Saddled with content\(^1\)

McDowell and the identity theory of truth

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§1 Introduction

In Mind and World, McDowell defends a conception of reality as “made up of the sort of thing one can think.” (1994: 27–8) Though such a conception may sound idealistic, it is not supposed to be metaphysically contentious. All it is meant to consist of is a truism or two. “Dressed up in high-flown language,” McDowell expresses the first truism as follows (27):

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\text{[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case ..., there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world.}
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McDowell’s ontological way of putting the point (“the sort of thing”) may raise some eyebrows, and this will be important to my purposes, but the core of his remark should indeed be uncontroversial: thinking stops

\(^1\) I've discussed this draft, and related ones, with David Finkelstein and Charles Travis. I anyway would not want to claim a philosophical thought as mine, but in this case I should mention in particular that two of the central points can be traced back to their influence. It was Travis who first made me see the difficulty of getting around what he refers to as ‘Frege’s point’. (This it to mention only the most immediately relevant idea I learned from him.) And I encourage him to blame Finkelstein for making me think that there is nonetheless a truistic way of understanding McDowell’s reminders. Finkelstein also drew my attention to McDowell’s lapse from disjunctivism, and I’ve benefitted greatly from his detailed comments.
nowhere short of what it answers to: one can think that things are a certain way, and when one thinks truly, things are in fact that way. Taking the ontological gestures more seriously, Jennifer Hornsby has incisively defended this view under its traditional name ‘the identity theory of truth’: true thoughts, which Hornsby refers to as true ‘thinkables’, are the same as facts, and the world is the totality of facts (Hornsby 1997). Neither for Hornsby nor for McDowell is it supposed to be a theory in any weighty sense. As McDowell puts it, “All the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, that spring has begun, and that very same thing, that spring has begun, can be the case.” (McDowell 1994: 27)

But the point comes to a little more than that, since it also contains an endorsement of the opening lines of the Tractatus, a conception of the world as everything that is the case. Those lines continue, “The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” (TLP 1.1, my emphasis) So one might think that this conception allows for a distance between the world, thus understood, and the world conceived as a totality of things, primarily the sort of things that we find around us, and are present to us in perceptual experience. If one cannot drive a wedge between true thinkables and facts, one might feel there must then be a distance between facts and the more or less concrete particular objects which make up our surroundings. I take it that McDowell’s account of experience is supposed to deny that these two conceptions of ‘the world’ can come apart. The world,

2 “... When we say, mean, that such and such is the case, then with what we mean we stop nowhere short of the fact; we mean that such - and – such – is – so - and - so.” (Wittgenstein Pl 95) McDowell refers to this, or his paraphrase, as Wittgenstein’s truism. I will later discuss the distance between the original and McDowell’s paraphrase.

3 As P.F. Strawson wrote, although in criticism of correspondence theories of truth, “... if we read ‘world’ (a sadly corrupted word) as ‘heavens and earth,’ talk of facts, situations and states of affairs, as ‘included in’ or ‘parts of’ the world is, obviously, metaphorical. The world is the totality of things, not of facts.” (Strawson 1953: 139n)

4 Again Strawson, this time reversing a remark of J.L. Austin, “If you prise the statements off the world, you prise the facts off it too; but the world would be none the poorer. (You don’t also prise off the world what the statements are about – for this you would need a different kind of lever.)” (1950: 197)

5 Nor do they come apart in the Tractatus: “To perceive a complex object is to see that its constituents hang together thus and so.” (5,5423) This continues with a discussion of the Necker cube. When we see it first one way, then another, “we really see two different facts.” See Sullivan 2005 for an elaboration of both
conceived as everything that is the case, includes the sensible world.\textsuperscript{6} The truism which assures this I will refer to as McDowell’s second truism: in experience it can be manifest to one that something is the case. McDowell expresses it as follows (26):

Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. \textit{That things are thus and so} is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, \textit{that things are thus and so}, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.

Reminding ourselves of these truisms is meant to dispel a sense of distance between thinking and reality, and in that way discourage engaging in constructing any more substantial theory of the relation between thinking and reality. There is a felt need for a more substantial theory when reality is pictured as lying “outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere”. It seems that for McDowell this is the same as denying the truisms. If the world, and our apprehension of it in experience, were not conceptually structured, in the sense in which the truisms say that they are, the ultimate justifications for our judgements would not be of the form \textit{that things are thus and so}. It would not be possible to make an experience, or what in it we experience, available for discursive deliberation in the way that a thought can be made available for discursive deliberation. Whatever can be expressed in words, what has the form \textit{that things are thus and so}, could only be a response to experience. But this, McDowell thinks, would make it impossible to see such a response as rationally motivated at all. For the response to be rationally motivated, it should at least be possible, even if we normally don’t, to step back and discursively deliberate over whether this experience warrants this response. But that would require putting the relevant aspect of the experience itself into words—exactly what, on a conception that denies the truisms, we cannot do. At best we could try to point at “something the affinity and the difference with McDowell’s view.

\textsuperscript{6} McDowell does recognise a broader conception of ‘world’, but concentrates his efforts on dissolving puzzlement about the relation between thinking and the sensible world: “[S]ince our cognitive predicament is that we confront the world by way of sensible intuition (to put it in Kantian terms), our reflection on the very idea of thought’s directedness at how things are must begin with answerability to the empirical world.” (McDowell 1994/6: xii)
that is simply received in experience” (McDowell 1994: 6), and McDowell clearly feels such a pointing would be an empty gesture. The predicament in which we feel the need to point beyond the conceptual sphere is one thing McDowell refers to as ‘the Myth of the Given’.

Where McDowell’s theme is justification, there Hornsby’s theme is a theory of truth, and I will generally follow Hornsby in this. Denying the truisms, we would be inclined to think of the truth of a thought as consisting in a relation of correspondence between the thought and something worldly which one can only refer to. Of course thinking answers to how things are, worldly things which one can generally only refer to, but one can say how things are— that is just the truism which the identity theory reminds us of. By contrast, the correspondence theorist conceives ‘how things are’, what the truth of our thinking depends on’, in such a way that it cannot be said. “From the point of view introduced by the identity theory, it will be distinctive of correspondence theorists to seek items located outside the realm of thinkables, and outside the realm of ordinary objects of reference, but related, some of them, to whole thinkables.” (Hornsby 1997: 7) Hornsby goes on to show that this idea takes many guises. The worldly correspondent may be a state of affairs, a situation, a particular case, a percept (Russell), a cosmic distribution of particles (Quine), or even a fact, as long as it is conceived as that which thinking answers to, without itself being thinkable. Such a theory pictures a thought as distanced from the world, so that for it to be true is for it to stand in a relation to what is ‘out there’ when it is true. Hornsby writes, “the identity theory is worth considering to the extent that correspondence theories are worth avoiding.” (Hornsby 1997: 6) And McDowell believes that if we accept that reality lies beyond the conceptual sphere, we are in a hopeless predicament, and no theory will help us out of it. “Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance implicit in the very idea of thought.” (McDowell 1994: 27)

But even if there is no distance implicit in the very idea of thought, there may be a distance implicit in McDowell’s conception of thought, as comes to expression in how he understands and develops his reminders. I will argue that the Fregean framework of Mind and World - in particular

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7 Given the dualism of a correspondence theory, a correspondence theorist will be inclined to find phrases such as ‘how things are’ ambiguous: there is what we say when we say how things are, and there is what makes it true or false to say so. On this second understanding of ‘how things are’, it is not, for the correspondence theorist, something that can be expressed in words.
the separation of thinkable content from assertoric force, and the consequent reification of thinkable content - blocks a truistic understanding of McDowell’s reminders. Now if we cannot understand his reminders as truisms, we would be tempted to think that there is, after all, a greater distance between thinking and reality than he allows for, and then this better not be a hopeless predicament. We would be thus tempted, but I think McDowell is right in wanting to avoid a conception on which reality is pictured as lying beyond the conceptual sphere, and even in taking such a conception to be obviously incoherent, flying in the face of what really are truisms, properly understood. It is just that the framework within which he develops his reminders prevents us, and him, from understanding them in that way. My aim is to bring out the problem clearly (§2 and §3), show why the separation of force and content is responsible for the problem (§4), and offer an alternative (§5).

§2  The sort of thing one can think

When McDowell affirms his truisms, which picture the world as the totality of true thinkables, one might worry where this leaves the more or less concrete particular objects which make up our surroundings, such things as clouds, people, lakes, snowflakes, sparrows, and so on. Such things are spatio-temporally located, undergo and effect changes, and can be present to us in perceptual experience; thoughts, by contrast, are generally taken to be abstract objects, grasped by the mind instead of the senses. If the world is to be the totality of facts, one might then think, as various critics have thought⁸, that McDowell has to choose: either he conceives facts as somehow made up out of the sorts of thing that we find around us, in which case they seem to be distanced from thoughts, or he identifies facts with true thoughts, in which case they seem to be distanced from the things that we find around us. In the first case, facts

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⁸ Julian Dodd presents this dilemma (Dodd 1995), but does not see the choice McDowell has already made to place facts in the realm of sense, nor does he see an escape from the dilemma. Peter Sullivan likewise thinks that the modern proponents of the identity theory face a problem given that they place facts in the realm of sense; he argues that the author of the Tractatus, unlike McDowell and Hornsby, escapes the dilemma (Sullivan 2005). The sense that thoughts must be abstract objects, grasped by the mind instead of the senses, also underlies the debate between McDowell and Charles Travis on representationalism about experience (see Travis 2013, especially what Travis refers to as ‘Frege’s point’).
would belong to what Frege called the realm of reference (what our thinking is about); in the second case, they would belong to what Frege called the realm of sense (what we think). But McDowell would reject the dilemma. He does conceive facts, and thoughts generally, as belonging to the realm of sense, but he does not take this to distance them from the realm of reference. Facts, on McDowell’s conception, are neither made up out of concrete objects, nor are they distanced from them; they are aspects of the things we find around us: “aspects of the perceptible world” (26).

Maybe we can understand McDowell’s talk of aspects, and generally his reminders, in the following way. In experience concrete particulars impress themselves on our senses, and thus become present to us. But a concrete particular is not divorced from how it is. We can’t have the thing before our eyes without also having its condition before our eyes. So in a sense, ‘how it is’, to the extent that this is manifest from our point of view, also impresses itself on our senses, and is present to us. For a concrete particular to be present to us is for us to be perceptually aware of how it manifestly is. For example, in observing a sparrow on my table, the sparrow and the table impress themselves on my senses, and in virtue of my being open to how they manifestly are, I enjoy perceptual awareness of where the sparrow is: on my table (McDowell thinks this requires me to draw on my capacity for using concepts of spatio-temporal arrangement). What would experience be if it did not already involve such achievements as seeing where things are? It would be, in a familiar phrase, a blooming, buzzing confusion. Understood in this way, McDowell’s second truism should be uncontentious. And McDowell’s first truism can be understood in a similarly unproblematic way. When I think that the sparrow is on the table, my thinking reaches all the way to the fact: I think of the sparrow that it is on the table, and on the table is in fact where the sparrow is. Thinking stops nowhere short of the world, because when one thinks truly, what one thinks of is the very way one thinks it is. That again cannot be contentious.

But can we understand McDowell in this way? The form of expression he chooses suggests that we cannot. In the understanding of McDowell’s truisms that I just sketched, I made sense of what it is for that things are thus and so to be an aspect of things by taking up the standpoint of having an experience, and then reflecting, from that standpoint, on what it is for an object to be self-consciously present to me. That things are

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9 That formula is limited to predicative thoughts. But if we can manage to find it unmysterious that predicative thought reaches all the way to the world, there won’t be a deep problem about differently shaped thoughts.
thus and so then emerges as a specification of what I grasp in seeing what I do. I can say generically that I see where the sparrow is, but I can also say more specifically that I see that it is on the table. *That the sparrow is on the table* is not parsed as the object of awareness, but as a specification of how I see the object of my awareness - the sparrow - to be, and so also as a specification of how that object is. Similarly, in my paraphrase of McDowell’s first truism, I take up the standpoint of thinking that the sparrow is on the table, and use this thought to describe the reality to which it answers: it is true to say that the sparrow is on the table because the sparrow is, in fact, on the table. In neither case do I refer to the thought, and from such a referential perspective relate it to the world.

Contrast this with the style in which McDowell presents his truisms. He emphasises *that things are thus and so*, and refers to it as a thing of some sort. It is this sort of thing which is supposed to impress itself on my senses, and thus (thanks to my drawing on my conceptual capacities) be given to me in perceptual experience. This is not yet, on McDowell’s view, seeing that things are thus and so. In experience I am presented with an appearance to the effect *that things are thus and so*; in response I can either takes this appearance at face value, as would be the default, or reject it as illusion. In Fregean terms, I am presented with a thinkable content; in response I attach a force (I will return to the Fregean framework in §4). Even when I do accept the appearance at face value, what I then see is that which I was at first merely presented with: “What we see is: that such-and-such is the case.” (29) One can see here that McDowell parses “seeing that things are thus and so” as awareness of (the true thinkable) *that things are thus and so*, and so conceives of “that things are thus and so” as a referring expression. And again in McDowell’s remarks on truth, instead of using a thought to describe the reality to which it answers, he refers to it, and from this referential perspective relates it to reality. He thus takes up the same perspective as the correspondence theorist. As far as his remarks in *Mind and World* go, which go about as far as what Hornsby has called the identity theory of truth, truth is conceived as a relation between a thought and some thing in the world, something to refer to, but where the correspondence theorist takes the relation to be correspondence, and the thing in the world to be distinct from the thought, there McDowell and

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10 McDowell’s work on modesty for a theory of meaning suggests a different conception of truth; in fact, the conception which I will recommend. On the right-hand side of a T-sentence of a Davidsonian theory of meaning, the sentence, which is mentioned on the left-hand side, is *used* to say when it would be true. This contrasts with the “very same thing” talk in *Mind and World*. 


Hornsby take the relation to be identity."¹¹

But it is just the referential perspective on ‘something that can be thought’ that creates the sense of distance from what is ‘out there’ when the thinkable is true, and so motivates a correspondence theory. From a referential perspective it is hard to see how a true thought can be a fact, if a fact is also to be the sort of thing that can impress itself on our senses, and be manifestly there before our eyes. If a that-clause refers to something, or in other words, if that things are thus and so is a thing of some sorts, it is not the sort of thing to undergo or effect changes, or have a spatio-temporal location. A thought cannot literally be touched, as I think anyone will acknowledge. Can it be seen? I look around, and I see leaves lying on the ground, the reflection of the sun in the windows, branches softly swaying, the aforementioned sparrow still on my table, but no matter how hard I look, nowhere do I find (the fact) that the sparrow is on the table, or any of the other things that I can judge to be so. That things are thus and so is not a thing among the things in our surroundings."¹²

¹¹ Hornsby for her part denies that the identity theory needs to treat thinkables as what she calls “OBJECTS” (Hornsby 1997: 4fn). I’m not sure what this means. But my objection is to the minimal commitment that in phrases such as ‘seeing that things are thus and so’ the that-clause is a referring expression, or what comes to the same, that such phrases are to be parsed as seeing (the thinkable) that things are thus and so. The objection does not require the identity theory to be committed to treating thinkables as objects in any more weighty sense.

Now Hornsby seems to reject even the minimal commitment when she writes, “The identity theory is not formulated in order to take a stand on the logical form of predications of truth.” (ibid.) She even adds that if it were, this stance would be erroneous, since Frege correctly observed that ‘truth’ is not a relation term. It seems as if Hornsby only wants to be committed to the rejection of correspondence theories. But I don’t see how that would do. If her reminders are to offer an alternative to a correspondence theory, they better not conceive truth in a way that is erroneous when taken seriously. The identity theory presents a picture of true thought as coinciding with elements of the world, elements conceived as facts, and this picture is relational if coincidence is a relation. I acknowledge, as Hornsby emphasises, that the theory does not amount to a definition of truth. So it does not commit one to analysing ‘is true’ as ‘is the same as a fact’, in the sense in which an analysis uncovers the deep structure that wasn’t apparent at the surface. But for there to be a point in affirming the theory it should be helpful, at least in opposing correspondence theories, to replace ‘is true’ by ‘is the same as a fact’, and what is here supposed to be helpful is a conception of truth as relational.
That is a more an appeal to intuition than an argument. One way to argue for this is through reflection on the possibility of false thought. Say that a thought, that things are thus and so, is the sort of thing that can be there before one’s eyes, the sort of thing that can be ‘in the world’ in that sense. Then if the thought is false, there would be no such thing in the world. But if a thought is the sort of thing that can be before one’s eyes, this now just seems another way of saying that there would be no such thing. For instance, if we take the thought that the leaves are on the ground to just be what is in the world when it is true, the leaves’ being on the ground (I suppose one may call this a state of affairs), then there is no such thing if the thought is false. But the thought must have being, since it must be thinkable, whether it is true or false. So we cannot equate the thought with the leaves’ being on the ground, or more generally with the sort of thing that can be before our eyes, impress itself on our senses, and be present to us in perceptual experience. If that things are thus and so is an object of some sorts, it is an abstract object, and awareness of it cannot be perceptual awareness.

Another way to argue for this is by drawing a contrast between the changeable world and the atemporality of truth. For it to be true that something is the case is not merely for it to be true at the moment; it is for

12 See also Travis’s similar remarks in Travis 2007.
13 What I refer to as McDowell’s first truism, McDowell refers to as Wittgenstein’s truism, a remark which ends with, “But one can express this paradox ... also in this way: one can think what is not the case.” (PI 95) I will return to this.
14 The argument turns on this, by thinking of a fact as something that can be there before our eyes (impress itself on our senses, be present to us in experience, be “an aspect of the perceptible world”), we cannot help but think of its obtaining as a form of existence. Even if it is inapt to say it exists, whatever other term we use (obtaining, subsisting, being in the world) is modelled after our understanding of what existence is. But that understanding requires us to say that if it does not exist (obtains, etc.), it fails to be, and so fails to be anything (in particular, thinkable).

This is part of what motivated Russell and Moore to reject the identity theory, after having first embraced it. Hornsby comments, “I believe that Moore felt forced to retract his first thoughts about truth because of his failure to see that facthood has to be reckoned an inessential property of any contingent truth.” (Hornsby 1999: 244) But it seems to me just the identity theory’s construal of a fact as something “there in the world” that blocks an understanding of facthood as an inessential property.
it to always have been, and always will be, a true thing for one to think. It is of course not just that its truth value cannot change. The thought itself cannot change, at least not in its essentials, if it is to be the same truth or falsehood for all eternity. Frege was motivated in this way to place thoughts outside the changeable realm (Frege 1918: 309):

The actual world (die Welt des Wirklichen) is a world in which this acts (wirkt) on that, changing it, and in turn undergoing reactions (Gegenwirkungen) which change it. All this is a process in time. We will hardly call actual (wirklich) that which is timeless and unchangeable.”

Undergoing and effecting changes, as the passage makes clear, is one way to describe causal interaction. So if a thought is not the sort of thing to undergo or effect changes, it is not the sort of thing to impress itself on our senses, or be present to us in perceptual experience (Frege 1918: 292):

A thought is something immaterial (Unsinnlich), and all sensibly perceptible things are excluded from the realm of things for which truth can even so much as come into question... That the sun has risen is not an object which emits rays that reach my eyes, it is not a visible thing like the sun itself.

I would not want to recommend Frege’s view. My point is merely that it is hard to resist this view once we think of a that-clause as a referring expression, and so of that things are thus and so as an object of sorts. If it is an object, it must be an abstract object, as Frege took it to be. McDowell is committed to an even more specific part of Frege’s conception of a thought: that things are thus and so is the sense (Sinn) of a sentence, as Frege says, or of a whole utterance, as McDowell has it. As such, a thought contrasts with the things it refers to, being the ways they are said to be.

Not that Frege thinks a thought is entirely without causal efficacy. A thought can act indirectly; it does so when human beings apprehend thoughts and act on them. But this does not effect a thought in its essentials: “There is lacking here something we observe throughout the order of nature: reciprocal action.”

Travis develops these remarks in Travis 2013, often explicitly in opposition to McDowell’s view.

What is expressed in the sentence “The leaves are on the ground,” is the
Say that I am watching a leaf fall to the ground. I see that the leaf is falling to the ground. What is present to me is the leaf and its falling; that is, where it is across a stretch of time. One could think of my ability to track the leaf across this stretch of time as an ability to recognise the leaf, as it is present to me at one moment, as the same leaf that is present to me the next moment. Frege’s apparatus of sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung) is designed to make sense of such an equation. But it would be a misunderstanding of this apparatus to take the sense to be before my eyes. The sense of the leaf at one moment, and the sense of the leaf at another moment, are two different standpoints which I take on the leaf. Similarly, the thought that the leaf is falling is a standpoint which I take on what is before my eyes: the falling leaf. A sense is not what is given, but as Frege says, a mode of givenness (Art des Gegebenseins). Modes of givenness are not the sort of things we find around us. By putting them in the place of what is given, McDowell cuts off from his picture what a thought is a standpoint on.18

So by taking up the referential perspective on a thought, McDowell blocks an understanding of his own reminders as truisms. I would like to hear the second truism, “In experience it can be manifest to one that something is the case”, as saying that in seeing what I do, I enjoy a perceptual grasp of how things manifestly are – seeing, for example, how things are spatio-temporally arranged, how they are shaped, and in the Fregean sense that the leaves are on the ground, which speaks of leaves as being on the ground. So what it speaks of - what is there in the realm of reference - are leaves, and also (but of course not as an additional item) their being on the ground. Being on the ground is a way for a thing to be, what the concept of being on the ground is of. (I think this way of thinking of the realm of reference, which I learned from Charles Travis, departs from Frege’s understanding of the sense/reference distinction, but I’m not sure if that is relevant to the present point.)

18 It is not that on McDowell’s view the realm of reference is divorced from the realm of sense. Quite the opposite: McDowell defends a view on which a thought is intrinsically connected, and dependent for its existence, on what it refers to. But the fact that on McDowell’s view Sinn and Bedeutung are internally connected does not help against the current objection, naïve as it is. The objection is just that the wrong sort of thing is held to be present to us in experience, and to make up the world in which we live. The objection is not that on McDowell’s picture, as he puts it, objects would “come apart” from the world, the objection is simply that on his picture they are not part of the world. See also Sullivan 2005: 60fn.
case of animals, what they are doing. That is certainly a familiar phenomenon. But the shape of McDowell’s account, and the form of expression which he chooses, forces me to understand this remark as saying that in experience I am presented with ‘a thinkable content’: that things are thus and so. McDowell thinks such things can be present in experience. But reflecting on the sort of thing thinkable content would be, it seems not the sort of thing to undergo or effect changes, or have a spatio-temporal location, and so not the sort of thing to impress itself on our senses or be present to us in experience. Now to be sure, such reflection is out of line with McDowell’s philosophical style: he does not want to worry about ontological concerns. But given the emphasis that he places on ‘the sort of thing one can think’, it seems at best neglectful to refrain from reflecting on what sort of thing that might be. It is just the style in which McDowell presents his truisms, itself a reflection of the framework within which he presents them, which positively invites such reflection. To take up the same perspective as the correspondence theorist, but reject the attempt at such a substantial definition of truth, is like forbidding a symptom while nourishing the underlying disease.

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19 I write “perceptual grasp of how things are” in order to make clear that “seeing how things are” is not an act in addition to seeing whatever is there.

20 That the identity theory is hopeless because it reifies thoughts, divorcing them from “I think”, “I see”, etc., is also the conclusion reached by Bertrand Russell, after earlier having endorsed the theory. Russell writes that it is “difficult to believe there are such objects” as a that-clause would denote (Russell 1910, p. 119):

It seems evident that the phrase ‘that so-and-so’ has no complete meaning of itself, that would allow it to denote a definite object... We feel that the phrase ‘that so-and-so’ is essentially incomplete, and only acquires significance when words are added so as to express a judgement, e.g. ‘I believe that so-and-so’...

The early Wittgenstein reaches a similar conclusion (Wittgenstein 1913, p. 102):

Neither the sense (Sinn) nor the meaning (Bedeutung) of a thought is a thing. These words are incomplete symbols.

Neither what a sentence expresses, nor that on which its truth value depends, is a thing. See Sullivan and Johnston (forthcoming).
When McDowell’s truisms fail to look truistic, the conception they were meant to discourage looks correspondingly common-sensical. Of course the world lies beyond the conceptual sphere. The conceptual sphere is made up of the sort of thing that one can think, and this sort of thing must be abstract, grasped by the mind instead of the senses. It is not the sort of thing that we find around us. When I think that the leaves are on the ground, for what I think to be true is for the leaves to be on the ground, but what is then ‘out there’ is not the thought that the leaves are on the ground but rather (as we are now inclined to say) the situation/state of affairs/particular case of the leaves’ being on the ground, conceived as distinct from the thought.

But I agree with McDowell that such a conception is hopeless. It amounts to a predicament of a certain characteristic shape, a predicament in which one finds oneself oscillating between a sense of confinement within the conceptual sphere, and a desperate attempt to point beyond it towards something inarticulable. The shape is familiar, as McDowell has argued, from Wittgenstein’s ‘private language-argument’, which culminates in the following remark (PI §261):

So in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound. – But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which now has to be described.

Wittgenstein is gesturing towards a predicament much more general (“when one is doing philosophy”) than merely that of private sense data. It is a predicament we are in whenever in philosophy we try to place the world beyond the conceptual sphere. In trying to say what makes a judgement correct, we can then only point at this ground. To acquiesce with an articulate description would be to confine ourselves within the conceptual sphere. But as Frege’s context principle reminds us, pointing at something, referring to something, is done within the context of a thought. One cannot just point out of the blue and have it mean something. So in order to understand this pointing, we must give it a

21 In the private language argument, sense data are what our thinking answers to, and so they take up the role of ‘world’ there.
propositional context, or as this idea finds a place within Wittgenstein's later thinking, describe the language-game in which it is supposed to be a move. But then we are confined within the conceptual again. Our picture of the relation between thought and reality creates the ambition to reach beyond what can be thought. It is not that this ambition is bound to remain unsatisfied (to think that would be to fall into an idealism that allows us only to know things as they are partitioned by our concepts, not as they are in themselves), we cannot even point at what it is an ambition for. In philosophy, in presenting the picture, we cannot get the aim in mind, and so it must really be confusion that our thinking has such an aim.  

McDowell does not always distinguish this predicament clearly from one philosophical pressure which may lead a philosopher into this predicament: a conception of sense impressing as an alien force, changing one’s mind the way a drug might, not the way a reason would. On such a conception, all that we can be given in experience must be something alien to the mind, not already structured according to the concepts we use to make sense of what is given. And so we are led to a conception of reality as lying beyond the conceptual sphere. But it should be clear that the predicament is distinguishable from the conception of sense

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22 In his characterisations of the Myth, McDowell tends to stop at the point where the philosopher falling into the Myth has to point at the ultimate ground of a judgement. “The idea is that when we have exhausted all the available moves within the space of concepts, all the available moves from one conceptually organized item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience. It can only be pointing, because ex hypothesi this last move in a justification comes after we have exhausted the possibilities of tracing grounds from one conceptually organized, and so articulate, item to another.” (6) McDowell seems to take it for granted that this pointing is empty, a desperate gesture that betrays an incoherent picture of the relation between thought and world. But the pointing can come disguised in a seemingly respectable grammatical form, for instance in terms of talk of truth-making. If it may seem an expression of a confusion to say, “It is true that p because: the world,” it sounds more respectable to put it as, “The world makes the thought true.” So it seems important to finish the dialectic, as Wittgenstein does, by questioning what the meaning is of the pointing gesture. At that point the philosopher falling into the Myth is forced to give the gesture a place within a propositional context, thus, by his own light, confining himself within the conceptual sphere. It is really his own desire to have the gesture be inarticulate, as it were an attempt at mirroring the inarticulable form of reality as he conceives it.
impressing as an alien force.\textsuperscript{23} McDowell often includes both in what he calls “the Myth of the Given”.\textsuperscript{24} I think it is this lack of clarity on what the Myth of the Given is supposed to be which makes McDowell miss other pressures that lead into the same predicament, in particular the pressures which I am drawing attention to, which combine to make it seem that a thought, if it is a thing of some sort, must be an abstract thing. Of course, this would be no criticism if this was merely one more mistake philosophers make—one can hardly expect Mind and World to be about

\textsuperscript{23} If we use Davidson’s phrase ‘scheme-content dualism’ for the Myth of the Given in the sense of the predicament - McDowell thinks this is the same (4) - it should be obvious that this is distinguishable from a conception of sense impressing as an alien force, and other pressures which lead into the same predicament. The dualists whom Davidson was thinking of when he introduced his phrase were motivated by a perceived variety of conceptual schemes. Different conceptual schemes must be different ways of partitioning, conceptually articulating, the same world, and so the world cannot in itself be conceptually articulated according to any one conceptual scheme—in itself, the dualist concludes, the world must be conceptually unarticulated. Maybe more than a variety of schemes, the issue is the feeling that our conceptual scheme (whether or not there are others) provides a merely parochial perspective on the world. Reality has to be uncontaminated by the mind. Anything conceptually structured betrays itself as partly determined by the mind, and so we must abstract away from this to arrive at what the world contributes. A restricted conception of causality can figure in such a conviction, but it does not have to. (Maybe the direction of thought can also be the other way around: maybe a dualism of scheme and content can motivate a restricted conception of causality. Either way, the two are distinguishable.)

A closely related motivation, maybe more relevant to present concerns, is the possibility of presupposition failure, and the concomitant task of preventing presupposition failure: there is more to rationality than merely saying “yes” or “no” to fully-formed thoughts—there is also a certain man-made fit or harmony required between the shape of the concepts used (the “conceptual scheme”) and the subject matter (the “content”, in Davidson’s phrase). I feel that McDowell’s picture fails to do justice to do this phenomenon. On McDowell’s picture we are presented with fully articulated content, which we can either accept or reject as an illusion. The task of finding apt terms to describe the current situation is always already accomplished as soon as the conscious subject arrives at the scene. It seems McDowell forgets that thought can be distanced from the world not only be being false, but also by being too inapt even so much as to be false.

Indeed, McDowell thinks that a thought cannot fail to be either true or false without failing to be a thought at all (McDowell 2005). The sort of presupposition failure McDowell has in mind is a failure of reference for a
every possible reason for falling into the Myth of the Given. But not only is it an especially important motivation in the post-Fregean tradition, more pertinently, it is one which is encouraged by the framework in which McDowell develops his reminders.

purported singular thought. Say that I am under the impression that there is a tree before me, and I say to myself, “That tree is shedding its leaves”. But it turns out that there is no tree before me, nor anything else which I can be taken to have been thinking of. Then one cannot even intelligibly attribute the thought to me that that tree is shedding its leaves – to attempt to do so would itself be a similar failure. So one must say, on pain of oneself falling into the same mistake, that I was merely under the illusion of having a thought. We can put the problem less frustratingly. To say otherwise, and allow for singular thoughts which lack reference, would be to embrace a conception on which “we know our way about in language before we know our way about in the world” (McDowell ...), and that is just (one form of) the kind of dualism which McDowell has spent his career combatting (the other form would be a conception on which we know our way about in the world before we know our way about in language).

But there are other kinds of presupposition failure. Say that the leaves are sliding down a hill, or blown about by the wind, or still attached to the drooping branches but, on account of said droopyness, touching the ground – are they lying on the ground? The question can still be asked, and so there must still be such a thought to think, but it is not flatly true or flatly false to say that the leaves are lying on the ground. Instead of insisting in simple terms whether the thought is “true or false”, it is better to say that it is misleading. But if the world is made up of true thinkables, and false thinkables are straightforward contraries of true thinkables, we have no space to make sense of such partial failures. I don’t know if McDowell needs to deny that such partial failures are possible. But there is nothing in his picture to connect this phenomenon to. On McDowell’s picture, the conscious subject can only hit the fact or miss it altogether, as if it is “only straight ahead that we can shoot words at the world” (Austin). Wishing to avoid such a picture now becomes a motivation for a dualism of scheme and content, the Myth in the sense of the predicament.

For instance when McDowell writes, “when we make out that the space of reasons is more extensive than the conceptual sphere, so that it can incorporate extra-conceptual impingements from the world, the result is a picture in which constraint from outside is exerted at an outer boundary of the expanded space of reasons, in what we are committed to depicting as a brute impact from the exterior.” (8)
§4  Separation of force and content

So far I have only shown a product of that framework: a tendency to take a referential perspective on a thought, instead of using the thought to describe the reality to which it answers. But it is far from merely a matter of style that McDowell expresses his reminders in the way that he does. It is a feature of his endorsement of Frege’s doctrine of the separation force and content. Frege observes that one can grasp a thought without acknowledging it as true, for instance when asking a question, or when the thought is used in the antecedent of a conditional. He concludes that we must distinguish between the thought, in itself forceless, and the force - assertive, inquisitive, etc. - with which the thought is expressed. This makes for a distinction between what we mean in saying what we do, and what we mean: the thing that we mean. What I mean in saying that the leaves are on the ground is that the leaves are on the ground (I mean it, so to say, with force), but what I mean, on Frege’s conception, is the thinkable content that the leaves are on the ground. The act of assertion is analysed as consisting in the act of attaching a force to a thinkable content; the thinkable content now becomes something to refer to, an object of some sort.

So the force/content distinction corresponds to a distinction between the act of judgement, and the thing which, in that act, is judged to be true or false: that things are thus and so. It is essential to Frege’s anti-psychologism that this should be so: it allows him to conceive logic as being about the things that one can think, rather than being about the activity of thinking, which he takes to be a merely psychological issue.5 I do not believe that McDowell would want to draw quite that contrast. But where the force/content distinction is Frege’s way of keeping apart logic and psychology, there, differently but relatedly, it is McDowell’s way of preventing the moderate form of idealism that he wants to defend from slighting the independence of reality (McDowell 1994: 28):

‘Thought’ can mean the act of thinking; but it can also mean the content of a piece of thinking: what someone thinks. Now if we are to give due acknowledgement to the independence of reality, what we need is a constraint from outside thinking and judging, our exercises of spontaneity. The constraint does not need to be from outside thinkable contents.

5 In fact, though, it is in tension with Frege’s deepest commitments that logic should be about anything in particular; I will return to this in a footnote.
Similarly, Hornsby thinks that those objecting to the identity theory of truth by accusing it of idealism confuse “people’s thinkings of things with the contents of their thoughts” (Hornsby i). But one does not have to confuse thinking with thinkable content to find the identity theory idealistic in a problematic way. In fact, it is just this separation which turns what is expressed in the utterance of a sentence into something to refer to, but from that perspective, it - a thinkable content - looks an implausible candidate to be such stuff as the world is of.

In his view of experience, McDowell aims to avert subjectivist idealism by drawing a contrast between the receptivity of experience and the spontaneity of active judgement. Thinking is in itself free, spontaneous activity, and so it would be idealistic if it were not constrained in any way. The world, mediated by perceptual experience, provides the needed constraint. But for that to be a constraint, experience has to be receptive, not itself an exercise of spontaneity. Aside from deciding where to stand and where to look, we do not decide what to see, or how we see it to be. Correspondingly, we can be criticised for our beliefs, but not for having the experience that we have. In the Sellarsian terms which McDowell likes to employ, experience is not yet a move in the space of reasons. Now McDowell thinks that for experience to be openness to the way things are, it requires the perceiving subject to actualise his conceptual capacities in being impinged on. But since it cannot yet be an exercise of spontaneity, these conceptual capacities are not exercised, but passively drawn on (10):

In experience one finds oneself saddled with content. One’s conceptual capacities have already been brought into play, in the content’s being available to one, before one has any choice in the matter. The content is not something one has put together oneself, as when one decides what to say about something. In fact it is precisely because experience is passive, a case of receptivity in operation, that the conception of experience I am recommending can satisfy the craving for a limit to freedom that underlies the Myth of the Given.

And so instead of describing experience, as one normally does, in the active voice, with the perceiving subject in the grammatical subject position, McDowell describes it in the passive voice. It is not yet seeing that things are thus and so, but being appeared to:
How one's experience represents things to be is not under one's control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it. (11)

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

Although this is meant to avert subjectivist idealism, it is just the idea that in experience we are presented with thinkable content, not simply seeing that things are thus and so (which could then be understood in the truistic way), which makes thinkable content seem opaque, getting in between the perceiving subject and the things he finds around him.

It may seem that McDowell also has another motivation for explicating 'seeing that things are thus and so' in the way that he does. It may seem he draws apart 'being appeared to' and 'taking the appearance at face value' in order to accommodate the possibility of illusion. But McDowell also writes that it does not matter very much that one may be misled (9). As a disjunctivist, he does not want to model the good case after what the good and the bad case have in common. But when he comes to fill in the distance between the passivity of experience and the spontaneity of thought, all he has is the possibility of rejecting an appearance as an illusion. There is a tension, then, between McDowell's disjunctivism and the contrast he draws between receptivity and knowledge. It would be better in accord with disjunctivism, as I will argue later again in more detail, to take experience to just be seeing that things are thus and so.

The separation of force and content divorces the 'I think' or 'I see' from 'that things are thus and so'. I have been arguing that this creates a problem about where to locate 'that things are thus and so'. There is another problem on the side of the 'I think' or 'I see'. In experience we see that things are thus and so; we do not hold this judgement at arm's length. Normally we would not even know how to begin to doubt whether things are as they appear to be. It is only in exceptional circumstances that our experience itself becomes the object of reflection, which then may or may not accurately represent the way things are. Normally, the appearances that 'present themselves to us' are already ours; that is to say, they do not present themselves to us at all: we simply see how things are. In response to similar criticism by Barry Stroud, McDowell has acknowledged that
normally we accept the content by a sort of default. This averts the most straightforward objection. But it still leaves intact what I am objecting to: this two-part structure of being presented with content and attaching a force in response, so to say the deep grammar of experience, which pervasively departs from the surface grammar of experience. McDowell wants to avoid constructive metaphysics, but what could be more metaphysical than to think that one can see in experience, underneath what is manifest to the perceiving subject, a structure that pervasively departs from the manifest structure? A more principled objection is that this deep structure could not be the way things normally are. If we generally were presented with appearances, which we had to decide to take at face value or reject as an illusion, there would not be enough to go on to make the decision. We'd be too alienated from our surroundings even to be able to see them. The account of experience McDowell presents would fit a subject who is not enough at home in the world to have a working capacity of perception, and so it precisely encourages the kind of radical scepticism that it was meant to lay to rest.

McDowell refers to his reminder as Wittgenstein’s truism. But the problems just noted are the result of the difference between the original and McDowell’s paraphrase. It may be helpful, on the way to presenting my alternative, to compare the two:

“Thought must be something strange (Einzigartiges).” When we say, mean, that things are such and such, then, with that which we mean (mit dem, was wir meinen), we do not halt before the fact: we mean that such and such – is – so and so – But one can express this paradox (which indeed has the form of a truism) also in this way: one can think what is not the case. (Wittgenstein PI 95)

We can formulate the point in a style Wittgenstein would have been uncomfortable with: there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case (as he himself once wrote), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance implicit in the very idea of thought. (McDowell 1994: 27)

In Wittgenstein’s passage, all that is needed for the sense of paradox is
that there seems to be some distance between ‘what we mean’, the thought that things are such and such, and what we mean, that things are such and such – as if something is achieved by saying it with emphasis. We know that nothing is achieved - the passage really says nothing - and yet we can recognise the ambition if we feel there is something to aim for. What allows us to recognise this ambition is the sense that ‘what we mean’, when we mean to say that things are a certain way, must be at a distance from what is ‘out there’ when things are that way. When we reflect on what sort of thing a thought might be, for instance by reflecting on the possibility of false thought (a thought must still have being even when it is false), it does not seem to be the sort of thing that we find around us. The sense of distance dissolves when, instead of referring to a thought, we take up the standpoint of thinking the thought, as Wittgenstein does when he writes, “we mean that such and such – is – so and so”. Here Wittgenstein uses the thought, as a complex unity (note the emphasis on predicative structure), to describe the reality to which it answers.

But in his paraphrase of the passage, McDowell re-affirms the reification which creates the sense of paradox. Instead of using the thought as a complex unity, he refers to it as a simple unity (replace ‘that things are thus and so’ by ‘that p’ and it wouldn’t make a difference), and from this standpoint relates it to a fact. So the distance between the original and McDowell’s paraphrase is this, Wittgenstein draws our attention to a distinction without a difference, between what we mean and what we mean, whereas McDowell leans on that distinction in expressing what he takes to be truistic.

§5  An alternative

At this point we have an antinomy between the correspondence theory and the identity theory of truth. Reflecting on what sort of thing that things are thus and so might be, we are led to some form of a correspondence theory, or what comes to the same, a conception of reality as lying outside the conceptual sphere. But this, as McDowell clearly sees, is a hopeless predicament. And so we are led to a rejection of the correspondence theory, a rejection which now takes the form of the identity theory of truth. But as long as it still seems that a thought is at a distance from the perceptible world, this leaves one with the sense that things in their concrete particularity have been cut off from the picture. It
is an antinomy, and not a paradox, because there is an underlying assumption. Both sides think of a thought as something to refer to, an object of some sorts, that things are thus and so, not that things are thus and so.

We find this tension closely beneath the surface of Frege’s late essay Der Gedanke, from which I quoted before. After rejecting the attempt to define truth as correspondence between a mental item and something worldly, Frege rejects altogether the attempt to define truth (Frege 1918):

For in a definition certain characteristics (Merkmale) would have to be stated, and in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it is true that the characteristics are present. So one goes round in a circle.

This circle is the by now familiar sense of confinement within the conceptual. We cannot define truth by saying what a thought must be like for it to be true. To do so would require taking up an impossible standpoint on a thought, what McDowell has called a sideways-on perspective. And so Hornsby sees in the rejection of this attempt at a definition something like an endorsement of the identity theory of truth (Hornsby 1997: 3). But that cannot be, at least not if the identity theory is to include both of McDowell’s truisms. Frege does write, “What is a fact? A fact is a thought that is true.” But in the very same essay we also find the aforementioned remark, “A thought is something non-sensible (Unsinnlich), and everything sensibly perceptible is excluded from the realm of things for which truth even so much as comes into question.” What we find in Der Gedanke is both sides of our antinomy. Frege is sensitive to the impossibility of looking at thought from sideways-on, but the temptation to take up such a perspective comes together naturally with his conception of a thought as a timeless, abstract object, outside the sensible, changeable world.

In these reflections a thought obtrudes itself as an object of consideration. It becomes itself the focus of our reflection, instead of it, so to say, constituting a standpoint from which we look at the world.26  

26 I am reversing a remark of Sullivan, in which he describes the transparency of representations on a Fregean conception that he wants to recommend: “neither the sentence nor the thought obtrudes itself as the object of consideration, or obstructs one’s view of things. Quite the reverse. The
Looking at a thought, it seems the wrong sort of thing to impress itself on our senses, and be present in experience. If it is a thing, it is not among the things in our surroundings. The attempt to say that there can be no distance between true thinking and reality then ends up positing thoughts in between the thinking, seeing subject and things in their concrete particularity. This sense of opaqueness is a familiar phenomenon. Sometimes propositional representations become the object of reflection, for instance when the words chosen are not flatly true or flatly false of the situation they were meant to describe. I say of a cat that it is on the mat. In fact the cat, having recently mastered esoteric meditation, is hovering a few inches above the yoga mat. My words relate opaquely to the intended situation, and may now themselves become the object of reflection: “Is the cat on the mat?” “Well, one could say so.” But this only makes sense if the description I just gave, that the cat is hovering a few inches above the yoga mat, relates transparently to that situation. Transparency must at least be the norm with reference to which we understand departures from the norm. Normally a thought does not get in between us and our grasp of reality; it is our grasp of reality. Similarly, an experience can become opaque when, in unfamiliar surroundings, we cannot form a coherent image of how things are spatio-temporally arranged – it isn’t clear what is background and what is foreground, and instead of simply seeing the scene before our eyes, it feels as if we are seeing our own experience. But again this is only possible as an exception to the norm. Normally an experience is too intimate to the perceiving subject to become the object of reflection. In the current dialectic the everyday phenomenon of opacity becomes a philosophical predicament. I have suggested that Frege’s separation of force and content, and McDowell’s endorsement of that separation in his understanding of his own reminders, is to blame for that. That separation amounts to a conception of “that things are thus and so” as a referring expression, and so of a thinkable content as a thing of some sort, something to refer to, instead of essentially something to think. But surely a thought is essentially something to think, and only secondarily something to refer to. By a change of perspective, we can regain a truistic understanding of McDowell’s reminders.

We cannot define truth by saying what a thought must be like for it to be true. But if we stop looking at a thought, and instead take up the standpoint of thinking the thought, we can define truth as being so: for it to be true that such and such is so and so is for such and such to be, in sentence understood, the thought, constitutes one’s view of things.” (Sullivan, “Frege’s Logic”: 733)
fact, so and so. Here on the right-hand side the thought is used to describe the reality it answers to. Our thinking reaches all the way to the facts, because when what we think is true, what we think of is the very way we think it is. And since the world is all things, being all the ways they are, there is no distance between thought, as such, and the world. Instead of thinking of truth as a relation between a whole thought and something else, as the correspondence theory does, or even, as the identity theory does, as a relation between a whole thought and that same thought-as-fact, we can think of truth as a unity between the thing thought of, and the way it is thought to be, the unity thought in thinking the copula. The only things figuring in this conception are the things we

27 This is one half of Aristotle’s famous definition of the true and the false in Metaphysics Gamma (the other half I will get to soon):

To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true. But neither what is nor what is not are said to be. (Met. Gamma 7: 1011b 26–7)

It is important that this definition, unlike the equivalence schema “It is true that \( p \) if and only if \( p \), is asymmetric. It is true (false) that such and such is so and so because such and such is (not) so and so, but not the other way around:

It is not because of our having the true thought that you are pale, that you are pale; rather it is because of your being pale that we who say so have a true thought. (Met., Theta 10: 1051b 6–9)

It is because of the thing’s being, or not being, thus-and-so that the predication is said to be true or false... (Cat. 5: 4b 8–10)

28 For this reason “Truth lies in being so” captures the core of Wittgenstein’s picture theory:

That the elements of the picture are combined with one another in a definite way, represents that the things are so combined with one another. (TLP 2.15)

Sullivan comments, “Understanding the transparency of propositional representation ... is very largely a matter of appreciating the force of the ‘so’ in this sentence. ... ‘so’ implies a kind of identity rather than any weaker form of
think of, and, in a different sense of ‘thing’, the ways we think them to be.29

From a certain point of view the departure from the identity theory of truth looks shallow. That suits my purposes, since I want my recommendation to be genuinely a way of understanding McDowell’s reminders. Those reminders are directed at a conception of reality as lying outside the conceptual sphere, or, as Hornsby puts it, outside the realm of thinkables, and outside the realm of ordinary objects of reference, “but related, some of them, to whole thinkables”. The point of the emphasised phrase is to allow for the kind of conception I want to recommend. It would be platitudinous, Hornsby agrees, to say that “true sentences say how things are”, as long as ‘things’ here refers to ordinary objects of reference. “[T]he true sentence ‘that book is red’, for example, says something about how things are by saying how one of the things (sc. that book) is (sc. red).” (Hornsby 1997: 7) The same conception of truth is implicit in the modest approach to Davidsonian theories of meaning, which both McDowell and Hornsby defend. On the right-hand side of the T-sentences of such a theory the sentence mentioned on the left-hand side is used (not referred to) in order to say when it would be true. That is just the right way to think of the relation between a sentence in its meaningful employment and the reality it answers to. But neither modesty for a theory of meaning, nor the rejection of correspondence theories by itself, is the identity theory of truth. That theory embodies a certain conception of truth (and if we add McDowell’s second reminder, of experience) that is supposed to help resist the temptation towards a correspondence theory. And the conception it embodies is in tension with those good ideas which are also to be found in the work of McDowell and Hornsby. In the moment when we ‘remind’ ourselves that the world is the totality of true thinkables, we are not conceiving truth in the way that we do when we think of the truth of “That book is red” as amounting to that book’s being red (or better: it is true to say, “That book is red,” because that book is red). Because in that first moment we are referring to a thinkable, and relating it to the world from that perspective, whereas in the second moment we are using it.

The difference becomes more pronounced when we turn to a correspondence.” (Sullivan 2001: 90)

29 It would be deeply true and superficially false to say that what can be said cannot be named, and what can be named cannot be said. It is false, of course, because one can refer to a thought, but it is true in a deep sense because the essence of a thought, what it is for things to be thus and so, does not reveal itself from a referential perspective.
definition of falsehood. The only conception of falsehood that the identity theory has room for is negative: “a thinkable is false if and only if it is not a fact.” (Hornsby 1999: 243) This in effect means that internal negation, a negation of a predicate within a thought, has to be reduced to external negation, a negation of the whole thought. For it to be false that the station is open, according to the identity theory, is the same as for it to be not the case, not a fact, that the station is open. Hornsby fails to say more because she fails to use the thought to say when it would be false. She, like McDowell does in his paraphrase of Wittgenstein, treats a thought as a simple unity (that things are thus and so can be replaced by that \( p \)), and relates it as a whole to reality. It was just this that made for the problem about the being of false thoughts. It may seem that in the alternative which I am recommending, that problem would return in the shape of the problem of non-being. If truth lies in being so, one might think falsehood lies in not being so, and this should trigger a deep puzzlement about absolute non-being. But if we stop looking at a thought, instead taking up the standpoint it constitutes, we can define falsehood as being not so: for it to be false that the station is open is for it to be not open; that is, closed. (This cannot be said if we use that \( p \), instead of schematically spelling out the thought so that we have its structure at our disposal.) This gives in a sense a positive understanding of falsehood. Instead of contrasting a thought with the whole of logical space, it is contrasted with a local alternative. There is nothing intrinsically puzzling about such local non-being. The station’s being closed is just as much a case of a station’s being some way as the station’s being open (not that they are symmetric: one understands the station’s being closed as a deprivation). No problem arises about absolute non-being.30

My alternative would also deal differently than the identity theory does with presupposition failure. From the perspective of the identity theory, it is something of a surprise that there should be such a thing as presupposition failure. If the world is the totality of facts, and these are just the sorts of things that we can think, it seems we can only hit or miss the facts altogether, as if, in J.L. Austin’s vivid phrase, it is only straight ahead that we can shoot words at the world. Indeed in McDowell’s view of experience, the task of preventing presupposition failure, of finding apt terms to describe the scene before our eyes, is always already achieved as soon as the conscious subject arrives at the scene. In response one can

30 This theme is explored in depth in the work of Jean-Philippe Narboux, to whom I am indebted for seeing the importance of refusing to reduce internal negation to external negation.
only say yes or no; accept the appearance at face value, or reject it as an illusion. McDowell thinks a thought cannot fail to be even so much as false without failing to be a thought at all (McDowell 2005: 60). I think this is in part the result of his focussing on reference failure for a purported singular thought, which really does mean a failure to express a thought, and in part a feature of the reduction of internal negation to external negation. Because the truth of a thought is constrained with the whole of logical space, there is simply no room within logical space for the thought failing to be either true or false. But when we have a positive characterisation of falsehood, as I just offered, we can make sense of thoughts which are neither true nor false without failing to be thoughts altogether. It is possible for the station to be neither open nor closed, for instance when the trains are not riding, but one can still enter the platform. In such cases, as Austin reminds us, it is neither flatly true nor flatly false to say that the station is open. But it is not that we have failed to think altogether. For one, the question “Is the station open?” can still be asked, and understood as it normally is, so there must still be, even by Frege’s light, such a thought to think. These are just the sort of cases to which I referred as ones in which a thought comes to seem opaque, getting in between us and the reality it is supposed to describe. So I can make the current point by saying that we must make room for the possibility of opacity, and so of there sometimes being a task of preventing opacity, of finding apt terms to describe a situation for current discursive purposes.

31 Somewhat surprisingly, in addition to arguing (convincingly to my mind) against the idea that reference failure for a singular thought would still allow for there to be such a thought, McDowell also has something like a general argument for bivalence (McDowell 2005: 60):

Judging is judging something to be so. Supposing there is no condition such that if it is met— if things are indeed so— the judgement is true, how can what we are dealing with be a case of judging? But if there is such a condition, it is either met or not, and we are back to thoughts with one or other of the truth-values, true or false.

But that “if there is such a condition, it is either met or not” is just what is under discussion!

32 “In cases like these it is pointless to insist on deciding in simple terms whether the statement is ‘true or false.’ Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo?” (Austin 1950)
But this does not mean we have to go to the other extreme, as Austin sometimes suggests, and postulate a dualism between thought and world in order to make room for the task of “conceptualising” reality. That would be to treat opacity as the normal case. Normally, people spontaneously and effortlessly find words that perfectly aptly capture the predictable patterns of their lives (it is a happy monotony that allows us to be at home in the world).

How does all this relate to the force/content distinction? My contention is that that distinction, when it takes the form of ‘attaching a force to in itself forceless content’, is one with a referential perspective on a thought, and it is only by leaving that perspective that the idea behind the identity theory - that there is no distance between true thinking and reality - can come into its own. One way of showing this would be to attend to a contradiction between the force/content separation and the transparency of truth, which I exploited in defining truth as being so. The separation of force and content treats the content as a thing, of which truth can be predicated as a property. Attaching the force of assertion to that things are thus and so is pictured as predicating truth of this thought. But predicating truth of a thought adds nothing to it. Not because truth is empty, but because the contention that the thought is true was already

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33 See for instance Austin’s definition of truth (Austin 1950: 116):

A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it ‘refers’) is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions.

Minus the talk of conventions, and moved to a Fregean framework, this corresponds to Charles Travis’s conception of truth as a relation of ‘instancing’ between a historic state of affairs (“a particular case of things being as they are”) and a thought. One find in Travis’s work a great sensitivity to what I call the possibility of opacity, and I imagine this provides an additional motivation, in addition to the Fregean reasons I have been discussing, for his dualism of ‘the historical’ and ‘the conceptual’ (see Travis 2011 and 2013).

34 The asymmetry of “Truth lies in being so” distinguishes it from deflationism. The deflationist holds that what truth is is exhausted by the formula, “It is true that p if and only if p”. But that formula is perfectly symmetric. By contrast, on my view the truth of the thought that things are such and such is explained by things being such and such. This corresponds to the difference between a true Davidsonian theory of meaning, one with true T-
contained within the thought. But that is just to say that the thought is, after all, that things are thus and so. A thought cannot be in a deep sense forceless. We can grasp a thought without acknowledging it as true, but this is best seen as withholding the force of assertion which is intrinsic to the thought. Correspondingly, to add ‘is true’ to the assertion of a thought is no ordinary predication; it is better seen as making explicit something that was already implicit within the thought.

It seems to me fairly easy to accommodate the more or less sentences, and one that can be “used as a theory of meaning” (McDowell ...). In the one that can be used as a theory of meaning, there is an explanatory relation between the left-hand side and the right-hand side of every T-sentence. So we find T-sentences such as “It is true to say, ‘Snow is white,’ iff snow is white.” It is just in such cases that “iff” can be replaced by because: it is true (false) to say that snow is white because snow is (not) white.

As Sebastian Rödl would put it, the ‘I think’ is contained within the thought.

This is in line with, and inspired by, Irad Kimhi’s ‘psycho-logical monism’. Unfortunately there is no published work to refer to, but maybe this can serve as an acknowledgement of sorts.

Although I am presenting my alternative as a departure from Frege’s official view, it takes seriously, maybe more seriously than Frege himself sometimes did, some of his deepest commitments. Frege’s universalism about logic commits him to the view that logic does not have a special subject matter. Logic is the study of the laws of truth. Unlike other sciences, it does not study some special range of truths (the chemical ones, the biological ones) but truth in general. If there is a sense in which logic is about thoughts, the bearers of truth values, thoughts better not be things at all – as if “thought” and “world” were just two more items that fall under the laws of truth. Universalism about logic is inconsistent with a sideways-on perspective; it requires us to take judgment as primary.

Grammatically truth appears as a predicate, which is predicated of a thought. So we are led to speak of truth as if it were a property of a thing. To take the grammar at face value is to reify thoughts in the way that I have argued is problematic. But Frege suggests an alternative. “May we not be dealing here with something which cannot, in the ordinary sense, be called a property at all? In spite of this doubt I want first to express myself in accordance with ordinary usage, until something more apt has been found.” (Frege 1918: 293) We can hear the implication that this is one of those cases where the reader has to grant him a pinch of salt. To predicate truth of a thought adds nothing to the thought. Not because truth is empty, but because this predication was already contained within the thought. It is just the failed attempt to speak of truth as a property.
technical reasons Frege had for separating force and content; conversely, I
do not see how the idea of a forceless thought can help here. Instead of
thinking of assertion as attaching a force to a forceless thought, we can
think of merely grasping a thought, without acknowledging it as true, as
withholding the force of assertion that is intrinsic to it. When we refer to
what someone said, we do not commit ourselves to what they said, of
course, but what we refer to is not a forceless thought; what they said was:
that things are thus and so. (This is why before I said that a thought is
essentially something to think, but still secondarily something to refer to.
We can refer to it, but what we refer to is something forceful, essentially
something to think.) When we embed a thought in a conditional, we do
not commit ourselves to things being as the antecedent says they are, and
we only conditionally commits ourselves to things being as the
consequent says things are, but we could do no such thing if the
antecedent or the consequent were in themselves forceless: what we say is
that if things are such and such and such, then they are so and so. It is just
a philosophical illusion that makes it seem as if we can hear a thought
without its assertoric force; or in the terms of Wittgenstein’s paradoxical
truism, that makes it seem as if we can hear “what we mean” as distinct
from what we mean. There is no such thing as a forceless thought, because
a forceless thought cannot be thought.

But Frege had deeper reasons for distinguishing force and content,
and it is only in terms of these deeper reasons that we can begin to
understand why anyone would try to strip away the assertoric force from a
thought. Doing so was Frege’s way of accommodating his anti-
psychologistic wish to distinguish the activity of thinking from the things
which, in that activity, we endorse as true or reject as false. For Frege, logic
cannot be about the activity of thinking, because then it would be merely
about the way human beings happen to think, not the way they should
think in order to reach the aim of thought: truth. It is as if Frege can only

that shows, Frege thinks, what is special about logic (truth):

It is precisely for this reason that this word ['truth'] seems fitted to
indicate the essence of logic. ... [It] seems to make the impossible
possible: it allows what corresponds to the assertoric force to assume the
form of a contribution to the thought. And although this attempt
miscarries, or rather through the very fact that it miscarries, it indicates
what is characteristic of logic. ... What logic is really concerned with is
not contained in the word 'true' at all but in the assertoric force with
which a sentence is uttered. (Frege, PW25t-2)
think of activity in statistical terms, or in any case, only in the terms of a science such as psychology, which at least in its self-conception refrains from normative pretensions. The missed alternative is that logic is about the way human beings normally think, where normal carries the sense of “the way it is done”; both the way it ought to be done and the way it normally, usually, is:

The logician does not have to answer the question: how does thinking normally take place in human beings? What course does it naturally follow in a human mind? What is natural to one person may well be unnatural to another. (Frege, PW: 7)

Frege wants to hand over even normal thinking to empirical psychology. It would be unsurprising if this was a reflection of the kind of disenchantment of nature that McDowell tries to rid modern philosophy off. It would be better in accord with McDowell’s philosophical outlook to reject this overreaction, on Frege’s part, to the threat of psychologism. We can be naturalists without being psychologistic if we conceive thought as the characteristic activity of a certain life form, the human animal. As Wittgenstein wrote, “Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.” (PI 25)

Within such an outlook we can also regain a truistic understanding of McDowell’s second reminder, that in experience it can be manifest to one that something is the case. This requires, I think, starting with the normal case, which is also what motivates disjunctivism at its best. The general approach is one of bringing to reflective self-conscious what we know in having a certain capacity; for instance, what we know in knowing how to reason, or what we know in knowing how to perceptually apprehend our surroundings. Before Aristotle discovered the study of logic people already knew how to think; in the study of logic we come to say what it is that we know in knowing that; we come to abstract away the forms of our thoughts in virtue of which they hang together in the way that we already knew they did. Knowing how to reason is, of course,

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38 But this sense of “usual” cannot be captured in a Fregean form of generality. See Thompson 2008.

39 This way of putting it I learned from James Conant. It would not surprise me if some of the phrases in this paragraph are almost a quotation.
knowing how to reason correctly; it is knowledge of norms in this strong sense. Departures from the norm are understood as such, as departures from the norm which is intrinsic to the kind of activity it is. One cannot, for instance, explain the idea of a logical fallacy except against the background of an understanding of logical inference.

When this approach is applied to the philosophy of perceptual experience, it takes the form of what has come to be known as disjunctivism (though perhaps it was originally differently motivated). An experience is essentially an attempt to perceive how things are. We understand cases of illusions, and other ways of failing to perceptually grasp how things are, as departures from the norm that is intrinsic to the kind of thing experience is. It can only be called an illusion against such a background (there are no illusions within dreams). Now we have to be careful about the kind of failure that an illusion is. It is not like saying something false, as seems to be implied by McDowell’s account. One cannot grasp what it is for a thought to be true without grasping what it is for that thought to be false (one cannot grasp the thought that the station is open without grasping the thought that the station is closed), but illusions are not like that; they do not provide an internal contrast to the good case. They are more like saying something which is not even so much as true or false. As in the case of opaque thoughts, certain experiences can become opaque, so that they themselves become the object of reflection. We look closer in order to rid ourselves of the sense of opacity, and see things as they are.

But despite McDowell’s disjunctivist ambitions, he only imperfectly follows this approach in his account of experience. The structure of the bad case, where one holds an appearance at arm’s length in order to assess whether it should be taken at face value or rejected as an illusion, is projected onto the good case. This lapse from disjunctivism, into what McDowell criticises under the name of the highest common factor view, corresponds to the structure of Frege’s separation of force and content. Given the conception of a thought as forceless, the closest that we could come to ‘taking up the standpoint of a thought’ is taking up the standpoint of merely entertaining a thought; transposed to experience, this is the moment of being presented with an appearance to the effect that things are thus and so, without yet, as far as thus being presented goes, taking it that things are that way. But this cannot be the normal case. We would not have enough to go on to make a decision about whether to

[40] It is important to the present topic that it is superfluous to add that, see Ford 2011.
take an appearance at face value if the need to make a decision was not, as in reality it happily is, an exceptional circumstance. The situation in which that would be the normal case is one where we would find ourselves in surroundings so alien that nothing provides an anchor for us to orient ourselves; surroundings which would not be structured according to the categories of our thinking. But if McDowell is right that experience is conceptually structured, then it follows that in such surroundings, our capacity for perception would not be that. More generally, it stands to reason that if our cognitive capacities belong to our natural history, as per Wittgenstein's idea, they are only capacities in our habitat.

All of this so far accords with McDowell's philosophical outlook, even though not with the shape that his positive view took in Mind and World. But it shows a tension between that outlook and the Fregean framework on which he there relied. As we saw, though Frege was motivated by anti-psychologism to separate thinking from the things that one thinks, McDowell's motivation was to avert a subjectivist form of idealism. He contrasts the spontaneity of thinking with the receptivity of experience. In experience conceptual capacities are not exercised, but passively drawn on. So experience cannot yet be knowledge, not yet seeing that things are thus and so; it is merely being presented with thinkable content. When we reject the separation of force and content, and the general philosophical outlook of which it is the central element, we can regain a truistic understanding of McDowell's second reminder: in a normal, good case of experience, how things are is manifest to us. This does not stand in contrast with the presence of concrete objects. In experience objects impress themselves on our senses, and thus are present. But an object is not divorced from how it is. 'How it is' is not a thing in addition to the object, and seeing how it is is not an act in addition to seeing. That things are thus and so is a specification of how things are, so it is also not a thing in addition to the object, and seeing that things are thus and so is not an act in addition to seeing. For an object to be present to the perceiving subject is for him to see how it manifestly is; for instance, how it is shaped, coloured, positioned or moving about, and in the case of an animal, what it is doing.

It seems to me that there is something wrong with McDowell's motivations. If we think of thinking as free, spontaneous activity, in need of a constraint from outside, then how can it be thinking that we have in mind? So far it is not recognisable as thinking, and so the constraint would not be a constraint to thinking. What we need is not a limit to freedom,
but a limit which is constitutive of freedom. Receptivity does not stand in
contrast to activity. It stands in contrast to creativity - for instance
keeping up one's end in a conversation. In such a case the subject makes a
contribution which is not bound by what is there anyway (other than
considerations of politeness and relevance and such, we have an
enormous freedom in deciding what to say). But there are other forms of
activity which are receptive. Think of actively listening to a piece of
music, for instance by 'singing the melody in our head' as we do so. In one
sense this is a passion, something we undergo, but who could deny that in
doing so we actively exercise our capacity for hearing the unity of a
melody? We may not have a choice what to hear, but then neither do we
have a choice what to believe. This sort of activity does not contrast with
receptivity: the unity we find was there to be found anyway. The idea that
activity cannot be receptive is just a version of the restricted conception of
causality that McDowell meant to rid philosophy off. If we think of
experience as a collaboration between mind and world (one on which we
draw on our second nature), rather than a confrontation, we can allow for
the subject to make a contribution without this being something that he
makes up. So there is no need to speak of experience in the passive voice.
We can just speak of experience as we ordinarily do, in the active voice,
with the perceiving subject in the grammatical subject position. When the
music is present to us, we are not being appeared to; we are simply hearing
how the notes hang together.

The truism to affirm, in response to a sense of distance between
mind and world, is that normally, the relation between language, thought,
experience, and reality is, in a phrase of Peter Sullivan, transparent to the
point of disappearance. Our conceptual representations do not get in
between us and the world. They constitute our standpoints on the world. 41
What our words make manifest, the thoughts we express, we can also
grasp in our experience, and thus find in the world around us. It is
important that this is only normally so, and we can get a grasp on what it
means for this to be normally so by looking at departures from the norm.
Words poorly chosen may fail, on an occasion, to make the intended
thought manifest; a thought may fail to be either true or false; and an

41 What I am saying about representations generally Sullivan says about
sentences and thoughts: “neither the sentence nor the thought obtrudes itself as
the object of consideration, or obstructs one’s view of things. Quite the reverse.
The sentence understood, the thought, constitutes one’s view of things.”
(Sullivan 2004: 733) In “Synthesising without concepts” Sullivan defends a
similar view about experience. The possibility of opacity is not a central theme in
his work, and I don’t know if he would accord it the same importance as I do.
experience in unfamiliar surroundings may become incoherent. In such cases our representations become themselves the object of our reflection. Such departures from the norm are in many ways more interesting, and certainly more varied, than the norm itself. There is very little to say about the norm—hence the emphasis on truisms. ("Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.") But we understand failures of transparency as such, as failing to live up to a standard that is internal to the sort of thing it is. This allows me to almost agree with McDowell’s core idea, “Our thinking can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance implicit in the very idea of thought.” Our representations can be distanced from the world by being false or opaque (e.g., inapt), but there is no distance implicit in the very idea of representation.
References


