent there must also occur a priori intuition into perception.

Keywords: Perception; Modal Facts; Intuition; Transcendental Conditions; A Priori

1. Introduction

It is generally held that the modal nature of the world cannot be known a posteriori. There is nothing one can empirically learn about any fact in the world that could make one also learn that it is necessary/contingent. Suppose it is a necessary fact that a stone falls. If, say, one knows the physical *law* of gravitation holds *everywhere and always* in the entire universe, this knowledge will not guarantee knowledge of the necessary falling of the stone. Nor can s/he know that the stone falls of necessity when knowing, if such were the case, that *all* stones fall. Less of all can she know that it falls of necessity if knowing that it *will* fall. None of this can grant knowledge of the necessity of the fact that the stone falls. So how could one know the

necessity of the fact just *by perceiving* the singular fact that the stone is falling?

Thinking of this chain of reasoning it rather seems that one has moved away from the place where necessity belongs in the first place instead of approaching it. If the stone falls of necessity it must be because that the law of gravitation is necessary. It is the necessity of the law that explains its universal scope, universality implying in turn that all stones fall, and that this stone will fall. But none of these facts is known by perception. So if singular facts are modally loaded and perceived, then knowledge of their necessity is not by perception.

Recently, Margot Strohminger (2015), and Catherine Legg and James Franklin (2017), have positioned themselves against this view. Strohminger argues that we *directly perceive possibilities* when we perceive abilities and dispositions. Legg and Franklin maintain that mathematical *necessities can be directly perceived* in diagrams and geometrical representations. Here I analyse their arguments and claim that, even if they are right that we do *perceive facts that* are modal, we do not *perceive that* facts *are modal*. Modality is empirically accessible in the sense that one can perceive and, in general, one can empirically learn, modal facts. But to realize that facts are necessary/contingent there must also occur *a priori intuition* into the content of perception. When modal facts are given in perception, modal knowledge is the result of categorial intuition into the formal structures of perceived facts.

In section 2, I present what I take to be the main defining characteristics of a priori knowledge, including a priori intuition. In section 3, I discuss Strohminger's and Legg and Franklin's arguments in favour of the perception of modality and argue that they do not succeed. A priori insight into the underlying structure of the content in perception is necessary for knowledge of its modality. In section 4, I argue that categorial intuition is our cognitive gateway to metaphysical modality. I consider other cases of categorial intuition occurring in perception, such as the perception of temporal and special facts, and

of facts of identity and diversity, to show how space, time or identity are not detected by perception. Rather, there is direct a priori intuition of time, space or identity as transcendental categories structuring correspondent facts. Categorial intuition thus accounts for the epistemology of the modality of the facts when these are given by perception.

2. A Priori Intuition

Trivially, something is a priori known if it is not empirically known.[1] To clarify this truism important remarks need yet to be made, remarks which will finally determine what is to count as a priori.

First of all, one needs to decide the scope of 'non-empirical.' In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant wrote that some judgements or principles are a priori if *no further experience* is required for their formation (*KU* 182). When, starting from wherever she stands, the mind arrives to new understanding or new belief without the need of new empirical content, that will count as a priori. This is a revealing remark, showing how the content of a priori knowledge can be empirical. The results of logical deductions, acts of universalization, existential generalization, abstraction, etc., are a priori. But their content can be empirical. The conclusion that it will be a lively party given that Otto will come with Waldo and that both together are fun to stay with, is reached a priori. *No new* empirical knowledge is necessary to attain it because given the premises the inference is *purely formal*. And it is a priori even if all the material content in the argument must have been empirically gained at some point.

[1] I will use *a priori known* as a general formula for different forms of epistemological acts or states that can be so modified, such as, a priori apprehended, a priori justified, a priori understood, a priori believed, a priori grasped, and so on. Also, I will use a priori to modify epistemological contents, such as a priori concept, a priori principle, a priori belief, a priori capacity, and so on.

In a similar way, knowledge by *introspection* is a priori knowledge. To introspect one's own mind is to have a priori access to one's mental states. Because I am perceiving it, I know empirically that there is red pen on my left. But I know a priori *that I am perceiving* a brown pen on my left. I also know priori that I am feeling pain in my arm, and that I am thinking about this sentence. All these are judgements of reflection. I could perhaps come know some of my mental states a posteriori instead of by introspection. I could come to realize about my being in love only because my best friend tells me. I could also be wrong or indeterminate about my being or not in love, or I could have just lost my arm and thus see that it cannot hurt. New empirical information could decide whether the content of my own perception is appropriately provided. Yet, *my awareness* of my perceiving (no matter how truly or falsely) the pen, my love or my pain is a priori. It is undeniable, I think, that the a priori/a posteriori distinction is strongly rooted in our being able to distance ourselves from the world we perceive and to think of ourselves as distinct to it.

It is necessary to underline the epistemological character of the notion of a priori. Something is a priori not because it lacks in empirical content but according to the *non-empirical way* in which it is given, apprehended, carried out or come to be accepted by a subject. To see one's own ideas clearly and distinctly is a priori. Definitions —especially for those that propose them— are a priori known not because they lack in empirical content, but because of the way they are said to hold. If centuries ago, an old astronomer defined a planet as a celestial round body that has a motion of its own, she came to know a priori the definitional judgement that a planet is a celestial round body because she defined without the aid of new empirical information what a planet was. As we all very well know from Kripke (1980: 56), performative speech acts like naming can produce a priori judgements. That their first born is María, is a priori known by her parents when first naming her. Likwwise, universal presuppositions about certain linguistic terms, especially those presuppositions concerning

'previously' fixed grammatical meanings, are usually known a priori. For most speakers of English employing the term, it is a priori that 'now' is the time they are speaking (see García-Carpintero 2008).

These two preliminary observations also imply that one should not equate a priori knowledge with *innate knowledge*. Innate knowledge is not empirical. So innatism is one form of a priori. There are also different forms of innatism depending on *what* is to be considered innate. One of the forms of innatism identifies the a priori with the activities of the human mind. Famously, Kant identified the realm of the a priori with innate universal capacities of rational beings. Common sense would be one of these. Other forms of innatism identify the a priori with ideas or concepts always existent in our mind, such as Descartes's idea of infinite or God. According to Fodor (1994) some concepts are a priori, and some linguistic structures are a priori according to Chomsky (1957), because they are innate. But being a priori does not imply being innate. If there are analytic propositions, conceptual analysis would be a form of non-innate a priori knowledge. And logical and mathematical inferences and principles, as well as processes of universalization and abstraction are a priori. But most of these capacities are acquired while we grow up, and they develop only after all sort of different cognitive capacities have already been developed.

That the notion of a priori concerns the non-empirical way in which something is apprehended or accepted by a subject makes it a *relative* notion. Something can qualify as a priori for a given subject, but it might be a posteriori for another. Innate concepts could be a priori relative to different subjects because many people could be born without them but acquire them later empirically. Equally, that Julius invented the zipper could be held a priori by some people. Perhaps this is the only thing they know about Julius (Evans 1979), or perhaps their language stipulates that Julius invented the zipper, as Marcus Barcan (1961) claimed. It is certainly an a posteriori judgement for me. I have also learned a posteriori that one meter is the length of a bar at Paris.

However, there has been a time when people at the Commission internationale du mètre knew it a priori. Not only a judgement can qualify as a priori relative to different subjects. It could also qualify as a priori for the same subject or for the same people relative to different times. For instance, if the presupposed principles on which a given scientific theory rests count as a priori, it could occur that a fundamental change in the theory changes the principles. In that case, it seems natural to say that old a priori principles have resulted empirically false. This is what Reichenbach (1929) said of the principles of Euclidean geometry in Newtonian physics: that they had been shown to be false by the theory of relativity. Thus, if Reichenbach is right, some people first believed a priori the principles of Euclidean geometry but then came to know a posteriori that they were false.

The previous consideration also implies that a priori knowledge is as *fallible* as any other form of human knowledge. Reflective awareness of our mental states is a priori, but we are wrong about them too many times. And there are very few logical or mathematical rules of inference, if any, that have not been questioned or directly denied at some point in human history.

Peacocke (2005) writes that many friends of the a priori identify it with a form of intellectual grasping. Thus, when one intellectually grasps the identity conditions for a concept or grasps a mathematical truth, that would be a priori knowledge. BonJour's (1998) rationalist position and also Bealer's (2002) are exemplars of this view. Call *rational intuition* this a priori grasping. Rational intuition and a priori knowledge are not equivalent. Rational intuition, rational insight, is a particular form of intuition that certainly counts as a priori. But not every form of a priori consists in rational intuition. Deduction is also a priori, but it should be distinguished from intuition. And not all forms of intuition are a priori. Classically, intuition is *immediate apprehension* of something. Knowledge by direct sense perception is a form of intuitive knowledge, but it obviously qualifies as a posteriori. Thus, intuition and a priori are not equivalent terms: deduction is a priori,

and there is a posteriori intuition. The difference between a priori and a posteriori intuition will be of relevance later in the paper.

That the notion of a priori concerns the non-empirical way in which something is given, apprehended, or accepted by a subject also makes it independent of the *conceptual content* of what is to count as a priori. There seems to be no reason in fact why the character of a priori should be restricted to conceptual judgements. Kantian aesthetic judgements of spatial and temporal forms qualify as a priori. Judgements of beauty are a priori because, at the conscious presence of an object or a fact, the judgement bypasses any idea of the object, and expresses the feeling of new understanding, not about the object or its representation, but of the transcendental forms of sensibility that make it possible. Without further empirical investigation, aesthetic judgements of beauty express the experience of temporal and spatial pure forms. The 'transition' —to use Peacocke's expression (2005, p. 744)— from a perceptual state about the fact of the world to the aesthetic judgement is an a priori transition. Thus, a priori intuition is not necessarily conceptual. Rational intuition would cover the way we have of grasping the identity conditions for a concept. But it would also cover the grasping of non-conceptual forms, such as those of time and space within a given fact. Non-conceptual rational intuition is the form of a priori intuition that I will advocate for modal metaphysical knowledge in empirically given facts.

Finally, that a priori is an epistemological notion helps also in understanding why aprioricity and *necessity* must be separable. Judgements are not necessary because a priori. If there is a mind-independent world, the modal realm cannot to be directly identified with the realm of the a priori. That Pluto is not a planet is relative to no knowledge or language. Were there in Twin Earth a planet that according to all our knowledge exactly looks like Pluto, it would not be Pluto. And if we were epistemologically designed to see only triangles in a world of squares, it would still be an impossible fact that squares

are triangles. To identify the realm of the necessary with the realm of the a priori is an inherited Kantian flaw.

There is, however, an essential link between a priority and modality. Modal knowledge can only be a priori. Metaphysical modal beliefs could be falsified a posteriori, but they cannot be justified a posteriori. The reason is that modality cannot be empirically detected. It cannot be empirically detected because modality is not a property of facts but belongs to their formal structure. I cannot fully defend this complex thesis here. But, considering recent proposals for the view that modality can be perceived, I will attempt to show the modality of perceived facts can be accessed only by a priori, rational, intuition.

3. The Perception of Modal Facts

Strohminger (2015) and Legg and Franklin (2017) have recently positioned themselves against the thesis that modality can be known only a priori by arguing that the modal character of facts is also the object of perception. This is a surprising claim. Even if one could agree that some modal facts are perceived, it is hard to accept that one perceives their modal character.[2] My claim is that we do *not perceive that* facts are modal when perceiving modal facts. Modality is a priori intuited in the content of perception. Let's consider their proposals in turn.

Legg and Franklin maintain that mathematical necessities can be directly perceived in diagrams and other geometrical representations. For instance, one perceives the necessary truth that 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 by looking at the following diagram:

[2] There are other proposals (e.g., Sonia Roca-Royes 2017) that also maintain that the modal character of facts can be gained a posteriori. But as they are based on the occurrence of apropriate empirical inferences, these are not perceptualist accounts of modality. So I will leave them aside here, as the purpose of the paper is to conflate, if possible, rational and empirical intuition.

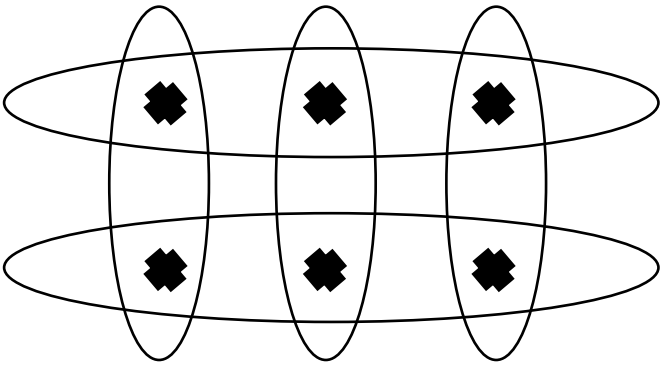

Figure 1. Why 2x3 = 3x2 (Legg/Franklin 2017: 320)

There are, I think, two different questions one must bear in mind when looking at this diagram. The first is whether, as they claim, one *perceives that* 2 *x* 3 = 3 *x* 2. The second is whether, given a positive answer to the first question, one *perceives that it is necessary that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2, as they also claim. The first, I think, should be answered in the negative. But, even if one were to grant that 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 is perceived, also the second question should be answered in the negative.

Consider the first question first. Suppose you do perceive *that* 2 *x* 3 = 3 *x* 2 when looking at the stars and lines in the diagram. In that case, the content of your perception should be distinguished from the content of your thought when you read and understand the mathematical written *formula* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2. Reading and understanding the mathematical formula is like reading and understanding any linguistic sentence written in a page, or like hearing and understanding what your teacher says aloud. But these forms of understanding do not count as knowledge by perception. There must be something you see (the written mathematical symbols) in order to read and understand, or something you must hear (the sounds) in order to hear and understand. But the *content* of your understanding in those situations of reading and hearing is not perceptual. There is a difference when

the content you learn is given by perception and when it is not. However, the content when you look at the diagram and the content in your thought when you hear and understand the formula do not differ in kind. But if they are the same then you do not *perceive that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 when looking at the diagram.[3] In fact, when you look at the diagram, you do not see but you *understand that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2.[4]

Legg and Franklin insist, not only that they perceive the mathematical fact, but that they do perceive that it is necessary. When looking at the diagram, they write:

> [...] we are not just perceiving that 2 x 3 *is* 3 x 2, but that 2 x 3 *must be* 3 x 2. It is clear that to try to create another option —such as 2 x 3 = 3 x 3— would be futile. It is as though *we can see the truth and* at the same time *the reason why it must be true*. (Legg/Franklin 2017: 321, my italics)

They also clarify that 'to perceive' is: 'the direct acquisition of beliefs about reality through veridical operations of the senses without the assistance of deliberate mental actions such as imagining or explicit reasoning' (2017: 324). Thus, to perceive a necessity is not to

[3] Strohminger (2015: 366) proposes the use of a modal auxiliary to distinguish between reading and perceiving by sight, in the following way. She proposes that for the perception of a school shooting when one eyewitnesses it, there is the possibility that one replaces the sentence by 'I could see that there was a school shooting'. This possibility is not open when one comes to know about the school shooting by reading a headline. However, note that this test fails for the case of the diagram: If I could see *that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 by looking at the diagram, I could also see *that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 by looking at the formula. Both seem to be true in the same sense of 'see', whatever that is. It is not as if, say, one is more in front of the mathematical fact when looking at the diagram than when reading the formula.

[4] If you still think that you *percieve that* 2 x 3 = 3 x 2 by looking at the diagram, then perhaps it is because there is for you no relevant diffence in the content in your mind irrespective of wheter it is achieved by sense perception or by thought. I will not consider thise possibility here because it would be of no use in deciding about out question about perception.

perceive the fact but also to *see why* it must be so. You perceive that you cannot create another option: 'that variants such as 2 x 3 = 3 x 3 are *impossible*' (2017: 336, my italics).

In other words, to perceive a necessity is to perceive that variants are impossible. However, it is not easy to see what could count as the *perception of impossibilities*. Impossibilities cannot be there to be perceived. One can imagine, hallucinate, and conceive impossibilities. But it does not seem easy to accept that one can also empirically discover or perceive impossibilities such as, say, that water is impossibly ClH. That water is impossibly ClH is not a part of the world because impossible facts cannot be. For the same reason, it is not a part of a possible world. Impossibilities, so it seems, cannot be empirically discovered; least of all, could they be learned by veridical operations of the senses.

However, some philosophers, notoriously Russell (1918: 44ff.), have claimed that there are negative facts. Other philosophers, notoriously Sartre (1969: ch. 1), not finding his friend Pierre at a French café, claimed that he perceived the negative fact that Pierre was not in the café. And once one comes round to negative facts, if there are also necessary facts, impossible facts go without saying. After all, impossible facts are the negatives of correspondent necessary facts. If it is necessary that water is H_2O, it is necessary that water is not ClH and impossible that water is not H_2O. So let's accept, for the sake of the discussion, that there are negative facts and necessary and impossible facts. How could their modality (and negativity) be perceived? Could there be, as Sartre claims, a '*that* this is *not* so' that is perceived? Could there be a '*that* this *cannot* be so', as Legg and Franklin claim, or a '*that* this is *possibly* so', as Strohminger claims, that is known by perception?

Necessity and negation can belong to the content of your perception. But you do not perceive negation and necessity. Consider identity and diversity facts, which are necessary. You see two pebbles. You can perceive the necessary fact that they are distinct. But you do not perceive *that* it is necessary that they are distinct, or *that* it is

impossible that they are the same. Perhaps, you can also perceive the negative fact that Pierre is not in the café. But you do not perceive nothingness. So there is a relevant difference to be made within the content of your perception: the material content of your perception, two pebbles and, perhaps, and Pierre at the café; and its formal structure, identity and distinctness, and negation. One consciously perceives the material content, but one is not aware by perception alone of these formal structures because they are also formal conditions for the very same content of perception. Reflexive necessary identity cannot be perceived as pebbles and colours are perceived. The colour is perceived, but that it is identical to itself is not.

Legg and Franklin claim that there is direct acquisition of modal beliefs about reality through veridical operations of the senses *without the assistance of deliberate* mental actions such as imagining or explicit reasoning. Thus, I guess they would say that one perceives the sum, or the multiplication and thus, one perceives the necessity they convey. I can find no meaning in the idea that a necessary mathematical function, as such, can be directly seen with our human eyes. To perceive is, according to usual theories of perception (e.g., Bruce and Young, 1986) is to have a dedicated sense or system which can receive the physical energy and translate it to neural activity that would somehow correspond to the content of experience. Even if there are no experiments that I know run with the end of finding such perceptual mechanisms for formal necessities, I think we can rule out them for the reasons already given. No perceptual mechanism could directly detect the necessity of a perceived particular fact without adding information about the metaphysics of the fact.[5]

[5] Mumford (2021: ch. 7) has claimed, for the case of negatives and absences, that we do have a perceptual mechanism that can make us have the perceptual experience that, say, there is no Pierre at the café, but it is a useful illusion. But even Mumford's perceputal mechanism of illussions cannot provide us with a non-Pierre perception.

On her side, Strohminger (2015: 369) writes that, when perceiving modal metaphysical facts, there is an *unconscious process* of deduction. Thus, when you perceive two pebbles, and unconsciously accept that diversity is necessary, then you perceive that two pebbles are necessarily distinct. And you perceive that the table is necessarily made of wood if you believe that things are necessarily made of their material, and this belief is unconsciously held by your mind when you perceive the table. The same goes for negative facts: there is an unconscious deduction running from their perceived positives plus the principle that if p then No-No-p towards their negatives. Thus, given the content of perception, there is an *unconscious* deduction to its modal/negative character from given *unconscious beliefs* held at the same time of the perception. But this must wrong.

It is wrong because when perceiving, say, that the sky is blue, you might also firmly and unconsciously believe that when sunlight hits an object, it will absorb specific wave lengths and reflect others that reach your eyes. Yet, when you consciously perceive that the sky is blue you do not *perceive* that some wave lengths reach your eyes. Wave lengths are not the content of your experience. Or you could firmly unconsciously believe that material objects are complex structures of bonds of energy, but if you perceive that there is a stapler on the table, you do not *perceive* that there are complex structures of bonds of energy in front of you. Bonds of energy do not form part of the *perceptual content* of your experience. In the same way, even if you unconsciously believe that actual facts are possible, when perceiving a contingent fact, you do not *perceive its possibility*. You see that this is a black house, but that it is *possibly* black is not part of the content of your experience. How could *possibly* be added to the material content of your perception of the black house? For certain, you do not perceive

What could be the *material content* of an illusion of a *non-Pierre*? Negation seems to be a transcendenal formal condtion for negative facts. That would explain why it cannot be preceptually dectected.

the many other colours that the house could have been. It seems to me that *possibility* is not part of the material content of your perception, but a formal condition for the actuality of the fact that the house if black and of your perception of it.

Moreover, according to Strohminger the perception of the modality occurs when there is an (unconscious) *deduction* mediated by a necessary belief. There is an a priori process that allows for the perception of the modality of fact. And it is this a priori deduction *from necessary beliefs* which explains knowledge *of modality* in perception. But then, in so far as she needs to propose an a priori process taking place in the mind that carries modal information to be *injected into* the content of perception, modality cannot be given a posteriori. In other words, it becomes difficult to see how she can allow that the fact that is the object of perception is modal in the first place. Its modality belongs in perception only parasitically. It has been inherited from another modal premise in the deduction.

Note that the worry is *not* (yet) that the processes affecting the content are deductions. I will defend later that intuition is the best epistemological form of modal metaphysical knowledge. But there are many cases of modal knowledge that are the product of a deduction, and many others that do not clearly fall into one of these forms. For instance, mathematicians and logicians have a trained brain that skips many steps in a deduction thus being able to directly intuit many mathematical facts. Rather, the worry is that in Strohminger's epistemological account, also in cases of perception, the modality of the fact is not *given by* perception. But this is a serious worry, as her epistemological account of metaphysical modality is intended as a perceptualist one. (Equally, according to her account, that Pierre *is not* in the café is not provided by perception.)

In summary, I think there are various difficulties with perceptualist accounts of the modality of facts. First, there seems to be *no perceptual mechanism* by which the modality of facts becomes part of conscious perceptual content. If perceived facts are necessary,

there is no direct perception of their necessity or of the impossibility of their variants, such as Legg and Franklin demand. Second, if one needs to add an unconscious mechanism that deduces the modality of facts, such as Strohminger demands, then their modality is *given a priori*. Finally, if the modality primarily belongs to the premises that the conclusion *inherits*, modal facts cannot be given by perception. In the next section, I will also claim that the modality in perceived modal facts is a priori reached by direct rational intuition; not by a deductive process of the rational mind.

In general, I maintain that there can be necessary facts and necessary relations between distinct entities (see García-Encinas 2013). But we do not perceive that they are necessary, even if we perceive correspondent structured facts. In particular, there is no sensory way of perceiving diversity, or identity, causality, diversity, time, ..., i.e., the metaphysical categories structuring facts, even if there are facts of identity and of diversity, causal and temporal facts, etc. that can be perceived. This might seem an ad hoc, rather clumsy, difference. On the contrary, I think it explains how in the perception of facts there is implied, sometimes conscious, a priori intuition into the formal metaphysical structure that constitutes them as the facts they are.

4. A Priori Intuition and Metaphysical Perception of Modal Facts

Defending what he calls a (higher-order) tracking theory of intentionality, Uriah Kriegel (2011) considers a particular version of a Phosphorus-Hesperus thought experiment. In this version we are asked to conceive of a possible situation where Tassandra, a subject who does not know that Phosphorus is Hesperus, has the perceptual experience that she is aware of looking at Phosphorus. Besides her being aware of looking at Phosphorus, there is nothing else that distinguishes that situation from a situation where she would be aware of looking at Hesperus —she does not know whether it is morning or evening, illumination conditions are identical, the position of Venus in

the sky is identical, etc. Yet, Tassandra *feels* that she is perceiving one star rather than the other. So Kriegel claims that Tassandra is in fact (higher-order) tracking a distinct property, namely, the property of consciously *appearing* (*to her*) *to be Phosphorus* —and if she had had the feeling that she is perceiving Hesperus, she would have had (second-order) tracked the property of appearing (to her) to be Hesperus.

Now, given the conditions of the experiment that Kriegel proposes, it seems that one could say, in a rather Kripkean style, that proper names 'Phosphorus' and 'Hesperus' cannot make any difference in cognitive content in Tassandra's experience. That is, contrary to Kriegel's claim, there can be no *property* of appearing-to-be-Phosphorus (to her) that is different from that of appearing-to-be-Hesperus (to her) if everything else is equal in her perception. Nevertheless, even if there is not such a property, I agree that there is something Tassandra is being aware of. Such as Kriegel writes, when looking at the sky, Tassandra 'has a strong gut feeling that she is looking at one star *rather than the other*' (2011: 127, my italics), which means that she is thus suffering a (false) perception of *a fact of distinctness*.

Tassandra, like someone that feels pain in a non-existing limb, is wrong in her perception. We all know that Phosphorus is Hesperus, and that it is necessarily so. So Tassandra is wrong. But that she is wrong is not what really matters here. For there are veridical perceptions, and empirical discoveries, of facts of distinctness and of identity. One can discover that Anna is, in fact, Manuela —her indiscernible twin; or that Hesperus is Phosphorus (see García-Encinas 2017). The wrong perception that this is Phosphorus and not Hesperus, the right apprehension that River Rubicon is not River Fiumicino, or the discovery of a fact of identity, such as that Plato is Aristocles, do *not* include the experiential perception of distinctness or of identity. As we have just seen, there is no difference in content in Tassandra's perception that this is Phosphorus rather than Hesperus. There is *no*

property that Tassandra is perceiving. Distinctness is no property of entities—even if it is necessarily true that every entity is impossibly other. Neither is distinctness a *concept* derived by induction or by abstraction, or rationally perceived in an idealist heaven. There are facts of distinctness. And they can be perceived. But distinctness is not given as part of the material content of perception. The option is thus that distinctness is (wrongly) intuited a priori in Tassandra's apprehension as a pure form. Let's see.

When you empirically learn that a twin is not the other, or that River Rubicon is other than River Fiumicino, you know *a posteriori* the necessarily fact that River Rubicon is necessarily other than River Fiumicino. In the form of a K-schema,

i) If River Rubicon is other than River Fiumicino then it is necessarily other than River Fiumicino, a priori.
ii) River Rubicon is other than River Fiumicino, a posteriori.
iii) River Rubicon is necessarily other than River Fiumicino, a posteriori.

Kripkean schemas have this general form:

i)	If p then Np	[a priori]
ii)	p	[a posteriori]
iii)	Np	[a posteriori]

According to Kripke, for any necessary a posteriori truth Np, there is an a priori conditional of the form if p then Np such that, when p is a posteriori known it is also a posteriori known that Np. In the classic example, (i) we know a priori that if Hesperus is Phosphorus then Hesperus is necessarily Phosphorus. One day (ii) astronomers discovered a posteriori that Hesperus is Phosphorus, so (iii) they discovered a posteriori that Hesperus is necessarily Phosphorus.

Sense perception is an obvious case of a posteriori knowledge. Thus, according to the schema, if p is a necessary fact and (ii) one knows by perception that p, then (iii) one knows by perception a necessary fact. Knowledge *that* p *is necessary* still rests on a priori knowledge of the form showed by (i). And yet that it is a priori, does not mean the one needs to perform an inference, or a deduction here.[6]

As we have just seen in relation to Strohminger's view, if it were a deduction, the necessity of the perceived fact could not belong originally in perception; it would be added from previous premises concerning laws of identity or diversity. However, if there is a true modal fact that is being perceived, the necessity must belong in the perceived fact. Its modality is not directly given as perception. But neither can come knowledge of *diversity and its necessary* character from *outside* the empirical fact. Rather, when there is awareness of the necessity of the fact, diversity is intuited as a formal condition for the fact. You have an a priori intuition of diversity, as its necessary condition of possibility, *within* the singular fact that River Rubicon is other than River Fiumicino. An act of intuition cannot generate the modality that distinctness conveys; so modality does not turn a by-product of the activity of your mind. When you empirically learn that River Rubicon is other than River Fiumicino, you *immediately* experience that they are necessarily distinct. Distinctness and its necessity are, as it were, *scanned a priori* into the structure of the fact that they are distinct.[7]

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[6] Because of this form of schema Anand Jayprajash Vaidya and Michael Wallner (2021) have called Kripke a deductionist. However, I am questioning that there is a deduction here.

[7] One referee for this journal has remarked that given we can be wrong in our a priori beliefs, it could be that modal claims of the form of (i) are revisable byproducts of experience, so that modality is an entirely a posteriori affair based on prior experience. I agree that modal beliefs can be revisable. However, they can only be held true a priori. It seems to me that, same as universal facts cannot be gained adding particulars, necessity can only come from necessity.

David Woodruff Smith (2012) has proposed an imaginary case where someone succeeds in tricking you by a slight of hand moving a tomato around in her right. Without your awareness, she substitutes the original tomato by another indistinguishable tomato. The content of your perception of each tomato is the same. But, if at some point, you realized that you are perceiving two indistinguishable tomatoes, you would be conscious of their individuality and thus grasp their distinctness.[8] Their individuality belongs in your perception from the start, but it is consciously intuited as a formal condition for the content in your perception when you realize they are two. You perceive an individual tomato, then another one. You perceive that there are two distinct tomatoes. But awareness of their identity and distinctness is not part of your *perceptual* awareness. Distinctness is a priori intuited in the content of your perception as a transcendental condition for the fact that you perceive. As distinctness is a metaphysically necessary relation, you intuit a priori the necessity in the fact.

Metaphysical categories are transcendental. This means that, even if categories are formal structures of facts that we perceive, our acquaintance with them cannot be by perception. Take another example. Consider Kant's (1768) two-hands thought experiment and imagine that from all the points of the surface of a human hand you extend perpendicular lines towards a plane that is opposite to the hand. If you connect all the points that constitute the end of lines, also including the lines that are extended behind the plane surface in similar distances to those of the original hand, you will draw a counterpart of the hand, which Kant calls incongruent as it is a spatial inversion of the hand. If the original was a right hand, you have drawn its left, and vice versa. You can now distinguish between these two objects. But there is no possible material difference between them. No

[8] Woodruff Smith (2012) presents the twin-tomatoes experiment to show that awareness of individuality, of being a *thisness*, is related to an experience of actual presence of the external object in the context of perception.

description, no property of the hands can tell you that they are two. The experience of their distinction is the rational intuition of a non-conceptual form or structure, their spatial form.

Following a similar line of reasoning, Hanna (2008: 57) has argued that our direct presentation of time is non-conceptual and a priori. He bases this conclusion on the idea that events in time are experienced in an order. Consider a perception of two duplicate events occurring one earlier and the other one later than event E. To uniquely determine in perception, as we do, one as earlier and one as later than E, requires an order in time that cannot be decided by the descriptions of E and of its companions, for they are indiscernible. So the possibility of perceiving the events ordered in time includes a non-conceptual experience, an awareness of their temporality in perception. Moreover, as we cannot but perceive in space and time, Hanna concludes that any possible perception includes a non-conceptual grasp of spatial and temporal pure bare forms. Any perception of us (and other animals) essentially includes non-conceptual acquaintance with pure forms of space and time.

Temporal facts, spatial facts, necessary facts of identity, etc. can be perceived. But time, space, identity … are not perceived. As transcendental conditions of possibility of the facts they structure, categories are not perceptually known. However they can be rationally intuited into the facts. My own (contingent) existence is a priori intuited in the fact that I am thinking. My existence is a transcendental condition for my thinking. But existence is not a proper part of the content of my thinking. Likewise, any metaphysical category, along with its modality, can be a priori intuited in the facts its structures, when the facts are given in perception or learnt.

5. Conclusions

I have tried to make sense of a form of rational intuition into the content of perception that would explain how perceptual knowledge is

knowledge of modal facts. Thus, I agree with some perceptualists that modal facts can be known by perception. However, I have argued that this cannot mean that we know their modality by perception. According to Strohminger's (2015) modal perceptualism when perceiving modality, there also occurs an *unconscious process* of deduction from modal premisses that finally supports modal knowledge. But deduction, unconscious or conscious, is an a priori process. So knowledge of modality is still a priori knowledge. Moreover, in her view, a priori knowledge *determines the modal* character of facts in perception. So modal facts would not be perceived. But this is an undesirable result for anyone that believes in the modality of facts in the world. On their side, Legg & Franklin claim that the necessity of mathematical facts can be perceived when looking at diagrams, because one perceives that variants are impossible. I have argued that impossibilities can be perceived in the same sense that necessities and negations can. That is, once accepted that there are negative facts that can be perceived, nothingness or negation are not part of the material content in perception, but a priori intuited as formal metaphysical conditions for the facts.

In general, I have claimed that modal knowledge of perceived modal facts is possible when there occurs an act of a priori awareness of transcendental forms structuring the factual content of perception. Thus, you perceive that two cats are necessarily distinct when you perceive two cats and rationally intuit necessary distinction as a transcendental condition for the fact. Call categorial intuition this awareness.[9]

[9] My special thanks go to the two anonymous referees of SYNTHESIS – Journal for Philosophy, for their insightful comments. I am sure that I have not been able to completely satisfy their 'more argument is needed' demand. But I do hope that, thanks to their observations, the position is now more clearly stated.

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The Active Mind: Peter John Olivi and the Enactivism

Abstract: This paper will claim that there is a set of similar ideas between Peter John Olivi's philosophy of mind and contemporary enactivism. More precisely, it will list four ideas that can be found in both sources: that (i) the mind has a fully active nature, that (ii) the mind does not process representational items, that (iii) different psychological capacities form a continuum of ways of accessing the world, and that (iv) perception is inherently permeated by conceptual capacities. The presence of these ideas in such different contexts will serve to highlight the strong mutual connection between these ideas.

Keywords: Olivi; Enactivism; Conceptualism; Perception

Introduction

Throughout the history of philosophical and psychological thought, certain perspectives on the nature of the mind[1] have dominated intellectual discourse. Among these perspectives, those we will refer to as 'passivist' conceptions—that emphasize the mind's reception of information from the world as a passive first step—have held a prominent position. In this framework, the mind is often understood as moving sequentially from passive input to active processing and, finally, to behavioral output. However, not all thinkers have subscribed to this model. An alternative perspective, which we will refer to as 'activism,' challenges this dominant framework. Activism posits that the mind is

[1] In order to trace the relevant conceptual connections, we will use the terms 'mind/mental' and 'psychology/psychological' in their contemporary sense. This encompasses what medieval sources would refer to as both soul and mind. Similarly, we will favor the use of contemporary psychological terms such as 'capacities' for what medieval thinkers call *potentiae* or 'attention' for *aspectus*.

fundamentally and entirely active in its engagement with the external world. There is no passive stage of reception; rather, perception and all forms of cognition are inherently active processes. This perspective is far from mainstream, but it has appeared in at least two contexts in intellectual history: the contemporary enactivist movement and the work of the medieval philosopher Peter John Olivi.

Enactivism emphasizes the embodied, dynamic, and interactive nature of cognition. It holds that mental processes are constituted by the ways in which an organism acts in the world and the ways in which the world, as a result, acts upon it (Rowlands 2010: 3). Enactivism, in this way, opposes the canon of contemporary philosophy of mind and psychology, which is predominantly cognitivist in orientation. It challenges functionalism, computationalism, representationalism, the input-process-output model (Hurley 1998: 401), and the notion of multiple realizability (Bickle 2020). More broadly, it represents the most revisionist stance in the current philosophical landscape, critiquing the ideas that have structured Western psychological thought since at least Descartes (Ryle 2009a: 1-8): dualism, intellectualism, internalism, and individualism. On the other hand, Olivi, a 13th-century Franciscan philosopher, offered a radical critique of the Aristotelian orthodoxy of his time.[2] Despite the vast differences in their historical and scientific contexts, both perspectives share a commitment to understanding the mind as fundamentally active in its interaction with the world.

The goal of this paper is to show the four main points of convergence between the two sources. It will begin by characterizing the most general idea that will encompass both Olivi's and enactivist thought, which we will call the 'activist thesis'. According to it, the nature of the mind is completely active. That is, mental activity does not consist in the passive reception of stimuli from the outside, but is primarily something that is performed on the world. Second, the 'anti-representationalist thesis'

[2] Cf. Boeri (2010: xiii-xxii) for an overview of the arguments supporting the assimilation of Aristotelian thought with modern computationalism.

postulates that there is no processing in the mind of mental items that represent the world and act as a medium between the mind and the world. Third, the continuist thesis will postulate that different types of mental states do not categorically differ from each other, but form a unity and a continuum through which people gain access to different types of features of reality. Finally, the 'conceptualist thesis' will introduce into this scheme the position that all human perception of the world is inherently permeated by conceptual capacities. This is not a list of disconnected ideas scattered throughout the work of these authors. The position that will be argued in the course of this text is that these four ideas are co-implicated, that one points to the others and generates a coherent and articulated whole. And that is why they can be jointly repeated in philosophical contexts as diverse as philosophy in the thirteenth century and current debates in the philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences.

The aim of this article is not genealogical. There is no indication that contemporary enactivist authors are influenced by Olivi's work, which, for historical reasons, did not initiate an enduring tradition of thought, at least in the field of philosophy of mind. This is not a reason not to examine the isomorphism between Olivi's ideas and those of enactivism, quite the contrary. It raises the question of why such different intellectual contexts gave birth to similar ideas. These two sets of ideas were conceived not only within completely different conceptual frameworks, but also in the light of a virtually incomparable body of scientific knowledge. But in addition to the similarities between Olivi's and enactivist thought, something else is striking: their profound differences. Enactivism will emerge from different fields as diverse as phenomenology, ecological psychology or robotics that focus on the importance of the body and bodily movements as constitutive of the mind. On the other hand, Olivi will base his ideas on a mind-body dualism even more pronounced than that of Aristotle or his medieval followers. If the repetition of various themes in different contexts indicated to us some kind of co-implication between the four theses we will examine, the radical difference between Olivi's metaphysics of mind and that of contemporary enactivists may lead

us to think that this comparison may also illuminate the conceptual interdependence between a core of enactivist ideas and a core of ideas about the embodied, embedded and extended mind.

1. Activist Thesis

The first aspect to consider of Peter John Olivi's position is his strong defense of the active character of the mind and the great number and variety of his criticisms of the contrary position. His view is extensively articulated in a long series of arguments in the *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, where he confronts the Aristotelian position, standard for his time, according to which the mental faculties or capacities (*potentiae*) are passive. We will use the term 'passivist' to denote the position of both Aristotle and his medieval followers. As we shall see, this picture of how the mind works equally encompasses the contemporary psychological canon, dominated by cognitivism and computationalism. We will refer to Olivi's position as 'activist'. We will use this term for two reasons. First, to differentiate the approach from other analyses that have been made of these texts. For instance, Dominik Perler (2000) has used the notion of 'direct realism', but in his interpretation, direct realism is sufficiently broad to be defended by Thomas Aquinas. The term 'extramissionist' has also been used to refer to Olivi's ideas regarding perception (Lička 2019). But this concept designates a larger medieval tradition of thought, which encompasses other Franciscan philosophers of the time. These philosophers belonged to a tradition that goes back to Augustine and the neo-Platonic school of thought, which includes thinkers such as Boethius (Silva/Toivanen, 2010: 247-250). However, we wish to focus on a more specific aspect of Olivi's thought, who elevates the critique of the passive image of the mind to a theoretical extreme unparalleled in the thirteenth century. One reason to consider using a different term is that it highlights the remarkable originality of Olivi's thought. But the main reason for adopting the term 'activism' is to underscore the isomorphism that Olivi's philosophy of mind has with

post-cognitivist—particularly enactivist—approaches within the field of contemporary philosophy and the cognitive sciences. These conceptual connections will be examined throughout this text.

Perler (2003: 38-41) argues that the active character of the mind is almost without exception accepted in contemporary philosophy, and it is only in the medieval context that Olivi's activist stance is profoundly original. Perler thinks of the concept of intentionality coined by Brentano (1874) when he claims that the default position is the activist one. Our interpretation differs. Olivi's philosophy not only contrasts with the mainstream of his time but also with the contemporary, with cognitivism and its theoretical pillars. On the passivist side, is not only the Aristotelian theory (and those influenced by it) that claims that the mind receives and processes species from the outside world; modern (in the broadest sense of the term) thought has systematically incurred in the idea that the mind is in charge of processing items passively received through the senses. The contemporary expression of species theory is the representational-computational theory of mind, according to which the mind processes stimuli provided by the world through the senses following syntactic-computational laws. The passivism common to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas also applies to contemporary cognitive sciences. All these positions are encompassed within the input-process-output framework (Hurley 1998: 401). This framework posits that cognition consists of three discrete stages: first, the passive reception of environmental stimuli, which involves the generation of representational items (medieval species, contemporary mental representations); second, the processing of these items; and finally, behavior. Therefore, Olivi's thought not only contrasts with most classical and medieval thinking but also with contemporary mainstream cognitivists views.

Olivi argues that the passivist notion has been accepted uncritically, not only by his contemporaries but also by Aristotle himself, who accepts

it in an unexamined way.[3] In response, Olivi employs a progressive argumentative strategy. First, he undermines the most radically passivist position: (i) that the acts of the faculties or powers of the mind are directly caused by external objects. From there, he moves on to positions that are gradually more concessive to the activist view but still passivist, showing that they are equally problematic: (ii) that the acts of the faculties or powers of the mind are caused by external objects through representational items (species), and (iii) that they are caused partially by the species and partially by the powers or faculties themselves. The first two positions conceive of the mind as passive with respect to external objects, which cause mental activity either directly or via representations (Silva/Toivanen, 2010). The third accepts a degree of activity in the mind but still maintains the existence of representational items.

Before deploying any kind of metaphysical argument, Olivi begins by conducting an analysis of the—in Wittgensteinian terms—grammar of psychological concepts.[4] 'Intelligere', 'sentire', 'apetere', in their active voice, have the mind as subject and the things of the world as object; just as the verb 'to heat' has as its grammatical subject the fire and not the heated air (II Sent. q. 58, 463). And we use the verbs relating to each psychological capacity in the same way—we say 'I see', 'I hear' and 'I understand'—because of the underlying unity of mentality (II Sent. q. 58, 464). But if the grammar of our psychological verbs is such, it is because it corresponds to the experience of the people who use those terms.[5] The

[3] 'sed potentiae sensitivae et omnes potentiae apprehensivae videntur esse totaliter passivae, ita quod earum actus totaliter videntur esse ab obiectis; unde Aristoteles, II De anima, vult quod idem sunt secundum rem coloratio et visio et sonatio et auditio, sicut sunt idem secundum rem movere er moveri (...) Probatio minoris, licet ab Aristotele videatur simpliciter esse concessa' (II Sent. q. 58, 404).

[4] 'Quia tunc intelligere aut sentire vel appetere active accepta potius deberent attribui ipsis obiectis quam ipsis potentiis, sicut et illuminare aut calefacere potius attribuitur soli vel igni quam aeri illuminato' (II Sent. q. 58, 463).

[5] 'statim cum una potentia inferior aliquid apprehendit, statim superior potentia apprehendit actum illius et hoc modo quod sentit illum actum exire a suo supposito, ita

phenomenology of experience indicates that our acts proceed from us and that it is us who have control over them (II Sent. q. 58, 463-464).[6] The same is true of the unity of the psychological capacities; we have the experience that the mental acts of the different capacities come from the same source. Olivi concludes that: 'if the acts came from the objects, this <form of speaking and this experience expressed by it> would not be true'[7] (II Sent. q. 58, 464). First-person experience is a valuable source of knowledge and points to the non-fragmentation of the mind into its various powers or capacities. Both phenomenology and ordinary psychological vocabulary point to the active character of the mind in the world. Olivi's argumentative approach places the subject at the center of the argument. The faculties of the soul are not merely an aggregation of activities triggered by disparate external objects. What unifies these faculties in experience is something more fundamental: the subject, who employs them through their will (Anchepe 2024: 22). Olivi accepts a pluralism of the human soul and the human composite but identifies a central explanatory level that accounts for why the acts of the higher faculties influence the lower ones and why they act upon them, judging them 'as if they were their own.'[8] Likewise, this explains our phenomenological experience and the grammar of our philosophical concepts.

In addition to these types of arguments, Olivi also offers a series of metaphysical arguments to support the most radically passivist position. However, we will not focus on these. It is the arguments rooted in the

quod fere hoc ita sentit de actu inferioris potentiae sicut et de suo proprio actu. Unde ita dicimus per intellectum: ego video vel audio sicut ego intelligo' (II Sent. q. 58, 464).

[6] 'Praeterea, nos intime experimur in nobis actus istos procedere a nobis et quod nos vere operamur illos' (II Sent. q. 58, 463-464).

[7] I base myself on the translation made by Ignacio Anchepe (2020).

[8] 'Isti igitur per hunc modum dicunt se salvare illud quod in nobis semper sentimus et causam quare actus superiorum potentiarum faciunt frequenter aliquas redundantias in inferioribus et causam quare superiores regulant actus inferiorum et iudicant de eis sicut et de suis' (II Sent. q. 58, 464).

analysis of ordinary language and phenomenology that draw our interest, as these are the ones that will resurface centuries later in the context of contemporary critiques of passivist views of the mind. Authors such as Ryle (2009a: 1–13; regarding the relationship of ordinary language with phenomenology, 2009b: 195–196), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Dreyfus (1992), from different philosophical traditions and perspectives, laid the landmarks for the enactivist critique of the representational-computational image of the mind (Noë 2004: 17).

Continuing with his progressive strategy, Olivi rejects passivist positions that introduce intermediary mental items between the world and the mind: both (ii) that mental events are caused by external objects through species, and (iii) that they are caused partly by species and partly by the mind itself. Many arguments rejecting (ii) point to the metaphysical differences between the mind and species. This is interesting to nuance the isomorphism between medieval and contemporary critiques of passivism, because it could not be applied to contemporary representationalist positions. The latter, in their orthodox form, are a kind of dualism: representational states cannot be reduced to physical states, even if one dimension of mental representations is their physical vehicle. This is why cognitivism views psychology as an autonomous science responsible for uncovering the computer programs that manipulate mental representations using syntactic laws. On the other hand, the representations Olivi criticizes with his metaphysical arguments in (ii) seem to correspond to the material order, and the critique is based on the unbridgeable difference between the material and the spiritual. Species have content because they resemble the world, but they are limited to being a material vehicle. This is why, for Olivi, they cannot have causal power over the purely mental (II Sent. q. 58, 465). This series of arguments continues the Augustinian tradition of rejecting the passivity of the soul based on its ontological superiority (Silva/Toivanen, 2010).

Another argument points to the consequences of mental states receiving their determinations from objects and not from the activity of the mind. This would cause the continuum of the mind to fracture and

there would be as many capacities as species (II Sent. q. 58, 465-466). Olivi also holds that if representations cause the action of the mind, it is indeed they of whom it can be predicated that they know, that they perceive, etc. In addition, Olivi points to two counterfactuals that could be taken as thought experiments. If mental acts are caused by representations, God could put those species into any non-organic substance and it would hold a mental state.[9] For a medieval thinker, this version of the idea of multiple realisability (cf. Bickle 2020) is self-evidently false; a mental act is a vital act: the cause of a mental process must be found in the operative principle of the organism (Silva 2019: 57-58). In this aspect, indebted to the Aristotelian tradition, and not passed through the lens of modernity, Olivi links his activism to some kind of life-mind continuity that will re-emerge later as a response to contemporary passivism (Di Paolo 2018). In the second thought experiment, Olivi adds that God might even make species without substance and assumes as nonsense the equivalent of a mind stimulated in a vat.[10]

The life-mind continuity thesis—the idea that the phenomenon of the mind and the phenomenon of life are coextensive—is central to a branch of enactivist theories known as 'autopoietic' (Di Paolo 2018: 73–75). The concept underpinning this view is 'autopoiesis' (Maturana and Varela 2003), which posits that mentality exists *in nuce* within basic biological processes. These processes (e.g.: molecular) are governed by a structure that enables the production of their own constitutive processes, forming a concrete unit in space and time. Autopoietic enactivism proposes a series of levels or emergent layers of successive complexity, aimed at explaining the domains of human mental activity. This stands in opposition to the orthodox cognitivist idea that a mind is defined by the functional arrangement of processing laws, akin to computational

[9] 'Praeterea, ponamus quod Deus miraculose huiusmodi speciem poneret in aere aut in quacunque substantia non intellectiva nec sensitiva: tunc huiusmodi species posset ibi habere actum intelligendi aut sentiendi (...)' (II Sent. q. 58, 466).

[10] '(...) aut etiam si miraculose faceret eam existere sine omni substantia, sicut facit de accidentibus panis in sacramento altaris' (II Sent. q. 58, 466).

software. According to this view, in humans, the mind is typically implemented in a biological substrate. However, if another type of non-biological physical substrate capable of implementing such software were discovered, that mind could be replicated on it. In the same way that we could conceive of a mind without an organic body, contemporary cognitivist passivism is compatible with the possibility of being a brain in a vat artificially stimulated. Enactivism rejects this idea, arguing that the mind necessarily emerges in the interaction with an environment (Noë 2009: 3–24), maintaining an externalist position, of which Olivi can be considered a precursor (Pasnau 1997b: 120-121).

Finally, Olivi points to another aspect of the mind that leads to activism: what he calls aspectus and we can call, with our psychological vocabulary, attention (Lička 2019: 98). The active character of the soul is seen in the constant need to focus on the object, to make a certain constant effort to perceive it or understand it. But attention is not only something that shows in experience the active character of the mind, it is the very force that guides and modulates this activity.[11] We experience some degree of control over that effort, we can make it with greater or lesser intensity, and we can direct it to different things. The attentive nature of the mind is a central aspect of Olivi's theory of perception (cf. Tachau 1988). Perception is possible because the mind constantly directs its attention to the world. The aspectus can be directed to different kinds of things.[12] This characterizes both the perception of our surroundings—through different perceptual modalities—and proprioception (Toivanen

[11] 'Quando enim sic aspicit obiectum quod tota inclinatio et impendentia perfecte quiescit et stabilitur, et tota eius ca pacitas ex cognitiva apprehensione obiecti repletur et occupatur, et hoc sic quod non praevalet aliquid aliud aspicere ultra: tunc dicitur perfecte figi et terminari in illo obiecto (...)' (II Sent. q. 74, 66-67).

[12] 'Sicut autem diversi sensus habent diversa obiecta, sic et alia sunt quae terminant visum non autem auditum et e contrario. Unde auditus faciliter audit ultra parietem, et pro tanto eius aspectus dicitur esse ultra et tamen noster visus, dum adhuc sumus animales et etiam mortales, non praevalet ultra parietem videre et pro tanto dicitur ultra non posse transire' (II Sent. q. 74, 67).

2013). But we also direct our attention to memories, to products of the imagination, to abstract thoughts, etc. (Perler 2003: 73-74; Silva/Toivanen 2010: 273-278). The latter points to another of the topics we will examine: the need to think of the different types of mental states as a continuum.

The focus on attention within theories of perception is something that is echoed in contemporary theories with results similar to those found by Olivi. Sensorimotor enactivism (O'Regan/Noë 2001; Noë 2004) similarly emphasizes the active character of perception. Experience is not like a photograph or a series of frames in which a scene is presented in its entirety. There are always parts of the visual field in focus and always parts out of focus, and the perceiver is constantly and actively exploring that scene. For enactivism, perceptual experience is something the subject constantly achieves through their activity in the world. The perception of the environment 'is not something that happens to us. It is something we do' (Noë 2004: 1). Similarly, Olivi shows that perception is an activity performed by the subject upon the world, rather than something passively undergone. Although the sensory organs are exposed to numerous objects in the environment and impressed by their forms, we don't necessarily cognize any of them unless we actively direct our attention toward them. When a person focuses their attention on a particular object, peripheral objects will be indistinct or fade into black (Martin 2019: 310). The attentive nature of perception in both cases highlights the active character of the mind.

This has its physiological counterpart: Olivi points out that the shape of the eye is spherical to allow its rapid movements in all directions.[13] This allows for a change of the focus of attention and the active exploration of the environment (Lička 2019: 99). Contemporary enactivists point out that perceptual access to the world is not only gained through conscious shifts

[13] 'Ut autem scias totam compositionem oculi huic opinionem favere et proprietatibus visualis aspectus proportionari: attende quod, ut aspectus per totum hemisphaerium nostrae faciei obiectum posset se libere diffundere simul et succesive seu universaliter et collective ac singillatim et discretive, ideo factus est oculus rotundus et cito girabilis' (II Sent. q. 74, 95-96).

in the focus of attention but also through constant bodily exploration ranging from moving around an object to access its different facets to the involuntary saccadic movements that the eye constantly performs (Noë 2009: 86). The passivist physiological conception is that people perceive because their perceptual organs collect information-laden impacts from the environment. Olivi rejects this position (Silva/Toivanen 2010: 262) in the same way as contemporary enactivists, who reject the conception of perception as a passive moment of informational input. It takes an active effort on the part of the perceiver to gain perceptual access to the world (Rietveld/Kiverstein 2014: 340-342).

The third form of passivism that Olivi attacks is the one that is more concessive to activist critique, but which nevertheless still suffers from the same kind of problems as the others: (iii) the acts of the mind are caused partly by species or representations and partly by the mind itself. Mental activity is not composed of diverse actions (II Sent. q. 58, 466). The simplicity of mental activity and the continuity between capacities is part of the activist image of the mind. The idea that the mind consists in some kind of processing (active moment) of something received from the world (passive moment) is implicit in passivism. To conceive the mind under the input-processing-output scheme implies adopting the passive image of the mind -regardless of the emphasis on the activity involved in such processing- and implies an ontological fragmentation of the mind.

Olivi constantly uses an argument ubiquitous in contemporary enactivist positions, the principle of parsimony. If the mind can partially give rise to its own activity, then it can do so totally, and there is no need to appeal to extra entities. To explain this he uses a metaphor: if two people can pull a ship and set it in motion, it follows that, although the force of each taken individually is not enough to move the ship, they are both capable of performing the pulling motion. Similarly, if the mind is conceived as capable of generating its own activity with the help of additional entities, then conceptually it is capable of generating psychological activity, and the extra entities are a dispensable leftover (II Sent. q. 58, 466-467). The very notion of mental representation implies for

Olivi an overabundance. The arguments are similar to those of contemporary anti-representationalists (Rorty 1979, Brooks 1991, Dreyfus 1992, Clark 1998, Noë 2004). If the mind can apprehend mental representations, then it can directly apprehend objects in the world. It makes no sense to postulate representational items when things are their own perfect representation (II Sent. q. 58, 469 471, 473).

Even though in hypothesis (iii) the mind is partially active, the presence of mental items such as species implies a degree of passivity. And this degree of passivism is sufficient to make it a target of all the criticisms previously deployed. Moreover, this form of passivism implies that the mind cannot access the external world but only the set of internal copies. If this is the case, then the object of mental activity is not the world but the representations themselves, and the species will not be intermediary entities but simply the ultimate object of human perception and intellection. We will return to the danger of the 'veil of representations' when we deal with Olivi's anti-representationalist aspect, but we may note that it opens up a whole family of epistemic problems that make the passivist option unattractive, as it may lead to skepticism (Silva/Toivanen, 2010). As in (ii), if the activity of the mind's capacities is partially caused by representations, we might think that a mind could have experiences if God provided an adequate flow of species (II Sent. q. 58, 469-470).

As we see, Olivi not only deploys a great number of arguments to refute passivism, but the heterogeneity of these arguments is noteworthy: based on the use of psychological concepts of folk psychology and ordinary speech; phenomenological, based on experience; appealing to the principle of parsimony; purely metaphysical; epistemological; arguments that we can call psychological, based on the analysis of the non-compositional nature of the mind, of attention, of intellectual habits. There is also an anthropological dimension to Olivi's arguments. He thinks that action belongs to the agent and not to the patient; if mental activity were passive, it would belong to the things that cause it and should be attributed to them (Silva/Toivanen, 2010).

Similarly, a number of traditions critical of modern cognitivism converged within the enactivist theoretical framework. As we have seen, contemporary enactivists employ argumentative strategies similar to those deployed by Olivi more than half a millennium ago, in a completely different discursive context. As we will see, in both cases, this activist perspective will be articulated with a series of ideas about the mental.

2. Anti-representationalist Thesis

As can be seen in the above, the activist image presented by Olivi address the Aristotelian idea that there is a first (passive) moment in which the mind receives stimuli from the outside, followed by another (active) moment in which these stimuli are processed intellectually through their manipulation and abstraction. If we previously emphasized the critique of perception understood as an input, it is now time to highlight the critique of mentality as the manipulation of intermediary items. Olivi stresses the simplicity of the mind (II Sent. q. 58, 466);[14] this will involve a critique of the notion that the mind processes a series of *species*, which function as mental representations. If the mind receives the species from the environment, it would fall back into the passivism that has already been discarded. But if the mind actively produces those same species, it will fragment into the plurality of those intermediary items, which would undermine this basic spiritual unity. The criticism can affect both Aristotelian theory and contemporary representationalist theories. In both, what characterizes the mind is the performance of a function of digesting sensible material (the intermediary items: species or mental representations) by intellectual means.

It is possible to make a representationalist approach to Olivi's ideas. Adriaenssen (2011) argues that Olivi's activism is limited to asserting that

[14] 'actus intelligendi et sentiendi sint simplices et ad minus non sint compositi ex essentiis diversarum specierum et generum et multo minus sint compositi ex diversis actionibus (...)' (II Sent. q. 58, 466).

mental representations are not originated by the environment but by the organism itself. Adriaenssen argues that representations are a kind of likenesses of some portion of the environment actively generated by the mind. Then, what remains to be solved is: 'how, granted that the sensory soul processes perceptual representations, these representations represent what they do' (Adriaenssen 2011: 325). Given that this representationalist schema is maintained, what Olivi would like to argue is that these representations do not acquire their content thanks to the causal chain in which they are immersed but because they have the primitive characteristic of being similar to the environment. Smoke can represent fire - without being similar - because it is part of the same causal chain, but this is not how mental representations work in Adriaenssen's interpretation. It is true that Olivi points out that stimulation in the sensory organs cannot cause perceptual experiences by itself; he mentions the case of ears being exposed to noises while a person sleeps.[15] Thus, representations exist because when we perceive, some similarity with the outside occurs within us. The representational character of perception is that it is 'expressive' or 'representative' of what is perceived. And the structure of perception is that if we see a grape in front of us, we perceive grapely (Adriaenssen 2011: 327-328). In this way, representations acquire semantic content.

It seems that, when Adriaenssen thinks of Olivi as a representationalist, he thinks that mentality must have some kind of content, that this content is not given by a causal relation to the world but by a relation of similarity, and that this is the basis of the intentionality of the mental. However, when talking about mental representations, it is usually held that they have a content (with semantic properties such as reference) and a vehicle (with physical properties). Content is usually

[15] '(...) frequenter multae passiones fiunt in nostris sensibus quae nobis non apparent, sicut patet in dormiente apertis oculis et auribus et naribus. Passiones enim quae tunc fiunt in sensibus non sunt actuales sensus, quamvis sint eaedem passiones secundum speciem cum illis quae fiunt in vigilantibus' (II Sent. q. 58, 484).

placed in the personal level of explanations and vehicles in the sub-personal level (Hurley 1998: 17-20, 27-32). If what Adriaenssen is referring to when he speaks of species is some kind of entity that has content but no vehicle, he seems to be referring to something else than what Olivi explicitly rejects. But if we want to save the representationalist interpretation by arguing that this is merely a terminological divergence, we must ask what sense it makes to speak of representations without vehicles, for the idea of representation is tied to the idea of some kind of processing (cf. Adriaenssen 2011: 325) and processing involves some kind of material to be processed. But it is not clear how we can think of any kind of processing without any physical instance at all.

In such terms, it seems that Adriaenssen is talking about the phenomenon of intentionality and not that of representation, namely, that there is some kind of direction of fit between the mind and the world, and that is what Olivi seems to be talking about when, in fact, he uses the term *repraesentatio*; after all, he says that things are their own perfect representation (II Sent. q. 58, 469). This disquisition allows us to shed light on what Olivi criticizes in passivism, which is the idea that there are items with informational content about the world and that the mind is that which receives and processes them. Even if one wishes to argue that it is possible to combine an activist and a representationalist view at the same time, Olivi highlights the pointlessness of such an attempt. If the mind is pure activity and generates representations -which are, in one way or another, similarities to the world- then it must have pre-representational access to the world in order to shape them (II Sent. q. 58, 473).[16] The mind should be able to direct attention to the world beyond representations. And at this point we come to a dilemma: either the mind can focus its attention beyond representations or its focus only goes as far as species. If the first horn of the dilemma is followed, then knowledge of the world is duplicated, because we know the things and their copies, and the realm

[16] 'Praeterea, anima non poterit producere in se species diversarum rationum, nisi prius aspiciat obiectum vel aliquid loco obiecti (...)' (II Sent. q. 58, 473).

of the mental unnecessarily doubles in size. But if attention cannot go beyond representations, we have access not to the world, but to its copy, and we do not perceive or understand it, but remember or imagine it (II Sent. q. 58, 469-470).

Up to this point, the nature of the mind is sought but only the workings of perception are being examined. One of the usual challenges for anti-representationalist theories is to give a solid explanation of what we call higher cognition, i.e. mental processes that involve dealing with complexity and abstraction (e.g.: Di Paolo 2005, Hutto/Myin 2017: 93-120, Di Paolo *et al.* 2018: 279-208, van Dijk/Rietveld 2018, Kiverstein/Rietveld 2021). Memory, planning, imagination, language use, and conceptual abilities are commonly considered 'representation-hungry' domains of cognition. They appear to be the kinds of processes that most require the use of some type of representational item, as they are directed toward objects or properties that are not currently present in the thinker's environment (Kiverstein/Rietveld 2018: 148). Conversely, the type of direct access to the world posited by anti-representationalist positions aligns more closely with mental capacities such as perception or sensorimotor coordination. In these domains, it is easier to conceptualize a form of access to the world unmediated by intermediary entities.

As we can see, there are several argumentative strategies that allow us to arrive to anti-representationalist positions regarding how a bunch of grapes in front of me can be seen. Most of Olivi's examples are perceptual and, more specifically, visual. But it is more difficult to explain how we can play chess taking into account a large number of rules and trying to predict the outcome of various moves and their respective responses in advance. The realm of inference, of cold thinking, of logical-mathematical calculus, seems to be more suitable for representationalist explanations. In Olivi's intellectual environment, it was accepted that this representationalist framework should be extended by appealing to intellectual representations (*species intelligibiles*) (Pasnau 1997b, Brower/Brower-Toland 2008). Species intelligibiles are created from the same 'digestive' process as sensory representations, in a process of

intellectual abstraction. In this way, higher cognition can perform the same processes of manipulation of an intellectual raw material.

But Olivi equally rejects this kind of mental representation. They are either superfluous entities because the mind can access reality directly anyway, or they are entities with catastrophic epistemic consequences, because they imply that people do not have that sort of direct access to the objects of thought (Perler 2003: 54-55). Again, the danger is that of the existence of a veil between people and reality. The reductio ad absurdum of the possibility that we may be minds fed with representations by God can be read as metaphysical arguments defending the embedded character of the mind, but also as an epistemic argument signaling the danger of skepticism (Perler 2003: 59).

3. Continuist Thesis

So far, we have focused on the activist and anti-representationalist character of Olivi's philosophy of mind. Of course, these are not two isolated positions but two different consequences of the same series of arguments that can be read mainly in quaestiones 58, 72, 73 and 74 of the Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum. There is a third aspect of Olivi's theory which resembles contemporary enactivist ideas. We have already seen that the 'activist thesis' points against the notion that mental activity begins with a moment of passive recollection of a mental raw material. On the other hand, the 'anti-representationalist thesis' attempts to refute the very idea of a raw material that the mind is in charge of processing. However, rejecting the idea of representational items functioning as intermediaries between the world and the mind presents an additional challenge. It becomes difficult to provide an explanation for capacities that involve dealing with absent or abstract aspects of the world. If the mind is active, it captures the world directly, without representations. But how can it capture aspects that are not present to be apprehended?

The key to understanding this lies in a 'continuist' perspective of the mind. According to this view, the various psychological capacities are part of a continuum of modes of a single operation: the individual's access to the world. This perspective contrasts with a 'discrete' perspective, which holds that the differences between capacities are substantive. The discrete perspective is embraced by the tripartite model of the mind, in which there is an input of information from the environment, characterized by its passive nature, as opposed to the activity involved in the information processing and the behavioral output. Olivi certainly accepts that there is a conceptual distinction between different mental capacities. However, there are also indications that they are not isolated from each other but that there is: 'only one power, and it acts in different ways' (Toivanen 2019: 30).

When we examine the arguments we have listed so far, we can see that they all aim at characterizing the mind in toto, i.e. all the capacities of the mind. But we also see that the vast majority of them either refer to the functioning of perception or are exemplified by cases of perception. Once again, we find a parallel with contemporary activist positions. The Cartesian tradition they challenge has shaped its conception of the mind on the basis of abstract and complex intellectual processes. Cognitivism is a research programme better suited for explaining how to play chess or perform complex mathematical calculations than for explaining how we can catch a moving football ball (Clark 1998: xii); from there, the same conceptual scheme is used to think about 'lower' types of psychological states. To a large extent, theories about the mind are shaped by which type of psychological state is taken as paradigmatic (Pérez/Gomila 2021: 48-52). Enactivist theories will not only challenge the passivist and representationalist dogmas but the intellectualist dogma as well, and although they differ from each other in profound ways, most of them have in common the adoption of perception as the paradigmatic state of mind to build their theories upon (Chemero 2003, Noë 2004, Hutto/Myin 2013: 83-134, Rietveld/Kiverstein 2014).

It is not surprising that Olivi dwells so much on the analysis of perception, it is a capacity particularly well suited to serve his explanatory goals: the idea of direct access to the world, unmediated by intermediate items, seems especially plausible when it comes to perception (cf. Gibson 1986). On the other hand, it is true that there is a sense in which Olivi is a deeply intellectualist thinker, and in this, he brings no novelty to his context. However, we can distinguish two forms of intellectualism regarding the mind. The first is the assertion of a kind of preeminence or superiority of intellectual capacities. This stance pertains not only to the nature of the mental but also more broadly to a philosophical anthropology. Yet, there is another sense of intellectualism that, as we see, Olivi does not endorse: the notion of conceiving higher cognition as the paradigmatic mental state through which to understand lower cognition.

Something worth considering when evaluating these distinctions is the place of the continuist conception within Olivi's large argumentative strategy. His defense of the unity of the mind is crucial for him; it is the continuity of the mind and its acts that makes it possible for the arguments to be able to explain to us the active nature of the whole mind. But even further, in the context of the Quaestiones, the ultimate goal is to ground the existence of free will. So the continuous mind enables us to realize the movement of transitivity from perception to the whole mind. The continuist thesis will be, in this way, the bridge between the doctrine of the activity of perception and the doctrine of the activity of will and, ultimately, the existence of free will.

As we pointed out, anti-representationalist positions often find their explanatory limits when leaving the sphere of perception. This is the case for memory. Only when the object is somehow in front of the organism is it possible to explain how there is a direct apprehension of it through the aspectus or attention (II Sent. q. 58, 469-470). Olivi does not avoid the problem. For him, even the intellect can be conceived under the activist image of the mind. However, he accepts the existence of mental representations in the case of memory (II Sent. q. 58, 462, 470; q. 74, 114-

116). This is the only concession he makes to the theory of species, and he includes in his explanatory scheme what he calls memory species. However, he does not explain in depth how these representations are formed or stored (Perler 2000: 117). In deploying his criticisms of Aristotelian passivism, he points out that one argument for accepting it would be that memory, intelligence and will are equal powers (based on Augustine's argument in *De Trinitate*, XI); and, on the other hand, that memory is responsible for receiving and retaining species, and is therefore a totally passive power. Therefore, the other powers are also passive (II Sent. q. 58, 404-5).[17] To a large extent, what he will then do is to invert the argument. It is only a matter of choosing more carefully the type of paradigmatic mental state.

When we think of continuism as a response to the separation between passive and active faculties, we find in contemporary enactivism an axis that separates two ways of approaching this critique. On the one hand, a dissolutive or eliminative approach to the psychology of faculties and folk psychology (e.g. Di Paolo 2005, Hutto/Myin 2013: 5-9, cf. Noë 2021). Such theories tend to consider that the interaction of organisms with environments can be thought of entirely in interactivist terms, e.g., through the language of dynamical systems, as if the mind performed a single operation. In this way, these theories are more aggressive towards common-sense psychological concepts and ordinary speech. At the other end of this axis, we can find theories that do not focus on dissolving the notion that there are different mental capacities, but rather support the idea that these are not separate compartments and that there is a continuum between ways of accessing the world (e.g. Noë 2004, 2012;

[17] 'Praeterea, secundum Augustinum, X De Trinitate, capitulo 11, imago divinae Trinitatis consistit in memoria, intelligentia et voluntate vultque quod inter se sint omnino aequales; quod probat per hoc quod se invicem totas capiunt, totam enim intelligentiam et voluntatem et memoriam et ipsas totas scio per intelligentiam et diligo per voluntatem, dicitque quod 'sunt una vita, una mens, una substantia'; sed constat quod memoria est potentia totaliter passiva, unde non facit nisi recipere et retinere species; ergo et aliae hoc ipsum erunt, alias valde essent inaequales et valde diversae essentiae' (II Sent. q. 58, 404).

Rietveld *et al.* 2018). Olivi is certainly closer to the second stance. As we saw, he invokes ordinary speech and the grammar of folk psychology to construct his activist stance, and constantly appeals to 'powers of the soul' that are conceptually distinguishable from each other (Silva/Toivanen 2010: 264). But on the other hand, it is constantly reaffirmed that intellection and perception have the same active nature. In fact, the same activist picture of the mind leads him to dismiss the idea that perceiving is a mere grasping of sensible qualities such as sense data. The distinction between sensory and intellectual grasping is blurred (Toivanen 2019: 10-11), and that brings us to a final topic: conceptualism.

If we consider the continuist thesis in isolation, as a notion about the simplification of psychological capacities, we might think it is compatible with the passivist perspective on the mental. Indeed, views more closely aligned with Aristotelianism can account for such simplification processes. For instance, an interpretation of the functioning of the 'sensitive soul' might argue that the 'common sense' performs a simplification process on the multiplicity of sensory modalities involved in the external senses. Olivi himself attributes this capacity to the common sense in several passages of the *Quaestiones* (Silva 2020). However, through this approach, we can only attribute an internal continuity to the 'sensitive soul'; in the tripartite cognitivist model, to the input. It is possible to embrace a stronger version of the continuist thesis, one that applies to the entirety of the mind. But doing so requires providing an adequate explanation for all psychological capacities, including those that seem more challenging for the anti-representationalist view defended by activism—capacities associated to 'higher cognition.' This will lead us to the necessity of offering a conceptualist perspective on perception.

4. Concetualist Thesis

As we can see, the activist picture of the mind leads us to an anti-representationalist stance. Without species, there is no separate set of

mental capacities dedicated to receiving them and another set that processes them. This in turn leads us to postulate the continuity of the mind in its ways of accessing the world. One possible consequence of this psychological continuum is to posit a total dissolution of the faulty psychology and even of psychology as a discipline. Those who follow this path will seek explanations at the level of patterns of interaction between organisms and their environments, in which cannot be distinguished discrete moments of passive information uptake and information processing (De Jaegher *et al*. 2010, Froese/Di Paolo 2011, McGann *et al*. 2013, Hutto 2020; for an opposite view, De Jaegher/Di Paolo 2013). This path is the opposite of all of Olivi's anthropological aims. But there is another direction to take if the continuist thesis is accepted. Instead of eliminating faculty psychology, a less problematic version of it can be proposed: adopting a conceptualist interpretation of the continuist thesis.

Higher cognition requires focusing the attention on some feature of reality, just as perception does. Perception, on the other hand, is not about blindly capturing informational particles for further processing. Here we find *in nuce* the kind of conceptualist thinking that will later be deployed by thinkers ranging from Kant to McDowell (1994). Cognition without aspectus is empty (cf. Perler 2003: 63-64),[18] perception as species is blind. To perceive is not to receive a stimulus from the world but to have an experience that one understands. Therefore, mere perception involves conceptual elements; these are not added to the experience at a later moment after the collection of raw impressions. Contemporary enactivists, such as Alva Noë, have embraced a stance of this kind. At first glance, the convergence between enactivism and conceptualism might appear surprising. After all, enactivism tends toward anti-intellectualist

[18] '(…) virtus aliqua potest esse praesens aliqui aut essentialiter aut virtualiter, hoc est dictu, quod potest esse praesens aliqui per hoc quod sua essentia est vere iuxta istum aut per hoc quod aspectus suae virtutis ita efficaciter est directus in ipsum acsi realiter attingeret ipsum' (II Sent. q. 58, 486).

perspectives on the mind, while conceptualism might raise concerns about the potential over-intellectualization of perception. However, the continuist perspective serves as the bridge that reconciles these approaches. This framework seeks both to intellectualize perception (Noë 2004: 181–201) and to de-intellectualize the intellect (Noë 2012: 114–125).

Juhana Toivanen (2019) brings Olivi closer to the conceptualist tradition of thought. The question is to examine how far the conceptual aspects of perception reach in this theory. What Toivanen (2019: 29-30) points out is that we can understand the phenomenon of 'perceiving as' under two different models (following Boyle 2016). First, the additive model according to which the person 'perceives x as φ' (P(x) as φ). Here we see what we have called the discrete conception of mind, with a first moment of perception to which is then added the ascription of a conceptual or universal characteristic through the action of the intellect. Against this we have the holistic model, which holds that 'perceiving as' implies that the person 'perceives a φx' (P(φx)). In the first model 'I see an apple as edible', in the second, 'I see an edible apple'. In this second model perception is not a moment isolated from the rest of mental activity, the conceptual capacities inherent to humans (and, for Olivi, to angels) alter the way in which we gain perceptual access to the world from the first moment. There are not two different moments, there are no passive capacities and active capacities. The activity of the mind in capturing the relevant information of the world is one, the different psychological faculties alter each other; perception includes the grasping of features that can only be grasped by the presence of rationality in man, and that is why perception comes loaded with conceptual notes at the sight of an appetizing apple. In other words, what the intellect does is not to add an interpretative layer to an inner representative image (phantasma), as Aristotelians such as Thomas Aquinas conceived it. Rather, the intellect transforms experience at its root. To illustrate how perception and intellect are simply two different ways of accessing the world that the mind has, we can consider Olivi's disquisitions on angelic perception as a kind of thought experiment (Adriaenssen 2011: 332-336). When the Angel

Gabriel looks at John, it turns its mind -as the purely intellectual creature that he is- to him. Now when a human sees John, she or he turns his perceptual power to him. However, both acts will have the same form on a more general level: to turn the attention (*aspectus*) to John. Of course, they are not identical acts, because just as the intellect permeates perception, the same is true in the opposite direction.

As can be seen, the continuist thesis fits with this conceptualist perspective about perception. This is what Olivi seems to be referring to when he argues that the kind of simplicity of the mind is not the kind of simplicity of a point (II Sent. q. 49, 17; cf. Silva/Toivanen 2010: 264-265). There is one activity that the mind renders on the world, but it can be focused on different aspects of this world through different capacities or powers of the soul. Thus, there is a great pillar of Aristotelian thought that is not rejected, but which is interpreted in a divergent way from that common in the thirteenth century, i.e. faculty psychology (Toivanen 2013: 7-13, 2019: 30-31). In this way, it does not imply a model of information processing. On the other hand, this conceptualist move has another consequence. It ensures that the activist view of the mind does not collapse into a form of interactionism that undermines the psychological level and the individual level of analysis. The psychological concepts we use to understand our experience have a purpose. A third set of problems are avoided with this conceptualist scheme. The function that species used to have (being likenesses of things) is now carried out by cognitive acts; the acts themselves are likenesses of things. The soul produces an act of its own which becomes a likeness of a world populated by features graspable through the senses and the intellect. The mind produces its own activity, but objects are the 'terminative causality' of it (Silva/Toivanen, 2010: 275; Ruiz 2014: 152-154), and thus blocks the danger of the activist perspective turning into some kind of idealism and the metaphysical, epistemological and practical effects that this would entail.

The active nature of mentality is easily attributed to higher cognition but is more challenging to explain in the case of perception, which is understood by most philosophical thought as a moment of passive

gathering of external information. On the other hand, the anti-representationalist thesis fits well with perceptual faculties but is harder to apply to the capacities of higher cognition (which involve concepts, language, abstraction, and entities absent to the senses). The continuist thesis, understood in the conceptualist way outlined in this section, serves as a bridge to extend, on one hand, the active nature to perception and, on the other, the non-representational character to higher cognition. As we have seen, these four interrelated topics are present both in the thought of Peter John Olivi and in contemporary enactivism. Naturally, there are not only similarities but also notable differences between these two bodies of texts. As noted, Olivi is strongly intellectualist and dualist, characteristics entirely at odds with modern enactivism. However, these differences may highlight the extent to which certain ideas discussed are independent of specific metaphysical and anthropological commitments.

Conclusion

The previous sections presented four conceptual nodes where Peter John Olivi's thought and contemporary enactivist theories converge. They considered the aspects of Olivi's theory that best serve to show the pattern between Olivi's opposition to a series of Aristotelian dogmas and enactivism's opposition to contemporary cognitivism. This serves several purposes. First, as mentioned in each section of the article, we can see the close links between each of the ideas. They all seem to function articulately and do so in two profoundly different theoretical contexts. In turn, the embedding of these ideas in different theories may indicate a degree of conceptual independence with other aspects of each conceptual framework.

For these reasons, Olivi's philosophy goes beyond historical interest and can be useful for the analysis of contemporary philosophical problems. Within the anti-cognitivist framework, the activist opposition to Aristotelian ideas can help in the search for new theoretical horizons.

Most enactivist texts begin with an allusion to the original philosophical sin, the Cartesianism. And this determines to a large extent the enactivist agenda, which is articulated in opposition to the modern ideas incorporated by cognitivism: intellectualism, dualism, internalism, individualism, etc. However, once we understand the way in which the four ideas we have outlined are opposed to ancient and medieval thought we can find other implicit assumptions made by psychological thought.

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The Buddhist Quest for Valid Experience from Dignāga to Candrakīrti

Abstract: Almost every Indian philosophical tradition sees reality as illusory and filled with suffering, aiming at liberation through correct knowledge. Hence, establishing valid means of knowledge has long been vital in Indian thought, and especially urgent in Buddhism. However, due to some of its inescapable premises, the latter grapples with ensuring valid knowledge, striving to preserve perceptual understanding of particulars while avoiding conceptualization. This article explores Buddhism's complex relationship between perception and conceptualization, focusing on unresolved epistemological tensions from the tradition stemming from Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and the attempts to resolve them by figures like Dharmottara and Tibetan *Gelug* and *Sakya* schools. In the conclusion, we will observe the unravelling of this very problem through the radical deconstruction operated by Candrakīrti, which shares certain similarities with Wittgenstein's dissolution of metaphysical illusions.

Keywords: Buddhism, Madhyamaka, Pramanavada, Wittgenstein, Ordinary, Conventional Truth

1. Framing the Background

Experience holds a central and complex role in Buddhist philosophy. It is central, first and foremost, because early Buddhism places strong emphasis on personal experience as the foundation for understanding its teachings. The Buddha's intent was never to establish authority-based doctrines or dogmas[1], as

[1] A seemingly contradictory notion arises: the Buddha seems to promote a specific doctrine. However, within Buddhism, this is a false problem. Canonical texts consistently show the Buddha urging disciples to believe only in their personal experience. If their experience validates his teachings, then those teachings hold value. This emphasis on individual verification is truly singular in religious history, as the Buddha granted his disciples complete freedom of thought and encouraged them to constantly test his doctrine (see MN XLVII, *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta*). When, on the contrary, a disciple is asked to blindly believe in a 'truth' given without experience, as the Brahmins did with the upaniṣadic doctrines (see MN XIII, *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*), this kind of dogma ends up becoming a source of attachment. The Buddha saw faith as an obstacle, not a path to

the latter would contradict the ethical essence of Buddhism, which is concerned with the task of alleviating attachment to illusions (particularly those conceptual illusions that provide us with simulacra of stability, durability, and permanence). So, there is no room for dogmatic doctrines, precisely because the perception of them as stable and eternal inevitably leads to disappointment. Buddhist philosophy in fact regards all phenomena as transient and relative[2]. Recognizing this reality enables the resolution of life's fundamental problem: suffering (*duḥkha*). Suffering arises from witnessing the decay of what was thought to endure forever. And to succeed in neutralising this painful way of experiencing the world is precisely the goal of Buddhist teaching:

> Impermanent are compounded things, prone to rise and fall,
> Having risen, they are destroyed, their passing [is the] truest bliss.[3]
> (*DN* XVI.6.10, transl. Walshe 1995: 271)

So goes the lament that still today rises with funeral pyres in Sri Lanka, echoing a profound truth. This brief yet poignant expression captures the essence of the Buddha's teachings, that can be distilled by focusing on key concepts: *duḥkha*, *anātman*, *anitya*, *nirvāṇa* and *pratītya-samutpāda*. The Buddha first expounded on *duḥkha*, *anitya*, and *anātman* – often referred to as the three characteristics of existence – in his initial sermon after awakening

understanding. For him, liberation comes from experience and critical examination, not blind belief: this is why Buddhism defies easy categorization as a religion of faith.

[2] This transience and relativity are, in some cases, interpreted by Buddhist traditions as 'emptiness'. This notion, however, can be understood in various ways; in this article, it would be primarily framed according to the *Madhyamaka* school's interpretation.

[3] This funeral chant, at once solemn and liberating in its tone, appears within the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, a text recounting the long series of events preceding and following the physical death (*parinirvāṇa*) of the Buddha. Clearly, from the standpoint of a soteriology based on attaining an 'ultimate' knowledge, understanding this inescapable causal truth entails the extinction of its effects; that is, of the affliction we daily experience because of our failure to understand it. And it is this extinction of the affliction caused by ignorance (the inability to see 'things as they are'), that brings true bliss. In fact, the literal translation of the second sentence, while actually sounding like 'their passing is the truest bliss', conveys more the idea that the understanding of this process behind all phenomena brings relief, not that the mere 'vanishing' of the phenomena itself does so.

(*bodhi*). Central to his diagnosis of the human condition, these three terms represent dissatisfaction/suffering, impermanence, and the absence of a stable individual self, respectively. Although *duḥkha* is commonly understood as suffering or pain, the Buddha uses the term more broadly to encompass an intrinsic dissatisfaction with existence. It is the *first noble's truth* exposed to his disciples, outlining the path the entire doctrine will follow: everything in life is *duḥkha*[4]. The possibility of happiness is not denied, but happiness itself is included in *duḥkha* since all that is impermanent – such as, indeed, happiness itself – is *duḥkha*.

Actually, this triad of marks of existence – *duḥkha*, *anitya*, and *anātman* – is fundamentally interrelated and intertwined. Things are *anātman* because they lack an enduring essence or nature, a condition closely tied to their being *anitya*, or impermanent; everything transient, by definition, lacks a stable essence. These traits characterize every aggregate (*saṃskāra*) – that is to say, every existing element – which, being produced and conditioned, is therefore impermanent and lacks a stable essence. *Nirvāṇa*, characterized as the opposite of typical existence, represents an exit from this ordinary mode of experiencing the world, free from causal conditioning, impermanence, and associated suffering[5]. *Pratītya-samutpāda*, or dependent origination, explains the causal genesis of suffering and provides a fundamental framework for understanding both the cycle of existence and the path to liberation from it. It is the all-encompassing process that lies at the heart of all phenomenal existence. The explanation of this key process is found in numerous *suttas* within the ancient *Pāli* canon, where the Buddha uses it both to demonstrate *more geometrico* the problem of suffering in human existence and, by tracing the causal chain in reverse, to uncover its solution. The Buddha's approach always involves

[4] *Duḥkha* likely serves as the cornerstone of the entire doctrine, as it is the problem that presents itself daily, initiating the quest for its resolution (which is none other than the teachings of Buddhism).

[5] '*Nirvana* is not a ground-of-being, nor is it a self-subsistent essence, but as unconditioned it is differentiated from that which is *duḥkha* and *anitya*; to be conditioned is to be inevitably subject to these two of the three marks' (Webster 2018: 95).

identifying causes and effects, retracing the causal chain to find solutions. This is a mode of reasoning that suggests that extinguishing the fuel will also extinguish the fire[6].

The most extensive and exhaustive formulation of the concept of *dependent origination* is contained within the *Pāli* canon, particularly in the sutra called *Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta*:

> With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, existence; with existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, monks, is called dependent origination. (SN XII.1, transl. Bodhi 2000: 533)

This chain of *dependent origination* is often presented in the oldest discourses as the key doctrine of the Buddha's teaching, so central that it is asserted that seeing *pratītya-samutpāda* would be equivalent to seeing the *dharma* (a term which for the Buddha means both 'the teaching' and 'the truth', in the sense of the law – in the scientific meaning of the term – of the universe, since what the Buddha discovered and then taught is precisely the law that governs all phenomena of existence)[7].

Thus, *pratītya-samutpāda* illustrates the causal genesis of *duḥkha* and underscores that everything is transient and impermanent. Within Buddhist thought, postulating absolute entities can lead to a dangerous illusion: that of a separate, unchanging self. This fuels attachment and the concept of possession,

[6] Cf. MN XXXVIII, *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta* (transl. Ñāṇamoli 2009: 351-352).

[7] 'This has been said by the Blessed One: "One who sees dependent origination sees the *Dharma*; one who sees the *Dharma* sees dependent origination." And these [...] [feelings] affected by clinging are dependently arisen. The desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding [...] affected by clinging is the origin of suffering. The removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire and lust [...] affected by clinging is the cessation of suffering.' (MN XXVIII, *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, transl. Ñāṇamoli 2009: 284-285).

driving worldly pursuits, karmic actions, and ultimately rebirth. Central to dismantling this cycle is the challenge posed by concepts. Our desire and attachment stem from the misconception of a stable self, leading to a relentless pursuit of satisfaction. The concept of *Anātman*, or selfless, is Buddhism's counterpoint, emphasizing that only the illusion of 'I' generates the grasping for 'mine'.

> The counterpart of the idea of selflessness is the Buddhist doctrine of 'dependent origination' (*pratītya-samutpāda*); that is, the reason that we do not have enduring and unitary selves just is that any moment of experience can be explained as having originated from innumerable causes, none of which can be specified as what we 'really' are. (Arnold 2005: 118)

The most dangerous aspect of concepts lies in their deceptive appearance: stable, eternal, separate, and existing independently. Buddhism cuts through this illusion by avoiding ontological inquiries altogether. These questions, while not denied, are deemed irrelevant to the doctrine's central purpose: awakening and alleviating suffering. The Buddha's method is in fact purely modal: in core *sūtras*, he shows *how* things function for sentient beings, not *what* they inherently are. For his teachings, knowing *what* offers no benefit, because true benefit lies in understanding *how* things manifest and *how* we can modify our relationship with them.

Accordingly, every Buddhist philosophy aims to rewrite our naive intuitions of reality, namely those intuitions that lead us to confuse basic experience by projecting ideas of stability and permanence onto impermanent phenomena[8].

[8] See Arnold 2005: 118.

2. The Quest for *Pramāna*s

The challenge posed by the Buddhist framework is to reconcile worldly experience with the need to avoid distortions caused by conceptualization. While the Indian world has always sought to establish reliable means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*)[9], Buddhism faced a most urgent need for this, because even perception, deemed the most immediate source of knowledge, posed significant challenges within this context.

Central to Buddhism is the idea of reality being utterly de-substantialized, characterized by relationality, transience, and flux; also spatially extended objects are considered unreal, being nothing more than transient aggregates. Crucially, concepts must also conform to this impermanence. The system views them as dangerous due to their allure of stability, universality, and eternity. Driving desires and suffering, human attachment to these conceptual illusions is what Buddhist traditions seek to overcome.

Being merely linguistic conventions mistaken for real essences, our misunderstanding of the status of concepts fuels the desires that bind us to suffering's cycle. The most important 'concept' that Buddhist teachings intend to deconstruct is that of 'Self', so much that we can say that the immediate purpose of any properly Buddhist philosophy is to safeguard the cardinal principle of *anātman*. The problem lies in the fact that Buddhists themselves recognize this principle as deeply counterintuitive: 'the phenomenological sense of personal identity is so compelling that (as Buddhists see it) deluded self-grasping represents an innate conviction that is uprooted only with considerable effort'[10].

[9] 'A *pramāṇa* is held to be the instrument via which a cognitive agent achieves *pramā* – where *pramā* is an episode of knowledge. Just as a person might eat food with a spoon, or clean one's teeth with a toothbrush, or cut down a tree with an axe, so, too, whenever a person knows something, he or she does so through some instrument. A *pramāṇa* is the instrument used for attaining an instance of knowledge. The claim that a *pramāṇa* is an instrument used for the attainment of knowledge is tied to the Indian tradition's broad predilection for a causal theory of cognition (and knowledge)'; Stoltz (2021: 11).

[10] Cf. Arnold (2005: 13).

Buddhist traditions see our sense of self as stemming from two sources: either an innate (*sahaja*) inclination, shared with animals, to conceive of ourselves as 'I', solidifying into an epistemic habit (*abhyāsa*) that has to be unlearned (according to the *Mahāyāna*) through a long and continued practice in the path of mental cultivation (*bhāvanāmārga*). Alternatively, it can be an artificial construct (*vikalpita/parikalpita*) based on religious doctrines, like Brahmanism or western monotheisms, and is eliminated (also according to the *Mahāyāna*) in the path of vision (*darśanamārga*).

To counter these epistemic habits, Buddhists employ logic and reason to build a new understanding. This perspective distinguishes between relative reality, where we perceive independent objects, and absolute reality, where phenomena are a flux of causes and effects perceived by a similar flow of mental moments we conventionally call 'self'. The challenge then became: how to experience objects functionally without relying on concepts? How can we know an object's function (like a jar holding liquid) without categorizing it as a 'jar'?

2.1. The Two Truths of Reality

The distinction between 'two truths', conventional/relative truth and ultimate/absolute truth, was theorized since the early systematizers of Buddhist thought, notably the *Abhidharma* school. This school categorized reality into what exists as substance (*dravyasat*) and what exists merely as a concept, and thus as convention (*prajñaptisat*), with the latter seen as derivative constructs. *Prajñapti*, existing solely as conceptual information, can ultimately be traced back to ontological primitives, namely to what is *dravyasat*. These primitives are characterized by their irreducibility, forming the foundation of this philosophical framework[11]. They are known as *dharmas*, the most fundamental elements of reality, that which cannot be further reduced through analysis, and as such they are the only things that truly exist. Identified by their defining characteristics (*svālakṣaṇas*), their definition is also their own essence (*svabhāva*). Thus, in this *Ābhidharmikas*' perspective, the notion of 'defining

[11] Arnold (2005: 18).

characteristics' merges with that of 'essence', in a way not dissimilar from what has occurred in Western philosophy (see, for example, Aristotle, for whom essence is the ontological correlate of definition)[12]. In this framework, the role of ontological primitives was assumed by *dharmas*, which literally means 'bearers', in this case of 'characteristics' (*lakṣaṇa*s). Such characteristics, when inherent, unique, and defining, are called *svālakṣaṇas*[13].

The interpretation of the epistemic role of *svālakṣaṇas* was central in the turn that led to the emergence of a Buddhist tradition that significantly influenced subsequent centuries of philosophy both in India and in Tibet, heavily shaping even non-Buddhist philosophical traditions[14]. This turning point was brought about by Dignāga, an Indian philosopher who lived between the 6th and 7th centuries of the current era in South India[15]. In the previous *Ābhidharmikas*' perspective 'the *svālakṣaṇas* that individuate existents as belonging to one or another dharmic category are fundamentally abstract. This is among the salient points that is transformed by Dignāga's use of the term' (Arnold 2005: 19). The *Ābhidharmika*s regarded (as mentioned, not unlike Aristotle) the 'essence' (*svabhāva*) of something as the abstract state of its being defined as it is (that is, having the *svālakṣaṇa* that it has). However, *svabhāva* not only provided the basis for the abstract classification of something, but also determined its existential status, since everything that could be characterized as having its own intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) was also correlatively determined as substantially existing (*dravya*).

[12] See *Metaphysics* Z VI, 1029b2; (transl. Tredennick 1961: 251)

[13] In Sanskrit, the prefix '*sva*-' denotes intrinsic qualities; so, similarly, the term 'essence' (*svabhāva*) etymologically refers to one's own (*sva*-) being (*bhāva*).

[14] 'Dignāga's place in the history of Indian philosophy goes beyond Buddhism. […] Indian logic had its origin in cross-currents between a grammarian, Bhartṛhari, and a Buddhist philosopher, Dignāga' (Deleanu 2019: 11).

[15] Dignāga, significantly, was a disciple of Vasubandhu, who initially was a follower - and a highly important author - of the *Abhidharmika* school. However, Vasubandhu later repudiated this school, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the *Cittamātra/Yogācāra* school, which was subsequently defined as Buddhist idealism

So, a *dharma*, which is defined by *svālakṣaṇa*, namely its specific inherent characteristic, obtains from the latter its *svabhāva*, its intrinsic nature. In this framework, the *svālakṣaṇa*s were therefore something abstract, nothing more than mere definitions, mere abstractions. In Dignāga's work, however, they shift from being 'defining characteristics' and thus abstract, to 'unique particulars' and thus substantial. They become sensorial data (rather than abstractions) that create subjective internal representations.

In the transition from the *Abhidharmic* conception to that of Dignāga, ontological primacy shifts from irreducible categories to unique particulars. These unique particulars are distinct from abstract concepts, serving as the sole objects of perception (*pratyakṣa*). While *Abhidharmika* tradition defined the *two truths* as reducible vs. irreducible, Dignāga distinguishes between relative (conceptual) and the absolute (the reality of things themselves)[16]. Perception takes center stage in the epistemic quest, being seen as the only certain means of knowledge directly in contact with the world. Any knowledge relying on conceptualizations risks deception. This epistemic framework, established by Dignāga, was further developed by his main commentator, Dharmakīrti, during a period from the middle of the 6th to the middle of the 7th century. Dignāga's work, though largely lost in its original Sanskrit, maintains significance through its influence on subsequent Tibetan schools and on a very large portion of traditions, both Tantric and non-esoteric, in India. Dharmakīrti's writings provide a detailed commentary on Dignāga's works, albeit with likely significant interpretation[17]. Hence, we need to consider the works of both as a unified body, as the extent to which Dharmakīrti's interpretation aligns with Dignāga's original vision remains uncertain in certain cases. Dharmakīrti establishes an ontological

[16] See Stcherbatsky (1965: 164).

[17] A paradox emerges as Dignāga remains central due to Dharmakīrti's extensive exegesis. Despite originating the theories, Dignāga's works are no longer read, leading to their partial loss as they ceased to be copied. This reflects a historical lack of interest in historiographical matters in traditional India, where philosophical engagement primarily focused on practical ends such as avoiding error and discovering ultimate reality. Philosophical texts were valued based on clarity of synthesis or detailed description. Thus, while Dharmakīrti's influence endured, Dignāga, the original inventor of the theories, faded into relative obscurity. (see Ingalls 1968: v-vi)

distinction between *svālakṣaṇa* (to which, as we have seen, Dignāga had attributed the new sense of 'unique particulars') and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* (general conceptual constructs). While the former are real aspects of reality, the latter are fictitious properties projected onto reality. Consequently, Dharmakīrti (following in this case Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I, 2) argues that if there are two types of objects, there must be two distinct means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) for each type.

So, in this Dignāga-Dharmakīrti's tradition, known as *Pramāṇavada*[18], there are only two means of valid cognition: perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*)[19]. Perception directly engages with real particulars, while inference relies on reasoning and deals with conceptual constructs. Dharmakīrti emphasizes that genuine knowledge of real individual particulars can only be acquired through perception, which then serves as the foundation for inference. The latter involves conceptualizing objects by superimposing fictitious properties onto them: 'Dharmakīrti gives primacy to perception among the forms of knowledge. Moreover, Dharmakīrti holds that the only other form of

[18] The term *Pramāṇavada*, never used by the original authors themselves, is likely a construct devised by ancient Tibetan scholars to classify this philosophical tradition. Dignāga is regarded as its founder, with Dharmakīrti as its main exponent. Erich Frauwallner attempted to identify a common approach within this tradition by coining the term 'Logico-epistemological School of Buddhism' in a more Western fashion (see Frauwallner 1969: 74). However, a unified school of this nature never existed within historical Buddhist tradition. Moreover, as noted by Steinkellner & Much (1995: xv-xvi), this 'school' is not defined by a specific dogmatic foundation, but by its focus on various cognitive issues. Thus, while rooted in the later works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, since cognitive issues play a decisive role in its characterization it also ends up including authors such as Śubhagupta – who identifies himself as *Vaibhāṣika* and criticizes Dharmakīrti – and works such as Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṅgraha* and Kamalaśīla's *Tattvasaṅgrahapañjikā*, which, while systematically classified in the Madhyamaka tradition, are primarily encyclopedic summaries of epistemological polemics against non-Buddhist doctrines

[19] Dharmakīrti, in fact, also acknowledges the Buddha's teachings as valid knowledge, as rejecting them would contradict Buddhism's essence. However, he demonstrates the reliability of the Buddha as *pramāṇa* by testing his teachings against the two accepted valid *pramāṇa*s: perception and inference. Only in this way 'one can infer his "being *Pramāṇa*" and the reliability of all his teachings, including those relating to truths that are beyond sensitive perception' (Saccone 2007: 184).

knowledge, inference, is valid only due to its reliance on perception. Hence, perception does form the foundation of Dharmakīrti's theory of knowledge' (Dreyfus 1996: 210). Accordingly, perception yields knowledge that, though reliable, is momentary, constituting a transient mental event. This process mirrors fleeting emotional or mood states, providing brief instances of awareness regarding an object. Once a mental state concludes, only a mnestic trace of the cognitive experience remains. However, memory, which merely recalls past knowing events, does not generate new knowledge and thus fails to meet the criteria of *pramāṇa*, lacking inherent reliability and non-deceptiveness.

The core dilemma within Dharmakīrti's theory of perception stems from recognizing that individual perception, in isolation, lacks substantial knowledge unless supplemented by perceptual judgments. Yet, these judgments inherently rely on memory, thereby shaped by prior experiences. Consequently, memory is both essential for perception and inherently unreliable as a means of knowledge[20].

2.2. The Ambiguous Status of Perception

To embark on understanding the inherent tension within this system, we must first establish the relationship between the theory of Dharmakīrti-Dignāga and the contemporary theories of knowledge that challenged the Buddhist tradition:

> Dharmakīrti's view is that perception is both free from conceptuality and undistorted. To understand the implications of this view, let us place it within the context of the *Nyāya* philosophy, which serves as the dominant account of perception in classical India. This will allow us to understand the reasons for Dharmakīrti's necessary and yet unenforceable rejection of the validity of memory. To greatly simplify, *Nyāya* thinkers distinguish two stages in the perceptual process: the first is a bare contact with the object in its sheer givenness. At this stage, we do not understand the nature of the object confronting us but just see, for example, a lump. The second stage is the subsequent articulation of reality through a perceptual judgment that understands the object as it is. We now see the

[20] Cf. Dreyfus (1996: 211-212)

> lump *as*, for example, a jar by categorizing the bare object (the lump) under its proper universal (being a jar). (Dreyfus 1996: 212)

In *Nyāya* theory, the second stage is termed determinate perception (*savikalpaka pratyakṣa*), while the first stage is known as indeterminate perception (*nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa*) and entails a basic sensation of the object. While *Nyāya* holds the reality of universals and contends that perception directly accesses external reality, Dharmakīrti refutes both these notions. He argues that perception offers pure sensation and doesn't provide direct information. According to Dharmakīrti, the validity of cognition depends solely on its non-deceptiveness regarding the practical function of the real object. For example, the perception of water is valid only if it aids in recognizing water for its practical uses like drinking, washing, or irrigating. Therefore, cognition's validity is rooted in its practical usefulness, guided by the principle of *arthakriyā* (literally 'to accomplish a purpose'):

> The means of knowledge is of two kinds because the object of knowledge is of two kinds. [The latter is of two kinds] because it is capable or incapable of efficient action. The [illusory hair and so forth are not [real] objects, for they are not determined as [real] objects.[21] (PV III.1a, transl. Franco & Notake 2014: 29)

The problem arises when considering how to achieve practical ends without first categorizing an object. With bare perception alone, termed indeterminate perception by *Nyāya*, we cannot identify, for instance, a lump of clay as a jar and understand its purpose of holding or pouring liquids. Memory, on the other hand, is viewed as a source of relative cognitions that clouds our understanding of reality. *Nyāya* considers these cognitions valid because objects conceived through thought are seen as real, given that thought's function

[21] These illusory hairs refer to an eye condition called 'vitreous floaters', where the patient sees hair-like objects against the background of white surfaces. Candrakīrti uses this same metaphor in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.29, to illustrate the difficulty of explaining the nature of ultimate reality to those with a lower epistemic status. For an enlightened and awakened being, convincing someone of the emptiness of ultimate reality is akin to trying to persuade a person suffering from this eye condition that there are no actual hairs in their clean bowl. See Westerhoff (2024: 80).

extends beyond mere imagination and closely reflects reality[22]. The *Nyāya* viewpoint, which associates knowledge with both perception and conceptualization, reflects a significant aspect of the *Brahmanic-Upaniṣadic* tradition, emphasizing the strong interplay between thought and reality. However, Buddhists, adhering to their notably minimalist ontology[23], reject this stance. They argue that cognition is limited to the immediate and concrete aspects perceivable by the senses, rejecting the notion of abstract or general aspects within reality. And yet it seems that without the element of conceptualization, human knowledge would be reduced to mere perception of particulars.

In Buddhism, ontology and epistemology are deeply interconnected, highlighting the significance of distinguishing between particular and general concepts. Buddhist philosophy prioritizes the particular over the general, regarding the latter as fictitious. According to Buddhist thought, reality consists of atomic elements[24], elevating the perception of particulars above generalizing conceptualization. Consequently, Dharmakīrti sought to differentiate between the real (particular) and the unreal (general/universal) by outlining four criteria:

1) Whether or not an object has efficacity (*arthakriyā*).
2) Whether it is similar or not.
3) Whether it is the object or not the object of a word.
4) Whether or not the cognition arises, when the causes other [than the object itself] are present.

[22] See Dreyfus (1996: 217)

[23] As already seen in the *Ābhidharmika* tradition, for Buddhist only irreducible elements exist, and solely as transitory moments. In fact, momentariness (*kṣanikatva*) is one of the most largely shared ideas in Buddhist traditions, and Dharmottara, a notable commentator of Dharmakīrti's works, confirms the validity of this tenet also for the logico-epistemological tradition: 'Since we are here (on Buddhist ground) all reality is reduced to momentary (sense-data)' NBT 10.12, transl. Stcherbatsky (1958 vol. II: 26).

[24] By 'atomic' one must mean the indivisible *dharmas*, whether they are material or not.

According to this scheme[25], the universal is defined as that which lacks practical efficacy, is similar, serves as the object of a word, and whose cognition arises from causes external to its own existence.[26] Apart from the already discussed main theme of the efficacity, first of all the obscure definition of 'similar' means here something that is neither identical nor different from an individual particular. It is indeed a mistake both to think that a universal has a nature of its own and to think that it is identical with a particular thing[27]. The third and fourth criteria are concerned with the fact that 'the cognition of the universal arises in dependence on verbal convention, or, when the cognition is not accompanied by a word, the proximity between the things' (Notake 1999: 1247). The cardinal principle here is that of *arthakriyā*, where Dharmakīrti prioritizes what is effective on a practical level as real. Therefore, the second, third, and fourth criteria are subservient to the first. Only what is particular qualifies under this criterion. However, if the system of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti acknowledges also inference (*anumāna*) as a means of valid unquestionable knowledge, how can we achieve an inference that does not rely on universal concepts to subsume particulars?

2.3. The *Apoha* Theory

For this difficult task, Dignāga developed in his last work[28] a methodological tool called *apoha*, that is a mental deconstructive process, literally meaning 'removal' or 'exclusion'. In this negative process, inference is attained by excluding heterogeneous things, resulting in a concept-free knowledge. By gradually excluding similar and dissimilar objects and similar and dissimilar meanings of a word, one gradually arrives at specifying particular objects or

[25] Dharmakīrti outlines this set of criteria for distinguishing what is universal in PV III.1b$_2$-c$_1$, 2. Tosaki (1979) and Notake (1999) link this list to the later demonstration of the unreality of universals in *Pramāṇavārttika* (PV III.11-50).

[26] See PV III.2b, transl. Franco & Notake (2014: 35).

[27] Cf. PV III.25-27b, transl. Franco & Notake (2014: 80-85).

[28] The *Pramanasamuccayavritti*; the elaboration of *apoha* can be found in the fifth book. (transl. Pind, 2015).

particular meanings of the same word. For instance, to select a rose, we exclude all other flowers that are not roses from the bunch, but also exclude all other roses. This method allows us to define the individual particular while categorizing it (achieved not by grouping together, but by gradually separating it from what is different and what is similar but not identical). *Apoha* involves two processes: *Vijātīya Vyāvṛtti* (exclusion of the dissimilar) which excludes objects from other categories; and *Sajātīya Vyāvṛtti* (exclusion of the similar) which excludes objects from the same category.

An example of the latter could be the one where you select a specific shade of red by excluding all other shades of red. For *svalakṣaṇa*, namely the concrete unique particulars (such as precisely a specific red tone), both exclusions are given, while in the case of *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*, the general shareable characteristics, you can differentiate by exclusion only what belongs to other categories (e.g., we can distinguish the cow from the bear in this way)[29]. *Svalakṣaṇa* denotes what is definable in terms of itself, possessing its own distinct characteristics. Conversely, *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* refers to something with only shared, general attributes apprehensible solely through inference, not through perception. These are the result of understanding an object through generality, denoting shared traits among specimens of a category. Therefore, *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* is solely relative to expression and communication, not inherent to the object itself. It is, therefore, a conceptual and linguistic construct. In fact, Dharmakīrti and all logicians in the Buddhist tradition reject the notion of words representing reality, meaning that they deny the possibility of a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality[30]. Language is comprised only of general terms, therefore representing fictitious generalities that do not align with the actual world:

> Dharmakīrti does not accept that the meaning of a word is an object or that a word denotes objects. On the contrary, he accepts that a word is a conceptual

[29] Cf. Bapat (1993: 192-193).

[30] Some argue that certain Buddhist thinkers did support this notion properly. However, this remains a highly controversial subject. Cf. Bronkhorst (1999: 17-24).

> and linguistic construction; it represents only generality and hence is unable to depict reality, which is made up of unique, discrete particulars. (Bapat 1993: 198)

The issue becomes apparent when considering this viewpoint: how can a word, inherently a generalizing construct, represent a specific object? For example, when I ask for a jar, why do I receive a jar specifically and not something else? How do they grasp the meaning of 'jar'? Dharmakīrti proposes that this is achieved through *apoha*: where the meaning of a word involves excluding other meanings, implying a process of negative discernment leading to positive identification. When we speak, we encounter numerous potential meanings. Through *apoha*, these are systematically excluded, allowing us to grasp the precise meaning intended.

Dharmakīrti outlines three stages in this understanding: linguistic, epistemic, and ontological. Linguistic comprehension distinguishes between 'jar' and 'non-jar'. Epistemic comprehension connects language to knowledge: hearing 'jar' leads to understanding 'non-jar' and recognizing the uniqueness of the specific jar. This uniqueness (as discussed earlier regarding the difference between *svālakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) cannot be fully captured by language. In the ontological stage, exclusion communicated through language and understood at an epistemological level is cognized as not merely linguistic or conceptual: it also pertains to reality, because exclusion constitutes the *svabhāva* (own-being, essence) of every *svālakṣaṇa*.

The development of the *apoha* theory was an attempt at resolving the unclear status of words and language in the Buddhist framework: if the words (as stated by Dignāga) cannot refer to particular objects of the world, and at the same time universals are not real, to what kind of things the words are referring? With the *apoha* theory Dignāga created something that is as 'useful' as universals, but without ontological implications.

Hence the Dignāga-Dharmakīrtian project tries to address its internal tensions through inference by exclusion, however, its conclusions are not entirely convincing. It posits that we differentiate between inherent and shared characteristics ontologically by exclusion. Similarly, it suggests that we discern between perceptual and inferential knowledge epistemologically using the same

process of exclusion. Yet, it remains unclear which faculty executes this process – specifically, is it a conceptual faculty? This raises significant questions about the solidity of its argument. And doesn't suffice to say that Dignāga was advocating the 'essential identity between the process of denotation and logical inference' (Bronkhorst 1999: 20), because this is only a repetition and not a solution of the very same problem.

The peculiar stance of the theory of *apoha* appears to reveal a prevalent flaw in the framework presented by Dignāga-Dharmakīrti: the lack of a thorough explanation of how perception can produce cognition without the intervention of conceptualization. Several attempts have been made to address this system's weakness. In India, notable efforts were made by Dharmottara, while in Tibetan monasteries, the *Gelug* and *Sakya* traditions produced the most notable works on the topic.

3. Dharmottara's Attempt

As we have seen, a means of knowledge can be regarded as *pramāṇa* only if the cognition that it produces is valid. But what means valid? Dharmakīrti himself, in PV II.1, equates valid with reliable (*avisaṃvādaka*). The meaning of 'reliable' is here strongly linked to the aforementioned practical *arthakriyā* tenet: so, we can say that a cognition is reliable if it has practical efficiency, namely if it brings the subject to obtain the object. Dharmottara, an 8th-century Indian Buddhist logician and notable commentator of the works of Dharmakīrti, emphasized this criterion of reliability arguing that a means of knowledge is considered trustworthy if it can accurately determine its object, indicating or denoting it and prompting us toward its attainment. This type of cognition can be relied upon to accomplish the subject's purposes:

> When a pot is seen and perception ascertains it, this perception is a valid cognition. For it is *avisamvādin* since, by ascertaining this pot, it indicates the latter, and by this it motivates a person towards it and thus causes a person to obtain it. (Krasser 1995: 248)

The peculiarity of Dharmottara's reinterpretation, or rather what it clearly highlights, is that for Buddhists, cognition is always inevitably tied to a real object: 'For the Buddhists the validity is due to the mere fact that [cognition] is produced by the real thing (*vastu*)' NBT 50.12f (transl. Krasser 1995: 264), however, thereby, in order for a cognition to be deemed valid or invalid, it must be confirmed by a subsequent perception that evaluates and verifies the accuracy of the preceding one. For example:

> The invalidity of an erroneous cognition that takes a mirage for water is ascertained by the later perception which determines the nature of the sunrays and which arises after one has failed to obtain the water. It should be understood, he states, that the cognition which ascertains the presence of the sunrays simultaneously determines the absence of water; just as a cognition of the absence of a pot from a certain place consists in a perception of that place that lacks a pot. (Krasser 1995: 265)

Dharmakīrti's epistemological approach emphasized the contrast between non-deceptive perception and distorting conceptualization; however, the efficacy of our practical actions hinges on conceptual judgments characterizing objects accurately. Thus, the validity of our experiences relies on precise categorization. But if perception's validity depends on conceptualization, what ensures the validity of this conceptualization? This dilemma exposes a circular problem: perception relies on conceptualization, and conceptualization relies on perception.

For a devout follower of Dharmakīrti, perception should be inherently valid. However, this presents a difficulty: perception alone does not furnish usable information without subsequent conceptualization. So, to Dharmakīrti, a jar is merely a mass of matter. According to his framework, conceptions are only valid forms of knowledge when grounded in the undistorted perception of reality.

> But how can Buddhist epistemologists hold that perception is foundational if its cognitive status is derived from its appropriation by conception? How can they even argue that perception is valid if experience becomes cognitive only by interpretation? Is not the validity of experience due to conception rather than perception? (Dreyfus 1997: 356)

This constitutes the weak link in the entire framework, which Dharmottara attempts to address in a manner that will significantly influence the Tibetan reception of Buddhist logical-epistemological theory. Dharmottara's approach involves acknowledging that perception, by itself, is not cognitive; it simply grasps its object and triggers appropriate cognition. This paves the way for a fully cognitive state to arise. Consequently, the responsibility for the validity of experience primarily falls on perception, as the conception induced by it does not fully qualify as genuine conception (which, according to Dharmakīrti, would lead to false knowledge)[31]. Dharmottara's approach effectively upholds the Dharmakīrtian theory because, in this context, conceptualization diverges from its usual role of imagining something absent or temporarily concealed (which Dharmakīrti considers false knowledge). Instead, conceptualization in this context assumes the role proper to perception: perceiving a present and visible object[32]. In this form of perceptual judgment:

> We conceive that we see an object not that we imagine it. In such judgment, the function of seeing, which is perceptual, is taken over by conception, which is induced by perception, thereby making the object available to us. In being induced by perception; conception leaves aside its proper function, which is to imagine an object, and, so to say, assumes that of perception, which is to see an object. This shows, according to Dharmottara, that in this case only perception is valid even though its object is made available to us only through the intervention of a conception. (Dreyfus 1997: 357)

In the Buddhist epistemological framework, perception triggers the process, and conceptualization completes it, but the overall operation remains primarily perceptual and non-conceptual. While Dharmottara's approach seems reasonable, it overlooks a critical aspect: Buddhist epistemology regards conceptualization not just a passive reflection of external objects, but as an active and creative process that leads to inevitable fictions. This differs from the realism upheld by the non-buddhist *Nyāya* school, which sees thought objects

[31] The distinction between correct ascertainment and false ascertainment of a given perception was already addressed by Dharmakirti himself. See, for example, *Nyāyabindu* I.4.

[32] See Dreyfus (1997: 357).

as real entities. *Nyāya* suggests that thought grasps general and abstract aspects beyond perception, a stance Buddhism rejects. Buddhist ontology asserts that reality consists solely of particulars, necessitating the hierarchical placement of perception above conceptualization. To maintain their minimalist ontology, Buddhists must limit the validity of thought, considering it valid only for inference without a direct cognitive role. While thought may infer the real world, it lacks direct access to reality and cannot be intrinsically valid in the process of perception, as Dharmottara argues.

However, Dharmottara's model challenges one of Dharmakīrti's key assumptions, which posits that perception and conceptualization operate on distinct objects: namely *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*. According to this view, conception cannot apprehend what should be perceived. Dharmottara's proposal, which involves cooperation between perception and conceptualization, incorporating these synthetic constructs (perceived + conceptualized), contradicts Dharmakīrti's system, going against its core principles.

This underscores a fundamental flaw in Dharmakīrti's system: the absolute dichotomy between the two forms of knowledge prohibits any coordination between them. They lack common ground, and even their objects remain distinct. This challenge undermines not only the epistemic role of conceptualization but also that of perception, which can only achieve cognition through conceptual interpretations.

3.1. Tibetan Reinterpretations

Building upon Dignāga's original theorization, we observe that the fundamental assumption of the entire logical-epistemological system is that 'perception has [only] *svalakṣaṇa* as its object and inference has [only] *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* as object' PSV I.2, (transl. Tillemans 1999: 221).

The *Gelug* tradition in Tibetan Buddhism attempted to bridge this gap between the separate realms of perception and thought, following the texts of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Dharmottara. Their solution is based on a statement that may seem paradoxical: that 'the object of thought is not a particular, but

particulars are objects of thought' (Tillemans 1999: 217). According to Tillemans, this strange formulation implies that the objects of thought, such as universals, are merely constructs of the mind. However, it does not mean that everything that becomes an object of thought is necessarily a mental construct. Another way to phrase this concept could be: 'although universal is mentally created, it does not follow that if *x* is a universal, *x* is mentally created' (Tillemans 1999: 215).

This tradition therefore distinguishes between *general* universals and *specific* ones, which is something absent in Indian Buddhist logic. According to this Tibetan ontology, various universals are also considered as particulars, while real particulars are effectively perceived by thought and can even be its explicit objects. The unconscious error is the one that involves confusing the status of fictional conceptual representations with the status of real perceived universals (embedded in particulars), despite their fundamental differences: one being unreal and the other real[33]. This differentiation between general universals and specific ones may have appeared paradoxical and sophistic even to proponents of other Tibetan schools. One of the most prominent figures of the rival *Sakya* sect dismissed this differentiation as nothing more than 'verbal obscurantism' (Tillemans 1999: 218). Moreover, the *Gelug* tradition found itself in a dilemma: accepting that universals are real, akin to the *Nyāya* tradition, would contradict both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Conversely, acknowledging that thought operates solely on its own unreal creations would mean it cannot engage with reality. Thus, this dilemma has pushed the *Gelug* into the treacherous terrain of differentiating between universals and Universal. This interpretation then distinguishes between a theoretical explanation and a practical application: for example, *apoha* is a mental construct (and thus is thought, conceptualization), but what is selected by *apoha* (i.e., the general concept resulting from exclusion) may not be so (see Tillemans 1999: 220). Tillemans argues that this *Gelug* solution is nothing more than a case of psychological fascination (typical of philosophers) with parallels and rhetorical inversions, which seduce us into thinking that they embody some special depth: a formulation such as 'the objects of thought are not particulars, but the

[33] See Tillemans (1999: 216).

particulars are objects of thought' is precisely one of these parallels/rhetorical inversions that philosophers find so fascinating[34]. The *Gelug* model resembles a mirroring, where a jar indeed appears to thought through a *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* (that is, through a verbal/conceptual construct aimed at indicating a generality), just as an object might appear through a mirror or a crystal. Thought then comprehends its object (particular) through this medium. If the jar did not appear in this mirror, we could know nothing about it, and our ideas would then indeed be 'only' inventions and misunderstandings.

In this *Gelug* setting, however, we see a distortion of the term *kalpanā* (conceptual representation) at work, where such conceptual representations end up being taken as faithful duplicates of the object, rather than substitutive constructions (and so entirely fictional). The *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* as a mirror thus seems like an undue transformation of thought into a kind of perception, capable of capturing all the characteristics of the object in an undifferentiated unity, while the *apoha*, in reality, worked exactly in the opposite way, operating thought subtractively, removing characteristics until isolating a very limited number and focusing on them. Mental representations in Buddhism are indeed always a partialization, a reduction compared to the unanalyzed complexity that is the real thing.

According to the aforementioned rival school of the *Sakya*, this *Gelug*'s differentiation can be easily avoided with a different interpretation of the source Indian texts, allowing for the assertion that all universals are unreal, yet we can still make use of them to operate on real entities. In the 13th century, Sakya Pandita (known as Sa-pan), a prominent figure of the rival Tibetan *Sakya* school, addressed the tension within the Dharmakīrtian system using a metaphor: 'sense consciousness is like the fool who sees. Conceptions is like a blind skillful

[34] Wittgenstein detects the same kind of psychological fascination in his *Philosophical Investigations* when he says: 'the problems arising through a misinterpretation of language have the character of *depth*; they are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. –– Let's ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)' (Wittgenstein 2009: 52^{e}–53^{e}).

speaker. Self-cognition is like [a person] with complete senses, who introduces one to the other.' (*Sa-Pan's Treasure* 6.a.5; transl. Dreyfus 1996: 223). So pure perception is like a fool: he sees the object but cannot distinguish it; conceptualization, on the other hand, is like an intelligent but blind person: he cannot see the object, yet is able to describe what he cannot see. The cooperation between the two would require an intermediary, as they do not apprehend the same objects, and for Sa-pan, this intermediary would be the reflexivity of apperception, what Dharmakīrti had called self-cognition: perception, while perceiving the object, perceives itself and does not need an external perceiver. In Buddhist epistemology, the subjective continuity of experiences is not due to an alleged transcendent unity of the Self, but to the reflective and self-representative nature of our mind's operations. This reflective factor ensures that conceptualization operates on the same object apprehended by perception; thus, apperception indirectly ensures that thought maintains contact with reality. Moreover, apperception pertains to both conceptualization and perception, and therefore can serve as an intermediary, ensuring the two components of knowing: the foolish perception and the blind conceptualization. This function is carried out, on a practical level, through keeping track of the continuity of our psychic life. Sa-pan's solution thus manages to guarantee in a fairly simple way that:

> Although there is no correspondence between concepts and reality, thought is not arbitrary but causally grounded in reality through perception. A mere causal link or association of ideas, however, is not sufficient to ensure objectivity. Something stronger is needed to warrant the link between perception and conception. If Sa-pan is right, Dharmakirtians find this link in apperception, which ensures the unity of our psychic life. (Dreyfus 1996: 224)

4. Defusing the Conventional/Absolute Dichotomy: Candrakīrti

What we have seen so far illustrates Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's project, presenting epistemology as a discipline capable of purportedly offering profound justification for human epistemic practices. It attempts to illuminate the ontological underpinnings of these practices, explaining our relationship to

such foundations. Dan Arnold highlights that in this form of foundationalism, the primary feature is the unwarranted fusion of causal explanation with the issue of justification[35]. In other words, *Pramāṇavada* foundationalism conflates the descriptive 'question of how one comes to believe something, with the normative question of why one should believe it', thus leading to 'to an epistemic notion of truth – which is not the idea of truth that is presupposed in ordinary discourse' (Arnold 2005: 16).

Returning to the initial question of ontological primitives, what the *Abhidharma* termed *dharmas* are, for the *Pramāṇavada*, *svalakṣaṇas*: if the former argued that the fundamental elements of reality were irreducible abstract elements, for the latter they are unique particulars, those particulars that cannot be subsumed under more general categorizations. These unique particulars are the object of the epistemic faculty of perception. According to Candrakīrti (6th-7th century CE)[36], a representative of the *Madhyamaka* tradition, the so-called 'Middle Way' school of Buddhism inaugurated by the work of Nāgārjuna (2nd century CE), the epistemological doctrine of Dignāga does not substantially differ from the previous *Abhidharma* theorization. Indeed, Dignāga exemplifies an interpretation of Buddhist teachings that is still specifically *Abhidharmika*: in both interpretations, a distinction is made between what is *dravyasat* (existing as substance) and what is *prajñaptisat* (existing only derivatively, as a construct, and therefore as knowledge). Everything that is *Prajñapti* can ultimately be reduced to what exists as an ontological primitive. When Dignāga says that 'the jar, etc. exist only by (human) convention, because, if the atoms are eliminated, the cognition which appears under their form (i.e. the form of the jar, etc.), ceases' (*Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* 5c-d; transl. Tola & Dragonetti 2004: 36), he means that what makes these objects 'conventionally existent' is their being reducible, while the aspects to which they can be reduced (e.g., color or matter) exist instead in a substantial way (*dravyatas*). In the perspective espoused by Dharmakīrti, the *svalakṣaṇas* are akin to sensory data,

[35] Conflation that has its root in the Sanskrit language itself, for which '*hetu*' means at the same time 'cause' and 'reason' of a thing. See Arnold (2005: 14)

[36] For a recollection on the Tibetan Candrakirti's renaissance see Vose (2009).

forming internal subjective representations, and revealing a world where our experience is made of fleeting sensations of unique particulars.

So, both these frameworks aim to replace our naive intuitions, transitioning to a reality that distinguishes between what is 'existent ultimately' and 'existent conventionally' (the 'two truths'). For these foundationalist systems, the conventionally existent is the realm of phenomena grasped in naive intuitions: for the *Ābhidharmika*s, the two truths are what is reducible (relative/conventional truth) and what is irreducible (absolute/ultimate truth); the *Pramāṇavada* shifts focus to unique particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*) instead of irreducible categories (*dharma*), distinct from referents of words (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*). In this latter tradition, absolute truth lies in unique particulars, while relative truth lies in generalizing verbal abstractions. These ontologically basic elements, moments of unique sensation, are known unquestionably through perception, caused directly by existing things. We perceive only these unique, discrete moments. Our subjective experience consists solely of a causally continuous series of momentary sensations. In line with *Abhidharma* theorization, the epistemology initiated by Dignāga precisely adheres to this fundamental precept of Buddhism (*cf*. Arnold 2005: 119). However, the *Madhyamaka* tradition, as interpreted by Candrakīrti, rejects the seminal *Abhidharma* characterization of the two truths: the set of what is ultimately existent is an empty set. *Madhyamaka*'s interpretation suggests that the *Abhidharma*'s ontologizing impulse undermines Buddhism's core principle: that everything that is 'existent' is (according to the tenet of *pratītya-samutpāda*) dependently originated and therefore lacks stable, inherent existence. For *Madhyamaka* there can be no exceptions to this all-encompassing rule: the causal chain cannot be traced back to its ultimate cause, thus there is no way to know what a phenomenon ultimately depends on. If one follows Buddhism's central precept, that everything is causally originated from something else, one cannot reduce something to its ultimate and unoriginated element. There cannot be ultimate reality because the very concept of 'ultimate' in a foundationalist sense contradicts Buddhism, so there cannot be a set of things that are 'existent' ultimately, i.e., inherently. According to Candrakīrti's perspective (who equates the concepts of 'conventional' and 'causally

originated'), devaluing the conventional (that is, the phenomenic world) implicitly implies asserting that not everything is dependently originated, and that there are things that exist in a stable, eternal, and independent sense. This will deny two of the three marks of existence expounded by the Buddha in his first sermon: namely, *anitya* (impermanence) and *anātman* (lack of stable essence).

Despite rehabilitating the conventional, *Madhyamaka* still distinguishes between ultimate and conventional truth. However, its ultimate truth is not the discovery of irreducible, 'truly' existing ontological primitives; instead, it reveals the non-existence of such a set. Thus, the ultimate truth is that there is no 'ultimate truth' – a paradoxical assertion that is itself posited as ultimately true:

> Candrakīrti's characteristically *Madhyamika* claim just is that there is no such thing as the way things 'really' are (at least, not if we imagine that as the *Abhidharmikas* do) […], [and so] the *Madhyamikas* Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti should be understood as making a universally obtaining truth claim to the effect that the way things really are *really is* such that we can never identify something "more real" underlying existents and our experience thereof (Arnold 2005: 120).

If the *Abhidharma* project was a foundational ontology, Dignāga's project develops similar positions but through epistemological arguments rather than ontological ones. That is to say, it seeks to demonstrate that our cognitive faculties can distinguish (with certainty) what exists from what does not exist. Both these systems are hence dualistic, as they split the 'phenomenal' and the 'absolute', *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, afflicted life and pacified life. For the *Madhyamaka* what is problematic about an approach such as the one of *Pramāṇavada* is 'the presupposition that justification could consist in cognitive contact with something "ultimately existent" – and this is problematic, for Nāgārjuna, just because his whole point is to argue that there is no such thing' (Arnold 2005: 145).

Candrakīrti argues against Dignāga's assertion, who claims access to a reality beyond what our conventional epistemic practices produce. Thus, the critique by the *Madhyamaka* philosopher against Dignāga and his associates begins by bringing back the use of the term *svalakṣaṇa* to its everyday (i.e.,

conventional) use[37]. Dignāga's shifted the Sanskrit suffix -*aṇa*'s meaning from 'that through which' to 'that which is characterized', thus creating a technical term outside of what Wittgenstein would call the ordinary 'language-game'. Consequently, *lakṣaṇa*, including *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*, transmuted from 'attributes of a substrate' to 'substrates' themselves (namely, existing as separate ontological entities). The conventional use was originally denoting 'defining characteristics', so nothing more than abstract and verbal descriptions of something. But when *svalakṣaṇa* switches to indicate an object, a 'unique particular' the relational principle remains: nothing can characterize itself, necessitating that what characterizes must be distinct from the object being characterized[38]. Candrakīrti dismantles Dignāga's argument by showing how the unconventional use of the term *svalakṣaṇa* leads to an infinite regress: if one *svalakṣaṇa* is an object, another must be its characteristic, and so forth. This is because the concept of *svalakṣaṇa* inherently implies a relational aspect, highlighting the necessity of a relationship between two entities.

But what, then, is the 'conventional' for Candrakīrti? It's the ordinary 'real' existence, understood as the state where the elements of the real world remain unanalyzed and undissected to our experience. Starting from this, Candrakīrti notes that the critical analysis employed by the *Abhidharma* and *Pramāṇavada* schools is not at work in everyday talking. In his main work, the *Prasannapadā* (a commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakakārikā*), he attributes to a fictional Buddhist logician, whose views closely resemble Dignāga's[39], the error of

[37] This resonates profoundly with the Wittgensteinian view of the self-illusion embedded in philosophical problems: 'We're bringing words back from their metaphysical to their normal use in language. (The man who said that one cannot step into the same river twice was wrong; one can step into the same river twice.) And this is what the solution of all philosophical difficulties looks like.' (Wittgenstein 2005: 304e). Heraclitus' mistake was to use the term 'river' in a non-ordinary way, in an over-analyzed way where the river becomes an unstoppable flow of atoms. However, this is not the sense in which a person means 'river' when he says 'I swam in the river both yesterday and today'. With this ordinary meaning of 'river', you can surely step two times in it. Dignāga's mistake is exactly the same.

[38] See *PP* I.60.4-I.61.2, transl. Stcherbatsky (1965: 143-144).

[39] On this fictional debate, see the seminal work of Siderits (1981) and the later article by Dan Arnold (2003).

attempting to imbue *svalakṣaṇa* with the sense of 'substance,' a notion alien to ordinary discourse, while the term's proper sense is the one derived 'from common conversation, (it refers only to what holds good in a conversation) in which there is no philosophic investigation of reality and the usual categories are accepted as real without scrutiny' *PP* 1.67.7 (transl. Stcherbatsky 1965: 152).

As Arnold efficiently explains, the things of the ordinary everyday world of conventional truth 'have "real existence", then, only to the extent that they are unanalyzed. [...] That is, what defines the conventional is precisely the absence of any analytic search for something more real than what meets the eye' (Arnold 2005: 160)[40].

Madhyamaka philosophy holds that no foundational explanations can be offered for the conventional and ordinary world. This is because any explanation must itself demonstrate the principle evident in the conventional world: that nothing can exist independently. As an infinite chain in both directions, *pratītya-samutpāda* defies tracing back to an original point. Therefore, any system consistent with Buddhism's primary principle cannot have a foundation. Any attempt at foundationalism contradicts Buddhism's essence. Instead, when searching for foundations, one must settle for what Wittgenstein referred to as a 'bedrock', namely the point beyond which it no longer makes sense to proceed, or beyond which we lack the means to proceed[41]. However, this demands a shift in perspective and a re-evaluation of one's will and its relationship with reasoning. In philosophical inquiry, the challenge lies in recognizing when to halt and acknowledging that oftentimes, when seeking a solution to a problem such as the foundation, the solution has already been reached or is right before our eyes, and there is no need to go further:

> The difficulty – I might say – is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary

[40] The illusion involved in philosophical analysis 'sees the essence of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes surveyable through a process of ordering, but as something that lies beneath the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see right into the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth' (Wittgenstein 2009: 48e).

[41] See Wittgenstein (2009: 91e).

> to it. "We have already said everything. – Not anything that follows from this, no, *this* itself is the solution!" [...] The difficulty here is to stop.
>
> "Why do you demand explanations? If they are given you, you will once more be facing a terminus. They cannot get you any further than you are at present." (Wittgenstein 1967: 58e)

Wittgenstein's remark that 'explanations cannot take you further than you already are', resonates deeply with the conclusions drawn by *Madhyamaka* philosophy, as elucidated by Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna. The most astounding tenet of *Madhyamaka* philosophy lies in the assertion of the identity between *saṃsāra* (the cyclic existence of suffering) and *nirvāṇa* (the cessation of cyclic suffering):

> There is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.
> There is no distinction whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.
> What is the limit of *nirvāṇa*, that is the limit of *saṃsāra*.
> There is not even the finest gap to be found between the two.
> The views concerning what is beyond cessation, the end of the world, and the eternality of the world are dependent [respectively] on *nirvāṇa*, the future life, and the past life.
> (MMK, XXV, 19-21, transl. Siderits & Katsura 2013: 302-303).

By drawing further on Wittgenstein, we can attempt to clarify what *Madhyamaka* philosophy intends here through some of the Austrian philosopher's annotations:

> I might say: if the place I want to get to could only be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there.
>
> For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now. Anything that I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me. (Wittgenstein 1980: 7e)

If I have to climb somewhere with a ladder, it is because I assume the existence of a separate plane from the one I am currently on. And it is precisely this assumption that gives rise to metaphysical questions and the resulting frustration due to the inability to answer them. Reality is singular, and any apparent duality is merely an illusion caused by our normal way of thinking and

perceiving the world. Therefore, our aim should be to return to where we already are, but with new eyes. In other words, opening our eyes means to realize that we are already where we aimed to be. This concept aligns with what Nāgārjuna says when he says that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are exactly the same thing, and that the prior limit and the final limit coincides[42].

So absolute reality and conventional reality are not separate, but the exact same world seen differently. Absolute reality is free from the distortions of concepts and attachment, while conventional reality is how we perceive the world through our ordinary experiences and beliefs. The *Madhyamaka* school emphasizes emptiness, but this does not mean that nothing exists: everything is impermanent, interconnected, and dependent on causes and conditions, this is what this philosophy refers to as emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The conventional world, always seen as *duḥkha*, arises from perceiving separate entities and clinging to them as something permanent. But since all things constantly change, the truth of emptiness is that there is no permanent self. We exist, but our existence is not fixed, realizing this is the key to liberation from suffering[43]. When we see phenomena as empty of inherent existence, we can let go of attachments and experience the world as it truly is: the sense we seek is in the world of conventional truth and not outside it. The error that leads to seek it outside is due to the human yearning for transcendence, for foundationalism, for first causes: and this is nothing more than an attempt to escape the roughness of the ordinary and conventional world, but once we reach 'the final sense', we discover that its truth is the 'absence of sense'. It is a return to the starting point without the illusion that there is a final point. The difference between before and after is only a new quality of life that stems from freeing ourselves from the idea that there is something (to be achieved) completely different from what we already have before our eyes.

[42] On this topic, see also Garfield's translation of the same textual passage (1995: 75-76).

[43] It is important to note that 'realizing' a truth differs significantly from 'rationally assenting' to it: 'the difference between rational assent and realization is that only the latter affects specific automatic default ways of cognizing and conceptualizing the world' (Westerhoff 2024: 53).

Nirvāṇa is seeing the world as utterly empty, meaning we stop seeking a transcendent, stable, eternal, independent, and separate meaning. Seeing the world as empty is seeing it free from the chains of searching for essences, substances, and definitions. It is observing the world in its dynamic unfolding as a swarm of causally determined relationships in a continuous flow without beginning or end. It is realizing that freedom is not independence but knowing that everything depends on something else. The vertiginous paradox of the 'two truths' of the *Madhyamaka* philosophy is that absolute truth coincides with relative truth, but this does not mean that relative truth must disappear.

Buddhism of the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) is not simply a monistic thought, but a non-dual thought: the only way to reach absolute truth is through relative truth, which is why relative truth must not disappear. The controversy between Candrakīrti and Dignāga thus ends with a clean cut of the entire logical-epistemological problem:

> In no case is there any independent (absolute) reality either of our cognitions, nor the objects cognized. Therefore, let us be satisfied with the usual (view of the phenomenal world), just as it is cognized by us from experience'. (*PP*, I.75.10, transl. Stcherbatsky 1965: 164).

What logicians failed to grasp is that the 'relative' is nothing but the surface of the 'absolute', and its value lies precisely in being that surface. Thus, 'absolute truth' entails nothing more and nothing less than learning to appreciate the navigation of this surface.

Abbreviations of Sanskrit texts

PSV: *Pramanasamuccayavritti* of Dignāga
MMK: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna
NBT: *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* of Dharmottara
PP: *Prasannapadā* of Candrakīrti
PV: *Pramāṇavārttika* of Dharmakīrti

Abbreviations of Pāli canon texts

DN: *Dīgha Nikāya*
MN: *Majjhima Nikāya*
SN: *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

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