

The Myth of Mere Movement

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Abstract Since Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” the myth of the Given has been central to philosophical discussions of perceptual experience and knowledge. In its most prominent form, the idea of the Given is the idea that perceptual experience can rationally support one’s thoughts but has no conceptual content. Now, intentional action is widely thought to be the structural complement of perceptual experience; via perceptual experience, the world impresses itself on the mind; via intentional action, the mind impresses itself on the world. But if that is true, we should suspect that there is something structurally similar to the idea of the Given in our thinking about intentional action. In this essay, I show in detail that indeed there is. Roughly, it is the idea that intentional actions can be rationally supported by one’s thoughts but have no conceptual content. I contend further that if the Given is a “myth,” so too is this structural analog. I also argue that if John McDowell’s way of avoiding the Given is satisfactory, there is a correlative way of avoiding the structural analog. The intriguing result: intentional action must have conceptual content. In the end, I raise two key questions about whether we should accept this result.

1 Introduction

Since Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” the myth of the Given has been central to philosophical discussions of perceptual experience and knowledge. Although it is often unclear what ‘the Given’ is supposed to refer to, let alone why it is a myth, perhaps the most widely shared idea is that ‘the Given’ is

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an epithet for a perceptual experience with certain allegedly problematic features.¹ For my purposes here, the idea of the Given will be the idea that perceptual experience can rationally support thought, but has no conceptual content. It is supposed to be a myth because perceptual experience can rationally support thought only if it has conceptual content.

Now, intentional action is widely thought to be the structural complement of perceptual experience; via perceptual experience, the world impresses itself on the mind; via intentional action, the mind impresses itself on the world. But if that is true, we should suspect that there is something structurally similar to the idea of the Given in our thinking about intentional action. I argue that indeed there is. Roughly, it is the idea that intentional actions can be rationally supported by one's thoughts but have no conceptual content. I call this the idea of Mere Movement.² I contend further that if the Given is a myth, then so too is its structural complement, Mere Movement. Roughly, it would be a myth because action can be rationally supported by thought only if it has conceptual content. I also argue that if John McDowell's way of avoiding the myth of the Given is satisfactory, there is a correlative way of avoiding the myth of Mere Movement. On that view, the intriguing result is that intentional action must have conceptual content.

In Sect. 2, in greater detail I explain what the Given is supposed to be, why one would be inclined to think of experience in that way, and why it nevertheless seems problematic. In Sect. 3, I make the analogy with intentional action, explaining what Mere Movement is supposed to be, why one would be inclined to think of action in that way, and why it too should seem problematic. In Sect. 4, I explain McDowell's proposal for avoiding the myth of the Given, and how a similar proposal can be made for the myth of Mere Movement. In Sect. 5, I close by identifying but not settling two questions provoked by the discussion up to that point.

2 The Myth of the Given

Here, I rehearse ideas about the Given that will be familiar to many readers. I do so because I believe that it anticipates the analogy that I intend to draw later in the paper. If the reader can do without a refresher on the idea of the Given, I ask that she proceed directly to §3, in which I develop the analogy.

2.1 What is the Given?

As I explained in the introduction, for my purposes here, the idea of the Given is the idea that perceptual experiences are capable of rationally supporting thoughts but lack conceptual content.

¹ Many people contend that there are different forms of the Given. See, for instance, deVries (2005), deVries and Triplett (2000) and Sellars (1956).

² 'The Myth of the Giving' is a suggestive phrase in this context, but it's too awkward. Also, Susan Hurley uses that expression to refer to a different idea, e.g. Hurley (1998, Chs.2, 7, 8). See also Rowlands (2006, Ch. 4).

One can arrive at that way of thinking about experience by thinking first about the rational credentials of empirical thoughts, like:

THAT IS ROUND.³
 THIS TOMATO IS ROUND.
 SOMETHING IS ROUND.
 MOST TOMATOES ARE ROUND.
 ALL TOMATOES ARE ROUND.
 MARK IS MALE.
 HALF OF ALL HUMANS ARE MALE.
 HALF OF ALL HUMANS HAVE A Y CHROMOSOME.

None of these thoughts is necessarily true; none is supportable by appeal to reason alone, whatever that would be. Some have better rational credentials than others. That is, a person can have better or worse reasons for believing these propositions. For instance, I have better reasons for thinking that Mark is male than I have for thinking that half of all humans are male.

What distinguishes well-credentialed empirical thoughts from not well-credentialed ones? How do thoughts get or have rational credentials?

On one attractive picture, some but not all empirical thoughts are legitimately inferable from other empirical thoughts. For instance, I may believe that something is round because I also believe that this tomato is round. In turn, some of those supporting thoughts themselves might be legitimately inferable from still other empirical thoughts. The thoughts with the best credentials should be those legitimately inferable from something that has its credentials directly, something that does not require inference or reasoning. Such a “something” would itself then have the most “original” credentials. Perceptual experience—or some special subset of it—seems well suited for this role.⁴ For instance, I have a visual experience of a round tomato and therefrom infer that this tomato is round. On this way of thinking, rational credentialing should begin with experience, and from there via reasoning be transmittable to one’s empirical thoughts.

This is a way to arrive at the idea that experiences are and must be able to rationally support empirical thoughts, given that some empirical thoughts have rational credentials.

This line of thinking also leads us to the idea that experiences must be different from empirical thoughts.⁵ Such thoughts get their rational credentials from elsewhere; they do not have such credentials directly. Something must have such credentials directly, which can in turn make such credentials available to thoughts. That is the job of experience. So, not only must experience provide some empirical thoughts with rational credentials, it must be essentially different from or independent of empirical thoughts, having its rational credentials directly.

³ I will use small capital letters to refer to thoughts.

⁴ Henceforth, I will talk simply of experiences, rather than perceptual experiences.

⁵ In McDowell’s explanation of the reasoning that leads one to appeal to the Given, he says that it seems like experience needs to be “outside” of or “external” to thought (1994, 5). More exactly, where I am using “thought”, he uses “conceptual”; thus, the idea would be that experience needs to be outside of or external to the conceptual.

In turn, it can seem that to be different from or independent of empirical thought in the relevant way, experience must not have the kind of content that empirical thoughts have, “conceptual content.” That is, it can seem that experiences must not be of or about something in the distinctive way that thoughts are of or about something.

What kind of content exactly do empirical thoughts have? What is conceptual content? So-called conceptual content is a much disputed topic.⁶ For our purposes at this stage of the discussion, some rough ideas should suffice. Conceptual content is the type of content exemplified in sentences of natural languages. For instance, ‘That is round’—or the proposition expressed by that sentence—has conceptual content; it does so because it applies a concept or category (being round) to something (whatever ‘That’ purports to pick out). Thus, very roughly, conceptual content is a kind of content in which concepts or categories are applied to things; put another way, it is a kind of content in which things are categorized or grouped.⁷

Now, why can it seem like experiences must lack that sort of content? The root idea is that if experiences were to have that sort of content, one would need to have some knowledge to comprehend that content. That is because grasping some conceptual content essentially requires having the relevant concepts. For instance, grasping what is expressed by ‘That is round’ requires having the concept of roundness. And grasping a concept requires having the relevant knowledge, such as knowledge of how roundness differs from other shapes. But if having experience requires having concepts, which in turn requires having knowledge, experience would depend on knowledge; experience would not be independent of knowledge.

Thus, one would arrive at the idea that experience must be able to rationally support thought, but not have conceptual content. Experience conceived of in that way is the Given.

2.2 Why is the Given a Myth?

Many people have contended that the Given is a “myth,” that experience cannot be capable of rationally supporting empirical thought and lack conceptual content.⁸ The basic reason? Something can rationally support thought only if it has conceptual content.

Why should we believe that?⁹

Suppose that my visual experience of a round tomato does not have conceptual content. Then, either my experience has no content at all, or it has only non-conceptual content. If it has no content at all, then it cannot be true or false (or

⁶ There is a large literature on conceptual and non-conceptual content. For some representative contributions to the discussion, see Evans (1982), Haugeland (1992/1998), Peacocke (1992), McDowell (1994, pp. 46–65, 162–174), Heck (2000), Speaks (2005), and Brewer (2005).

⁷ Thus, for me here, non-conceptual content corresponds with what Speaks calls “absolute non-conceptual content” and with what Heck calls “content nonconceptualism”.

⁸ Most prominently, Sellars (1956) and McDowell (1994).

⁹ This version of the case against the Given—against this version of the Given—derives primarily from the more comprehensive cases made in deVries (2005) and deVries and Triplett (2000), both of which purport to be clarifying Sellars’s original arguments.

accurate or inaccurate). Thus, it could not contradict any thought, such as the thought THAT IS NOT ROUND.¹⁰ But then that visual encounter makes no thought any more rationally appropriate than any other; there is no thought it precludes having. As a result, it cannot rationally support any thought. Thus, if experience does not have content, it cannot rationally support thought. Now, suppose instead that my visual encounter has non-conceptual content. What sort of content is that? That is a vexed question on which there is no consensus.¹¹ What matters here is that whatever it is, such content is not conceptual content, the kind of content expressible in sentences of natural languages. But if it is so fundamentally different from conceptual content that it could not preclude or contradict any thought, such as THAT IS NOT ROUND, then it also cannot rationally support the thought THAT IS ROUND. So—it appears—if experience does not have conceptual content, it cannot rationally support thought.

Thus, it appears that experience can rationally support thought only if it has conceptual content. The Given is a myth; there is no such thing.

3 The Myth of Mere Movement

I now want to explain how in thinking about intentional action, there is an idea analogous to the idea of the Given—the idea of Mere Movement—that is problematic for similar reasons.

3.1 What is Mere Movement?

One widely shared conception of the mind holds that the mind is a complex system with two basic interfaces with the world: experience and intentional action. Experience is where the mind is affected by the world; intentional action is where the world is affected by the mind. In an experience, when things go well, the mind takes up how things are in the world; it comes to reflect the world; in turn, this “reflection” or correspondence between world and mind can be transmitted with greater or lesser fidelity to other operations of the mind, thoughts, generically speaking. In intentional action, when things go well, the world takes up how things are in the mind; it comes to reflect the mind; in turn, this “reflection” or correspondence between mind and world can be transmitted with greater or lesser fidelity to further parts of the world.

¹⁰ In “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” McDowell rejects his earlier view (from *Mind and World*) that experiences have exactly the sort of content expressible in declarative sentences of natural language, so-called propositional content (258). Nevertheless, he maintains, experiences still have conceptual content (2009, 260). For a similar suggestion, see Kukla and Lance (2009).

¹¹ One common suggestion: nonconceptual content is exemplified by pictures. The trick is then to explain how that sort of content is essentially different from the content of, say, sentences of natural language. See, e.g., Haugeland (1992/1998). A different important proposal comes from Peacocke (1992): nonconceptual content is a “scenario,” consisting of an origin and orientation on axes.

Not everyone accepts this conception of the mind. I have mentioned it only because it invites the idea that in thinking about intentional action, there will be an idea analogous to the idea of the given.

In brief, the analog is this: intentional action must be rationally supportable by thought but have no conceptual content.¹² Although using a short label for this idea risks confusion, a label will ease exposition. Since a key part of this analogous idea is that an intentional action has no conceptual content and is in that sense *merely movement*, I will call the analog “the idea of Mere Movement.”¹³

The idea of Mere Movement is analogous to but not the same as the idea of the Given. The idea of the Given is the idea that experience must be capable of rationally supporting thought but lack conceptual content; the idea of Mere Movement is the idea that intentional action must be capable of being rationally supported by thought but lack conceptual content. Both concern thought’s rational relation to something without conceptual content. Yet they differ over the direction of that relation. While the idea of the Given is that something without content can rationally support thought, the idea of Mere Movement is that something without conceptual content can be rationally supported by thought.

Now, how does the idea of Mere Movement arise? Why might it seem compelling?

I believe that many contemporary philosophers find the basic idea attractive, even though many do not explicitly discuss or defend it. Indeed, the idea of Mere Movement can seem just obvious. It can seem just obvious that intentional actions can be rationally supported by an actor’s thoughts; and it can seem just obvious that intentional actions do not have content. Indeed, I suspect that for some, it would be nearly a category mistake to hold that intentional actions—apart from, say, intentional utterances—have content; for those philosophers, intentional actions just are not the sort of thing that have content.

In any case, we should like to know why the idea of Mere Movement can seem just obvious. What exactly makes it compelling?

Many contemporary scientists and philosophers, such as Donald Davidson, hold that intentional actions differ from mere behavior. For instance, shaving and getting dressed are normally intentional actions, while stumbling over a carpet, perspiring, and digesting are normally not intentional actions, but mere behaviors. What exactly distinguishes these things from one another? As Davidson puts it in “Agency”:
“What events in the life of a person reveal agency; what are his deeds and his

¹² Just as many contend that there are different versions of the Given, and I have focused on only one such version, so too there are probably different versions of the analog of the Given, and I am focusing on just one.

¹³ Sellars does not discuss the idea. See, e.g., Sellars (1963a, b, c, 1967, 1976). Moreover, recent commentators on Sellars who have recognized this idea have not developed it. See, for instance, McDowell (1994, pp. 89–90, 2010, 2011a, b), Brandom (1994, pp. 294–295), and Brandom (2000, pp. 31, 94–95). The idea is not discussed by deVries (2005) or O’Shea (2007). Earlier important comments on Sellars and action also do not discuss the issue, e.g., Aune (1975, 1978), and Castañeda (1975). The issue lurks but is not pursued in the recent debate between McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus (Scheer 2013).

doings in contrast to mere happenings in his history; what is the mark that distinguishes his actions?" (43).¹⁴

Davidson holds that actions differ from "mere happenings" because they are rationally supported and caused (in the right way) by certain mental events of the actor.¹⁵ For instance, Donald's shaving is an action because it is rationally supported and caused by Donald's desire to have a shaved face, and his belief that shaving will lead to a shaved face. By contrast, Donald's stumbling over a carpet is not normally an action because there is no belief and desire that rationally support and cause it.¹⁶

Davidson takes for granted that an action is explained by citing certain mental states of the actor, by displaying why the action seemed to make sense from the actor's point of view. Donald's shaving gets explained by saying what Donald thought about shaving. By contrast, we do not and cannot explain "mere happenings" in a similar way. We can't explain Donald's stumbling by saying what Donald thought prospectively about stumbling; very possibly he had no thought about it. In this way, Davidson holds that actions are the sort of thing for which the actor's own reasons can be ascertained, whereas "mere happenings" are not that sort of thing. Given that feature of action-explanations, Davidson finds it sensible to hold that actions can be rationally supported by the actor's thoughts.

Let me now connect this line of thinking with the idea that intentional actions must lack conceptual content, the other component of the Myth of Mere Movement. In theorizing about intentional action, we need to take account of the fact that sometimes we make mistakes; sometimes we fail to do what we meant to do. For example, while preparing dinner, Mark goes to pour wine in the pan, but pours it on the stove. What Mark intended (or desired, or planned, or attempted to do) did not happen, but something else instead. The happening—the pouring of wine on the stove—is a failure, a non-success. The other side of this coin is that some intentional actions succeed. Mark pours the wine, and it does indeed go in the pan, not on the stove. The general point is simply that intentional actions are open to a certain sort of error, a certain sort of evaluation. We evaluate each with respect to what was to be accomplished—whatever was "in the mind" of the actor. By contrast, non-intentional actions are not open to this same sort of error and evaluation. With such actions (or events), there is not something "to be accomplished" in the same sense. For instance, when Mark (or his body) sways modestly as he stands watching his son's spelling bee, this behavior is neither a success nor a failure in the specific sense that Mark need not have any thoughts, consciously or unconsciously, about swaying or not swaying.

In this way, then, it appears our intentional actions need to be independent of our thoughts. They need to be independent of the thoughts that rationally support and cause them. For instance, Mark's pouring must be independent of the thought that

¹⁴ See also Davidson (1980c, d). For many contemporary philosophers of action, this is *the* problem of action, to use Harry Frankfurt's expression (1978).

¹⁵ See, for instance Davidson (1980a, c, d).

¹⁶ In later work (1980d, 1985), Davidson no longer holds that the cause of an action is a belief-desire pair (as he does in 1980a), but holds instead that the cause is an intending, which results from the belief-desire pair.

gave rise to it, and which is “supposed” to rationally support it (e.g., his desire to put wine in the pan and his belief that pouring it this way will do so). What happens with Mark’s body and the world more generally must be “independent” of these thoughts in the sense that it must not be necessitated or guaranteed by Mark’s thoughts alone. Otherwise, there would be no room for failure; success would be guaranteed, which makes calling it ‘success’ gratuitous.

There is a further significant way in which intentional actions must be independent of one’s mind. We cannot simply decide that we are (will be, or have been) successful. For instance, as Mark starts pouring the wine, he cannot simply decide that he is or will be successful; he cannot simply make it the case that he is or will be successful. Indeed, no one else can do so either. Rather, it depends on how things go in the world. To put it provocatively, Mark’s success is for the world to decide. So, while intentional actions must be causally independent of the thoughts that rationally support and cause them, they must also occur outside the mind—not just the actor’s, but anyone’s. They must occur in the world. Combined with the assumption that the world outside the mind is meaningless (mere matter in motion), one is pushed to think that intentional actions have no meaning or content. Like a ripple on a lake or a falling leaf, the movements of Mark’s body as he pours the wine are meaningless events; they do not say or mean anything; they have no content.

Putting all of this together, we have a case for Mere Movement. In brief, it looks like this: intentional actions must be rationally supportable by thought if they are to be more than mere behavior; and they must not have conceptual content, if we are to make room for the possibility of failed intentional actions. That is one way a theorist of action could reasonably—even if only tacitly—accept the idea of Mere Movement.

To prime you for the case against Mere Movement, let me summarize the analogy between the Given and Mere Movement. The idea of the Given is the idea that experience can rationally support thought, but has no conceptual content. The idea of Mere Movement is the idea that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought, but has no conceptual content. The idea of the Given emerges when thinking about thought’s rational credentials; that is, it emerges when thinking about how some thoughts about the world have better justification than others. The idea of Mere Movement emerges when thinking about the difference between mere behaviors and intentional actions; it emerges when thinking about how we are rationally accountable for some things that happen with our bodies, but not others. We are led to the idea of the Given by thinking that experience must be somehow independent of thought, of any thought (e.g., an empirical judgment) that is to be measured by or assessed with reference to experience. We are led to the idea of Mere Movement by thinking that intentional action must also be somehow independent of thought, of the thought (e.g., a belief-desire pair, or an intention) that is to be in some way the measure of the action.

3.2 Why is Mere Movement a Myth?

The case against the Given suggests an analogous case against Mere Movement. The basic contention against the Given was this: experience cannot be capable of rationally supporting thoughts while lacking conceptual content. The main supporting claim was that something can rationally support thought only if it has conceptual content. Analogously, the basic contention against the idea of Mere Movement is this: intentional action cannot be rationally supportable by thought while lacking conceptual content. The main supporting claim will be that something can be rationally supportable by thought only if it has conceptual content.

Suppose that intentional action does not have conceptual content. For instance, suppose that Mark's pouring does not have conceptual content. Then, it cannot have the sort of content expressible in a sentence of natural language. Either it has no content at all, or it has non-conceptual content. If it has no content at all, then this pouring by Mark cannot contradict any thought, such as the thought I AM NOT POURING THE WINE or I WILL NOT POUR THE WINE. But then that action is made no more rationally appropriate by one thought rather than any other; there is no thought that the action precludes. Thus, it cannot be rationally supported by any thought. So, suppose instead it does have content, but only non-conceptual content. As I acknowledged earlier, the situation here is less clear, for there is no consensus on what non-conceptual content is. Analogically extending the argument we saw in Sect. 2.2, the key point is that the content of an intentional action would not be adequately expressible in a sentence of natural language. But then it becomes unclear how an intentional action could rationally follow from one's thoughts, which are essentially expressible in sentences of a natural language. Thus, it appears that if intentional action does not have conceptual content, it cannot be rationally supported by thought.

So, it appears that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought only if it has conceptual content. Intentional action cannot be rationally supported by thought if it lacks conceptual content. Mere Movement is a myth; there is no such thing.

I said previously that Mere Movement is only analogous to and not the same as the Given. Similarly, the case against Mere Movement is not the same as the case against the Given. The case against the Given centers on the claim that only something with conceptual content can rationally support thought. The case against Mere Movement centers on the claim that only something with conceptual content can be rationally supported by thought. Those are different claims. Neither implies the other. Thus, one could accept the case against the Given, but reject the case against Mere Movement, or vice versa.

Both cases rest on deeply contentious claims, and so it would be appropriate now to consider reservations. In the conclusion (Sect. 5), I will identify several compelling reservations. Right now, I want instead to consider how one might think about intentional action, if the case against Mere Movement is roughly sound.

4 Avoiding Both Myths

If Mere Movement is a myth, how should we think about intentional action? John McDowell has contended that that since the Given is a myth, and that we should accept that experience can rationally support thought, we should hold that experience has have conceptual content. That suggests a way to think about intentional action: because we should believe that it can be rationally supported by thought, it too must have conceptual content. In this part of the paper, I want first to sketch McDowell's argument about experience, and then to show how a similar argument can be made about intentional action.

4.1 Avoiding the Myth of the Given

The basic problem with the Given is that experience cannot both rationally support thought and lack conceptual content. So, we should consider abandoning either the idea that experience can rationally support thought, or the idea that experience has no conceptual content.

McDowell contends that we should not abandon the idea that experience can rationally support thought.

Why not?

It might seem tolerable to abandon the idea that experience can rationally support thought. Even if experience cannot do so, it could still cause one to have a thought. An experience of a round tomato in front of me could still cause me to think that there is a round tomato in front of me. In that way, one could continue thinking that one's thoughts are responses to reality. In *Mind and World*, McDowell calls this view "Coherentism"—treating Donald Davidson as a representative of it.¹⁷

It is important not to be misled about what Coherentism proposes. It might seem that Coherentism leaves room for a causal theory of justification by experience, one which holds roughly that an experience can rationally support a thought so long as that experience is an exercise of a reliable process, a process that reliably tracks some aspect of the environment. But that would be an illusion. Coherentism simply gives up the idea that experience can rationally support thought.

McDowell thinks Coherentism is wrong about the relationship between experience and thought. For instance, suppose that I have a visual experience as of a round tomato in front of me; subsequently, I think there is a round tomato in front of me. Coherentism allows that my experience can cause my belief, but it does not allow that what I believe can be rationally supported by what I experience, which seems implausible to McDowell. My experience of a round tomato supports my belief that there is a round tomato in front of me. For contrast, suppose instead that I believed that there was *not* a round tomato in front of me; all else being equal, my experience as of a round tomato in front of me would not rationally support that belief. That belief would be incompatible with my experience. In this way, Coherentism does not let experience itself impose any rational constraints on one's thinking.

¹⁷ (McDowell 1994, 14–18).

At best, Coherentism allows *thoughts* about experience to impose rational constraint on thoughts. For instance, the thought I JUST HAD A VISUAL EXPERIENCE OF A ROUND TOMATO IN FRONT OF ME could rationally support my thought THERE IS A ROUND TOMATO IN FRONT OF ME. In that case, it would be one thought that was rationally constraining another thought. McDowell thinks this is a problem because for thought to be genuinely rationally constrained, it must be constrained, at some point, by something other than itself. In particular, such constraint must come from encounters with the world, encounters with the very thing that empirical thoughts are about.¹⁸

So, McDowell holds that we should not abandon the idea that experience can rationally support thought. For him the other main option is to abandon the idea that experience does not have conceptual content.¹⁹ If we must accept that experience can rationally support thought, and the Given is a myth, then we should think that experience has conceptual content.

But can we abandon the claim that experience does not have conceptual content? In Sect. 2.1, we saw an argument for thinking that it cannot have conceptual content. So, we have a tension.

According to McDowell, the argument for thinking that experience must not have conceptual content does not work because it fails to distinguish acts of thinking from contents of thought.²⁰ Recall that the basic reason for thinking that experience must not have content is that experience needs to be different from or independent of thought; to genuinely constrain thought, it cannot be just one more thought. According to McDowell, however, experience needs to be independent only of *acts* of thinking; it does not need to be independent of *contents* of thought. So, experience does not need to lack conceptual content. (Indeed, if the Given is a myth, and experience can rationally support thoughts, then experience must have conceptual content.) More exactly, for experience to constrain thought, it is *experiencings*—occurrences of experiences—that must be independent of *thinkings*. In other words, experiences cannot be wholly within thought's control; one cannot just choose to have experiences—as if one could just elect to have visual evidence for something that one thinks. Although I do have some control of how my body, head and eyes are oriented, I do not have total control of the having of experiences; they just happen to me whether I like it or not; however I orient myself, I encounter the world as being some way or other. For McDowell, for experience to be a suitably independent constraint on thought, all that is necessary is that *experiencings* are suitably outside of one's control in this way.

¹⁸ He calls this “minimal empiricism,” “the idea that experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are” (1994, xii).

¹⁹ McDowell does mention another option: “bald naturalism” (1994, xviii–xxiii, 67, 76–77, 88–89). According to McDowell, bald naturalism abandons the idea that thought is “answerable” to the world in any normatively rich sense—it abandons “minimal empiricism”. In turn, it is not interested in trying to understand how thought is so answerable to the world. Bald naturalism differs from Coherentism, which accepts the idea that thought is answerable to the world, but holds that a merely causal relationship between experience and thought will afford such answerability.

²⁰ (McDowell 1994, 28).

Thus, McDowell holds that we should and can think that experience can rationally support thought and have conceptual content.

4.2 Avoiding the Myth of Mere Movement

I will now sketch a similar line of reasoning for intentional action.

The basic problem with Mere Movement was that intentional action cannot both lack conceptual content and be rationally supportable by thought. So, we should consider abandoning either the idea that it is so supportable, or the idea that it lacks conceptual content.

Following McDowell, a case can be made for hanging on to the idea that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought.

On the face of it, a view like Coherentism might seem tolerable. According to this view, although intentional action would not be rationally supportable by thought, it could nevertheless be caused by thought. The extending of my arm could be caused by my belief-desire-pair or intention to extend it. In this way, we could still hang on to the idea that some of our movements are responses to our thoughts.

But, as with Coherentism, it is important not to be misled about what this view proposes. It is not offering a causal theory of the justification of intentional action. For instance, it is not proposing that the extension of my arm is justified because it was caused by (or caused in the right way by) some belief-desire-pair or intention. Instead, it is simply denying that intentional action can be rationally supported by thoughts.

For that reason, this view can seem implausible. While it is true that some intentional actions are not in fact rationally supported by thought, it does seem that others are so supported. For instance, all else being equal, Mark's desire to have wine in the pan, and his belief that pouring it in will make it so rationally supports his pouring. But this view would deny that.

At best, like Coherentism, this view allows *thoughts* about intentional action—rather than intentional actions themselves—to be rationally supported by thoughts. For instance, the thoughts I WANT WINE TO BE IN THE PAN and I BELIEVE THAT POURING IT INTO THE PAN WILL MAKE IT SO can rationally support the thought I SHALL POUR WINE INTO THE PAN. In that case, thoughts rationally support a thought about an intentional action, but not the intentional action itself. The problem here is that intentional actions were to be the initial means by which any of our doings in the world had rational support. If they are not rationally supportable, then nothing that emanates from them is either. (Not my completing dinner, or feeding my family, or anything else.)

So, it appears we should keep the idea that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought. The other main option was to abandon the idea that intentional action does not have conceptual content. If we must accept that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought, and Mere Movement is a myth, then we should think that intentional action has conceptual content. Thus, we get the idea that intentional action can be rationally supported by thought and has conceptual content.

However, it might seem that we cannot accept that intentional action has conceptual content, since in Sect. 3 we were given a reason for thinking that it does not have it. Extending the ideas from McDowell summarized in Sect. 4.1, we can now try to undermine that argument.

The basic reason for thinking that intentional action does not have conceptual content was that we needed to allow for the possibility of mistakes or failures. Another way to understand that idea is that actions have to be independent of the thoughts which are their measure. The thought that gives rise to an action cannot by itself guarantee that the action is successful. However, we can clarify this requirement. Intentional actions need to be independent of acts of thinking, but they need not lack conceptual content. More exactly, for genuine mistakes or failures to be possible, intentional actions cannot be wholly within thought's control; one cannot just simply elect or choose to have some part of the world reflect one's mind—as if one could just elect to act successfully. Although I do have some control of how my body moves, I do not have total control over it, or over related worldly circumstances, such as gravity or strong breezes or the availability of a pan. When I act, some things remain beyond my control; my success relies on those things going well. That is the way in which actions should be independent of thought. So, we do not have to accept the previous argument for the claim that intentional actions must not have conceptual content.

4.3 “Intentional Actions Have Conceptual Content”

At least some readers will still not accept the claim that intentional actions have conceptual content. This might be because they are uncertain about what exactly that claim means. So far, I have suggested only that it means this much: intentional actions have the sort of content that thoughts do, the sort that is expressed in sentences of natural languages. In this penultimate section, drawing on a suggestion from McDowell, I will try to clarify the claim a bit further.

In a few recent essays, McDowell has focused on the content of intentions in action.²¹ Such intentions are to be distinguished from prior intentions, which are intentions for actions that we have yet to perform. For instance, I have the intention to cook dinner. I am not yet doing so. This is a prior intention because it occurs before the relevant action. An intention in action, by contrast, is an intention had in the course of doing the very thing for which one has that intention. For instance, when I commence cooking dinner tonight, as I cook, I will have the intention to cook dinner. An intention in action need not be preceded by or grow out of a relevant prior intention. I might commence cooking dinner without a prior intention to do so. Likewise, a prior intention need not precede or grow into a relevant intention in action. Although I now intend to cook dinner *later*, I might change my mind between now and then.

²¹ McDowell (2010, 2011a, b). In different ways, Levy (2013) and Valaris (2015) defend the more specific idea that intentional actions themselves are cognitive or mental. This idea resonates with various suggestions that minds are essentially embodied and enacted. Seminal work includes Varela et al. (1991), Haugeland (1995) and Clark and Chalmers (1998). For more recent discussion, see Clark (2008), Adams and Aizawa (2008), Menary (2010).

McDowell asks, “What is the content of an intention in action?” He discusses several forms of words that seem adequate for expressing such intentions, including:

I’ll do such-and-such.

I better do such-and-such.

It’d be a good thing for me to do such-and-such.

All things considered, it is desirable for me to do such-and-such.

McDowell contends that the content of an intention in action is “given by what one would say in expressing it” (2010, 417). According to him, “the proper form of expression... is ‘I am doing such-and-such’” (2010, 417). For instance, to express the intention I have in the course of cooking dinner, I would say, “I am cooking dinner.” According to McDowell, those words express the content of my intention in action.

Although McDowell is proposing a view about the content of intentions in action, I think his proposal can be reasonably applied to the contents of actions themselves. Thus: the content of an action is the content of the relevant intention in action. Put another way, the content of an intentional action is what one would say in saying what one is doing. For instance, the content of my action of cooking dinner would be expressed by saying “I am cooking dinner.” An onlooker could express it by saying “He is cooking dinner.” The general claim is that for each intentional action, there is an attendant content of this form. (Why might the intention and action have the same content? One tempting possibility: because the intention constitutes and does not merely cause the action; the intention helps make the action the thing that it is.)

Now, this is just one suggestion about how to articulate the claim that intentional actions have conceptual content. One might argue for a different way of conceiving of the content of intentional actions. I am not trying to settle the issue, but only to give some initial clarity to the broad idea.

With this clarification in place, an important question remains. Do intentional actions have conceptual content? We came to that suggestion in an attempt to avoid the alleged myth of Mere Movement, but perhaps something went awry in our earlier reasoning.

5 Conclusion

I began by explaining what the Given is supposed to be, why one would be inclined to think of experience in that way, and why it nevertheless seems problematic. I then explained that something similar is true for thinking about intentional actions; I explained what Mere Movement is, why one would be inclined to think of intentional action in that way, and why it too can seem problematic. I then explained McDowell’s proposal for avoiding the myth of the Given, and how a similar proposal can be made for avoiding the myth of Mere Movement.

In this concluding section, I will identify four challenges one might make to this line of thinking, revealing two important questions that should be answered before accepting that intentional actions have content.

First, one might challenge the initial case against the Given, and thereby the case against Mere Movement (to whatever extent the latter is analogous to the former). Second, one might dispute McDowell's proposal for avoiding the Given, and thereby the proposal for avoiding Mere Movement (again, to whatever extent the latter is analogous to the former). Third, independently of what one thinks about the case against the Given, one might dispute my claim that there is an analogous case against Mere Movement. Fourth, independently of one's stand on McDowell's proposal for avoiding the Given, one might dispute my analogical extension of that proposal.

The first two challenges can be helpfully grouped together. The arguments against the Given and in favor of McDowell's strategy for avoiding the Given depend on the claim that only something with conceptual content can rationally support thought. Analogously, the arguments against Mere Movement and in favor of the strategy for avoiding it depend on the claim that only something with conceptual content can be rationally supported by thought. While arguments were made for both of those claims, they are certainly not beyond dispute. One might simply want further clarification about what conceptual content and rational support are supposed to be. That is surely a reasonable request. It leads to the other pair of challenges.

They too can be helpfully grouped together. They both focus on my claim to find a (robust) analogy between thinking about perceptual experience and thinking about intentional action. The argument against Mere Movement, and the argument in favor of avoiding it depend on the idea that the rational support provided by experience to thought is similar to the rational support provided by thought to action. This contention is mostly an unsupported assumption. Furthermore, on the face of it, there is a reason to doubt that the two sorts of rational support are the same. The rational support that experience can provide to thought concerns something like evidence. Whatever sort of rational support thought can supply to action, it is not obviously evidentiary support.²² So, one might contend that while it might be true that something must have conceptual content to provide evidentiary support to thought, it does not necessarily follow that something must have conceptual content to be rationally supported by thought—in the way that actions are.

So, arising from these four challenges, we have two big questions. (1) Can only something with conceptual content stand in rational relations to thought? (2) Is the rational support supplied by experience to thought the same as the rational support supplied by thought to action?

If the answer to either question is “No,” then the arguments sketched here do not succeed, and actions might not have conceptual content. But if the answer to both questions is “Yes,” then we have reason to think that intentional actions have conceptual content, and that Mere Movement is a myth.²³

²² Robert Brandom says that “acting is making-true”, whereas thinking or believing is “taking-true” (2000, p. 158). In these terms, one might think that reasons for making-true are fundamentally different from reasons for taking-true.

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