

RATIONALISMS OF INTUITION. KANT AND
MCDOWELL ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
CONCEPTUAL CAPACITIES AND SENSORY
EXPERIENCE

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Moving from D. Davidson's claim that «nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief» and from the Kantian conception of our empirical intuitions as configurations in sensory receptivity that are categorially structured, J. McDowell argues that «responsiveness to reasons as such» and conceptual capacities are at work not just in (inferential) reasoning, but also in perceptive experience. He recommends a conception of our experience as actualization of conceptual capacities in sensibility to open a path between the conception of the “mythical” givenness of traditional empiricism and a “rationalistic” coherentism that does not give the world a satisfactory position in the credentials of empirical beliefs. This coincides with basic doctrines of Kant, but McDowell (like Hegel) is dissatisfied with the Kantian conception of sensibility because of the thesis of her independence from reason, that seems to be founded on mere subjectivity, on reflection of a bare fact about us. We will argue that such criticism is not sound, but, above all, that Kant's theory could be used to spell out his claim that conceptual capacities are actualized, but not exercised in perceptual experience.

Plainly and convincingly McDowell restores a chief feature of Kant's philosophy explaining how the theoretical assumption of a self-sufficiency of sensible content and conceptual content produces an insurmountable gap in our comprehension of the possibility of knowledge. If the sensible experience – the intuitional consciousness to be in the presence of objects and states of affairs – wouldn't

contain reasons from the very beginning, if it wouldn't already be a rational event, that is a form of conceptual knowledge (which can be articulated in propositional knowledge), it couldn't motivate or justify any judgement and we would incline to consider it like a course of inner states without sense and reference. In that case the thought too, in its paradigmatic expressions such as to judge and to make inferences or to get and to justify beliefs, would seem at the end «only a play of empty forms» (MW, p. 6)¹. Without a real empirical content, without access to an outer source, which the thought could refer to to verify and guarantee the objective validity of our representations, our thinking would seem to be not just devoid of truth-values, but even with no real possibility to refer to the world.

To sum up with a saying of Kant «thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind» (A 51/B 75), and, if things would really be this way, one can't see what a magic could mediate between the notions of these alleged types of world-representations to obtain an account of the possibility of our cognitive experience. It seems therefore more consistent to deny the philosophical assumption that understands the dichotomy of given perceptions and judgements as a very dualism, than to give up the rationality of experience and the intentionality of thought. We should recognize that «the very idea of representational content, not just the idea of judgements that are adequately justified, requires an interplay between concepts and intuitions» (MW, p. 6) and so that «receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation» (MW, p. 9). Required is a profound reconsideration of the classical empiricist conception of sensible experience. According to McDowell the latter is to be understood – with and at the same time against Kant – like something that, notwithstanding its receptive-passive nature, from the viewpoint of the representational content is on the same level with the conceptual thought, or more accurately shares with him the same content.

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at

¹ MW: J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1996².

face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are (MW, p. 26).

This last proposition brings to mind a topic, that won't be in the middle of our considerations and concerns McDowell's assent to an idealism that have to coincide with the realism of common sense, a position which obviously goes back to Hegel, more than to Kant, who rather maintains a more specific correspondence between *transcendental* idealism and *empirical* realism in accordance with his own conception of sensibility. A comparison of the latter with that of McDowell will be introduced in the following pages, now we just notice that McDowell – inspired by the ontological premises of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and by Hegel's objective idealism – characterizes the conceptual sphere as boundless, meaning that the space of reasons coincide with that of concepts (so there are not non-conceptual reasons) and that the world (even though it is independent from me and my free actual thoughts) isn't external to the thinkable. In general terms this perspective belongs also to varieties of hermeneutics and inferentialism; the peculiarity of McDowell's insight into the conceptual seems then to consist precisely in the revival of the above quoted Kantian proposition: thoughts have intentionality and objectivity for the reason that they are not empty. This isn't a tautology, because it implies an internal and necessary thought-sensible experience relationship.

It is not that we could first make sense of the fact that the world is thinkable, in abstraction from experience, and proceed from there to make sense of experience. What is in question could not be the thinkable world, or, to put it another way, our picture of the understanding's equipment could not be what it needs to be, a picture of a system of concepts and conceptions with substantial empirical content, if it were not already part of the picture that the system is the medium within which one engages in active thought that is rationally responsive to the deliverances of experience. Thoughts without intuitions would indeed be empty (MW, pp. 33-4).

According to McDowell «active thought [...] is rationally responsive to the deliverances of experience» and «*responsiveness to reasons* is a good gloss on one notion of freedom» (MW, p. xxiii, cf. p. 182). Freedom is understood as a feature of man's second nature, as an active and spontaneous faculty, acquired by education (in the sense of the German word *Bildung*) through language and social rela-

tions. It can't be homologated to the space of natural laws defined by modern science, nevertheless it remains deep-rooted in the original possibilities of a natural being, that are realized in our growing up as rational animals (Kant uses sometimes the Latin expression "*animal rationabile*", what could be read as a sign of a more complex and challenging conception of the relationship between nature and freedom). We let behind the much debated question of the second nature as well and restrict ourselves to highlight first that, if the spontaneity of thought has to be responsiveness to the reasons that the sensible experiences provide, the latter must be real openness of the cognitive subject to the world, direct consciousness of the presence to the senses of the object; otherwise the thoughts couldn't properly have a content at their disposal and would be empty. Secondly, sensible experience have to take in not just the bare presence of the Given, which – as expounded by McDowell – cannot be ground of rational claims or provide reasons in the strict sense of word: reasons, which we are conscious of *as* reasons, that is as conceptual knowledge and as rational ground for beliefs and actions; it must be a conceptually structured given, that happens together and in interplay with an having-the-world-in-view. So we return to the question shared by Kant and McDowell about understanding the sensible experience in a new way, maybe with a better insight into its systematic relevance.

Undoubtedly Kant maintains that the contributions of sensibility and of understanding to knowledge can and indeed have to be discerned, not because he thinks that experience, like some glue, obtains its properties from two separated ingredients existing in themselves, but because he is convinced that they aren't interchangeable; to mix up their respective functions ends in self-contradictory philosophical theories. The difference between sensibility and understanding is however recognized only at the level of the philosophical analysis of the conditions of possibility of experience. It is not a material (empirical) diversity. The difference with McDowell doesn't emerge here. He denies that sensibility can give an even notionally separable contribution to the knowledge, but in a sense that Kant could undersign, that is meaning that «one's conceptual capacity have already been brought into play, in the content's being available to one, before one has any choice in the matter» (MW, p. 10). «It is not that they are exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of re-

ceptivity» (MW, p. 9); to think so would be the same as falling back into the Myth of the Given. McDowell shares Kant's opinion that it is not possible to have a representation with a barely sensible content, which can eventually become an object of thought through some following operations.

We should understand what Kant calls "intuition" – experiential intake – not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge (MW, p. 9).

Disagreement, that is evidently a sign of a formidable theoretical difficulty, arises after showing that objective knowledge is possible only if the contents of thought and sensible experience are homogeneous or even the same (at least in case of the most basic concepts), when man asks about the possibility of this kind of passive but conceptual experience.

When we trace the ground for an empirical judgement, the last step takes us to experiences. Experiences already have conceptual content, so this last step does not take us outside the space of concepts. But it takes us to something in which sensibility – receptivity – is operative, so we need no longer be unnerved by the freedom implicit in the idea that our conceptual capacities belong to a faculty of spontaneity (MW, p. 10).

Actually McDowell's reasoning – in part because of its therapeutic intention – is apt to show the soundness of an hypothetical, not of a categorical, thesis: if experience has a conceptual content and is the expression of a receptivity in operation directed to the world, then it can be both source of content and objective constraint for the subject's thought. We could then argue as follows: since our judgements are evidently about the world and subject to verification and review, since we attribute truth-conditions and -values to the propositions that express them, since the previously considered alternative explanations of experience drive us toward self-contradictory conceptions, the aforesaid if-clause on the nature of experience must be considered satisfied without any further explanation of its real possibility. This would drive us anew toward those philosophical dualistic premises, that already restrained the comprehension of the objectivity and rationality of our representations. In McDowell thesis the reality of the consequence cannot be given up, and this should be enough guarantee of the premise's possibility. With per-

ceptive experience we have touched the foundational bottom, it is not judicious to dig longer and go beyond the boundary of a ‘moderate’ transcendental argument that can be useful to dispel a philosophical anxiety about the objective validity of thought, but doesn’t produce apodictical proofs. Nevertheless it is a serious problem of this approach that the premise in question is not at all simple, but already entails the beginning and the conclusion of an explanation of the possibility of experience according to the conception that McDowell intends to support; it even *have to* implies such an explanation, otherwise it wouldn’t have a determinate content and could represent only an empty theoretical requirement. But, if this is the way things are, could we really do without an articulated account of the possibility of the sensible rational experience?

The passivity of experience, necessary so that thought aren’t empty of content, can’t be reduced only to the influence of the world on receptivity traditionally conceived, once it was explained that causal events can’t introduce us in the normative sphere of the thinkable. McDowell derives «from Sellars, and trace to Kant, a rejection of the idea that something is Given in experience, from outside the activity of shaping world-views» (MW, p. 135). Experience is then passive as «receptivity in operation» (MW, pp. 10, 24), with other words «even though experience is passive [or rather: exactly because it is passive in the transcendental meaning referred to the possibility of knowledge], it draws into operation capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity» (MW, p. 13) and «if we try to keep spontaneity out of the picture but nevertheless talk of conceptual capacity operating in experience, the talk of conceptual capacities is mere word-play» (*ib.*). However, it would be appropriate to clarify what exactly means that «the relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity» (MW, p. 9), or that they «are *passively* drawn into play in experience» and «belong to a network of capacities for active thought, a network that *rationally govern comprehension-seeking responses to the impacts of the world on sensibility*» (MW, p. 12, emphasis added).

The spontaneity is indissoluble from the conceptual capacities and these must be somehow involved in sensible experience, if – as we have already seen – the content of the latter has to be considered conceptual, at least in a minimal sense that makes it a ‘given’ which is homogeneous to and accessible for thought. So in order not to

fall back again into the naturalistic fallacy of the call for a Given that is absolutely independent from our cognitive capacities, passivity and spontaneity of experience must be thought together, but how can it be done?

The essential outline of McDowell's position is contained in a passage of the Introduction to the second edition of *Mind and World*.

From the thesis that receiving an impression is a transaction in nature, there is now no good inference to the conclusion drawn by Sellars and Davidson, that the idea of receiving an impression must be foreign to the logical space in which concepts such as that of answerability function. Conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the *sui generis* logical space of reasons, can be operative not only in judgements – results of a subject's actively making up her mind about something – but already in the transactions in nature that are constituted by the world's impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable subject; that is, one who possesses the relevant concepts. Impressions can *be* cases of its perceptually appearing – being apparent – to a subject that things are thus and so (MW, p. xx).

Basically, here is said (i) that the conceptual capacities can be present or immanent, even «be operative» in the natural transactions that constitute the impressions of the sense, because they, although *sui generis*, belong at any rate to the nature, and (ii) that the impressions, which are effects of the influence of the world on our sensibility, are conscious perceptions of facts too, thanks to that presence of conceptual capacities.

The idea of spontaneity cannot be aligned with the logical space that is the home of ideas of what is natural in the relevant sense, conceptual powers are nevertheless operative in the workings of our sensibility, in actualizations of our animal nature, as such (MW, p. 74).

It should be quite uncontroversial that with the use of such expressions one undertakes the obligation to explain what is exactly the above mentioned involvement of the spontaneity. The passivity of the experiences seems to be ensured by the fact that they are impressions, their spontaneity by the circumstance that in the human beings sensibility evolved from sensible bare natural faculty to receptive faculty of a sensible rational subject that is moulded by the second nature. «Our perceptual sensitivity to our environment is taken up into the ambit of the faculty of spontaneity, which is what distinguishes us from them [the animals]» (MW, p 64, v. pp. 69-70). It is so the same (second) nature to be spontaneous and conceptual

in the knowing subject that is free and responsible in his acts, even when he behaves receptively with regard to the outer nature.

At this point, the world – what is subjected to the natural laws, that are not free, are described by the modern science and don't imply reasons or responsibilities – has to be considered as conceptually articulated too. Indeed, if a fact must be *given* to the receptivity of the subject as an outer constraint for his actual thought, it has got to be itself already conceptual, otherwise it would be by definition outside of the sphere of the thinkable. So at the beginning of sensible experience there would be outer facts that are structured in conformity with a rational form and as such impress themselves on the sensibility. Their action would cause impressions, whose content can be conceptual *a parte subiecti* because our receptivity has already been shaped into a second nature that is capable to apprehend directly the facts with their conceptual form. What matters at this place is not the specificity of the causal nexus between the world and the subject's inner state that should mirror it, but the fact that the conceptual capacities are already operative, though not spontaneously in it:

we must insist that the understanding is already inextricably implicated in the deliverances of sensibility themselves. Experiences are impressions made by the world on our senses, products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves already have conceptual content (MW, p. 46, v. pp. 62-3). At least with 'outer experience', conceptual content is already borne by impressions that independent reality makes on one's senses (MW, p. 67).

We remind once more that McDowell would resist to our request for an explanations of the possibility of experience and that, this notwithstanding, we think these are needed to obtain a satisfactory understanding of his own proposal. So it seems us that the conceptual background of his persuasive reasoning isn't fully clear and distinct yet. Before looking briefly at Kant's philosophy for theoretical resources that could be helpful to specify and possibly to enrich the picture outlined by McDowell, here some more passages from *Mind and World* to confirm that we tried so far to reproduce it accurately.

To give the impressions of "inner sense" the right role in justifying judgements, we need to conceive them, like the impressions of "outer sense", as themselves already possessing conceptual content; to supply the

the necessary limit to the freedom of spontaneity, we need to insist that they are indeed impressions, products of receptivity (MW, pp. 21-2).

The thinkable contents that are ultimate in the order of justification are contents of experiences, and in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts, facts that obtain anyway and impress themselves on one's sensibility (MW, p. 29)

I am trying to describe a way of maintaining that in experience the world exerts a rational influence on our thinking. And that requires us to delete the outer boundary from the picture. The impressions on our senses that keep the dynamic system in motion are already equipped with conceptual content (MW, p. 34)

In the perspective of Kant's transcendental philosophy «maintaining that in experience the world exerts a rational influence on our thinking» is understandable in the light of the conception of the subject of experience and thought as protagonist of the synthesis, that is the fundamental intellectual capacity, articulated into different cognitive levels, to bring the manifold to the unity of apperception. Both perceptions and discursive thoughts are its noematic crystallizations. So the content can't be considered as already given with the impressions, which should be called less ambiguously sensations; on the other hand experience and world are seen as correlate results of the cognitive process. Herein the experience's openness to the outer world realizes itself directly, without mediations of a third one. In perception the subject learns immediately about the world according to the way of its appearing to him, phenomenologically disclosed through the apperceptive 'passive-active' synthesis of the manifold of sensibility. The latter forms the representations and places them at the thought's disposal; the content of intuitions is thus given to the spontaneous conceptual synthesis from inside of the sphere of the representations and of the thinkable, so that they can be articulated and differently unified on the level of propositional content, as McDowell holds too.

Such a general picture, however complex and controversial can be its details, promises a clear and coherent view on the relationship between mind and world. It brings anyway to mind that, if we recognize the indissoluble cooperation of spontaneity and receptivity as the ground of our representations, it is more convenient to follow Kant distinguishing the concepts of impression or sensation, intuition, experience and worldview to refer them to the specific condi-

tions of our different but homogeneous cognitive acts, than to let these notions not much defined and interchangeable as names of an objective reference point for understanding intentionality that stops the possibility of further reflection, as seems to do McDowell. Let's try to draw some few schematic road markings.

The impressions in themselves don't have any content, they are inner informational states produced independently from spontaneity. So they are not representations in the strict sense of the word and lack of intentionality and reference. The very notion of them is not to be considered as original, in fact it is obtained as the concept of the matter that would remain if we could still have a representation subtracting from it the form that is intrinsic to it and related to the exercise of spontaneity and of receptivity in operation, which actually are necessary to our manner to represent (l. the quarrel with Evans, MW, pp. 48 ff.). As a consequence, the fact that the sensations are natural events, that the outer independent world gives rise in the sensibility to the matter, which the mind exercises its spontaneous activity on, doesn't qualify them as something that is given to us independently from our cognitive capacities, because the impressions are actually not given in the proper sense of the word, but provoked. They doesn't show the specific relationship of the giving something to somebody, which happens only in the dimension of conscious experience. The real given for knowledge is the presence of the object in the sensible intuition of a self-conscious subject: the way of this object- or fact-appearing allows to characterise the sensibility as passive, that is as receptive capacity, because – to use again McDowell's words – that something is given or not doesn't fall within the sphere of the free choices and of the responsibilities of an individual.

The presence of the world in sensibility, understood as receptive faculty of an 'I' (what leaves out the possibility that the latter could be in Kant's opinion a disembodied 'transcendental entity', as McDowell fears), is immediate; objects and facts give themselves to the subject in his intuitional representations without intermediary because the content of intuition is already endowed with unity, articulation, relationality, and this justifies its classification under the headline 'conceptual content'. To represent something is so really an acting to which cooperate both the faculty of receptivity and of spontaneity, it is not a bare undergoing the outer influence, because

the object of intuition is *given*, but from the point of view of the transcendental reflection the intuition itself is not such, but the outcome of the intellectual functions of the synthesis of a spontaneous subject, a constituted representation, not an immediate one as can be fingerprints thanks to the direct affinity and contiguity between a natural cause and its effect. Notwithstanding a sensible intuition, without the aid of any other representation or more basic constituent of representations, presents us (to consciousness) immediately an individual fact that takes place in an always already given net of perceptive and conceptual connections. Such is the space of reasons and, first at all, the rational dimension of sensible experience, which is always open to the world but to the propositional articulation of its contents as well, in other words available to specific conceptual determinations or, generally put, to interpretations. All this constitutes a worldview and its interdependence with the particular experiences just according to the lines drawn by McDowell.

The notion of transcendental synthesis (the idea of an acting, which is a priori structured by formal relationships among the cognitive capacities that are necessary to the experience of a self-conscious sensible subject, generally considered in the normative dimension of the reasons and not in that of the nomothetic descriptions) seems so a suitable theoretical mean for explaining the possibility of a passive-spontaneous sensibility, understood as the act to receive outer information without leaving the impressions outside of the conceptual sphere or turning them into something that should not simply correspond to the facts, but literally coincide, at least formally, with them. As already mentioned, on the one side it is tough to think the impressions as such as cognitive complex structure that are unitary, articulated and integrated in a net of systematic connections, and so apt to represent the content of facts; and on the other side man should fairly explain how facts as such can impress themselves with their formal properties in the sensibility.

A position like this, a kind of direct realism that is grounded on nature, but not naturalistic, implies probably something like the aristotelic principle of the homogeneity of cause and effect and the theory of knowledge of Aristotle, according to which the object can transfer to the senses and to reason its formal determination, that these faculties take in passively in an analogous but different way, but at the same time acting actively too, since they employ the sen-

sible and intelligible forms of the object to represent it in the soul. We are just evoking these analogies and neither argue that there are really these theoretical influences, nor want to examine the consistency of the aristotelic model with a position that was born on the basis of the debate following Quine and Sellars and that programmatically goes back to the intuitions of Kant and Hegel. Anyway, McDowell refers positively only to the ethics of Aristotle to illustrate the idea of second nature. With respect to the modern epistemological worries raised by the banishment of the reasons from nature, he ascribes him an unaware innocence (MW, pp. 108-9, 181-82)².

Summing up, the strong hold of McDowell's position is certainly the identification of

the possibility that conceptual capacities might be already operative in actualizations of sensibility [...]. So long as a passive operation of conceptual capacities is not in view as an option, one cannot even try to cast experience as a rational constraint on empirical thinking without falling into the Myth of the Given (MW, p. 67).

Assenting to this point of view, we tried first to illustrate that it is not enough just to propose the idea as a logical possibility and then to show its plausibility with respect to the question of understanding intentionality; then we have suggested that a Kantian transcendental explanation of the possibility of experience can meet the theoretical requirements that McDowell has renewed and enforced. We want now remind that for McDowell the main obstacle to make a fully and unprejudiced use of Kantian philosophy is the transcendental idealism, that unquestionably is an essential premise of the theory of synthesis, our candidate to the task of explaining the possibility of a sensible rational experience.

According to McDowell, «if we take Kant's conception of experience out of the frame he puts it in, a story about a transcendental affection of receptivity by a supersensible reality, it becomes just what we need» (MW, pp. 95-6), but that conception is the outcome of his whole transcendental reflection. In Kant's philosophy, unfortunately but luckily as well, there are not on the one side fruitful intuitions on the nature of experience and on the other side an extrinsic systematic frame which we could decide to ignore. This old

² But compare the essay *Sellars's Thomism*, in J. McDowell, *Having the World in View*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) – London, pp. 239-55.

general bias, that *via* Strawson is carried on by McDowell too, causes many misunderstandings like that to see a transcendental, maybe we should better say onto-metaphysical history as ground of the empirical synthesis. According to it the impressions of a noumenal world become the content or at least the matter of intuition through the form of our sensibility, understood as a faculty that is endowed with a priori but factual forms and is independent from the conceptual ones of understanding. Such a picture contains obviously aspects that contradicts what appears to be the more positive core of the Kantian conception of experience as empirical knowledge that is objective as conceptual. McDowell finds in Kant the presupposition of a transcendental Given too, and so a revival of the Myth of the Given because he thinks the Kantian form of sensibility as obtained from a reflection on the contingent constitution of man and fears the recovery of the ghost of “an isolable contribution from receptivity” (MW, p. 41), of something that keeps being outside of the conceptual sphere. This creates problems for the real capacity of thought to refer to the world and makes us consider the facts of our empirical experience as bare appearances of the ‘real supersensible world’. Actually almost nothing of the narrative of the ‘transcendental impression’ matches precisely with the original texts of Kant, the very term-combination should be considered, with respect to the Kantian meaning of ‘transcendental’, expression of a categorial mistake.

Elsewhere I tried to show that the texts expound a more complex and refined story that tells of an inborn ground of the receptivity of our sensibility which can be modified through outer impression, but isn’t yet a faculty capable of supply us with intuitions of objects or, in general, with (conscious) representations. It is rather a kind of ‘a priori matter’ for the spontaneity of the subject that acts first at all on himself, more precisely on his own sensibility to unify its receptive possibilities and so to bring them to the unity of self-consciousness. This synthesis stands for the original acquisition of space and time as formal intuitions; by means of it a pure boundless manifold that represents all possible connections in space and time is gathered in a whole representation. In other words, transcendently spoken, the spontaneity gives to the conscious thought the representations of two infinite magnitude, that is of space and time. All following particular spaces and times are nothing but determin-

able parts of them. So every change of the inner state of the mind can be apprehended as limitation or local filling of the only infinite space and the only infinite time. Space and time are forms of intuition because they are represented as formal intuitions and, conversely, this is possible because in them a manifold of sensibility is determined, according to an a priori form, as matter of the representation.

This means that sensible intuition is both passive and active, real openness of the receptivity of a sensible but rational being to the outer world: it is passive, since the limitation or determination of the relationships in space and time through sensations makes real a possible sensible form and constitutes the presence to consciousness of the object or fact independently of the subject's choices. Sensible intuition is nonetheless, at the same time, active because the all-embracing representations of space and time aren't static and contingent forms of an individuals, but dynamical and systematic schemata that arise from the original interaction of the receptive potentiality of sensibility with the conceptual functions of the spontaneous synthesis. Without receptivity the unity of apperception, which is a necessary condition of experience, couldn't become the act of a living thinker, that is: the thought would remain empty. Otherwise, without spontaneity no sensible matter could have a synthetic form and be unity of a connected manifold, that is: it could not become a conceptual content (at least in the widest and fundamental meaning of the expression) and enter in the space of self-consciousness or of reasons. You can say that we don't give to ourselves the contents of intuitions, but in a certain sense we do give ourselves the general way to have sensible intuitions and perceptions with consciousness.

An interpretation of Kant that brings out the fine articulations of his general conception of experience promises to take with it an explanation of the indiscernible cooperation of activity and passivity in intuition, of the presence of spontaneity *in* intuitions, of the sense in which conceptual capacities can be considered passively operating in sensible experience and even of the thesis that the conceptual is boundless, because it shows that without the synthetic activity of spontaneity that is governed by intellectual and so conceptual functions there couldn't be any representation and as a consequence we wouldn't have contents of consciousness or presence of facts.

The form of intuiting belongs to the sensibility but performs its function together with the normative conceptual capacities and so it isn't subjective in the sense that is opposed to objective or conceptual. This worry can be set aside too. Finally, in space and time objects and facts of experience are given to us just in the way that is consented by the particular openness to the world which our sensibility and our understanding together have the possibility to realize.

It is not so that we impose a subjective form on the world, but certainly the objectivity of our experience has the particular character that it has because of our specific subjectivity. Facts are a real tie for thought but their general formal configuration depend on the way of our being in the world as cognitive subjects, a way of being which is obviously given and shaped as definite and limited. The all-embracing conceptual dimension can't overcome completely the experience's contingency of finite rational beings as we are, but this doesn't mean that our worldviews and our experiences are sheer subjective or even arbitrary. Probably such acknowledgment of our contingent and finite nature wouldn't be approved by McDowell, who follows Hegel and denies every kind of sensibility's independence and the transcendental difference between what the world is absolutely in itself and the world of facts. To us, however, this seems to be a reasonable price for such a comprehensive conception. Briefly, the Kantian theory of synthesis could be useful to specify McDowell's conception and to strengthen it, but it requires assent to the transcendental idealism, that – properly understood – say only that we have to consider the specific form of our sensibility and the synthetic nature of our representations by our effort to understand experience and its possibility.