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# WRIGHT *CONTRA* McDOWELL ON PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND SCEPTICISM

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**ABSTRACT.** One of the key debates in contemporary epistemology is that between Crispin Wright and John McDowell on the topic of radical scepticism. Whereas both of them endorse a form of epistemic internalism, the very different internalist conceptions of perceptual knowledge that they offer lead them to draw radically different conclusions when it comes to the sceptical problem. The aim of this paper is to maintain that McDowell's view, at least when suitably supplemented with further argumentation (argumentation that he may or may not agree with), can be shown to be a viable alternative to Wright's anti-sceptical proposal, one that retains the driving motivation behind Wright's proposal while avoiding one of its most fundamental problems. Wright's wholesale rejection of the McDowellian anti-sceptical strategy is thus premature.

**KEYWORDS:** Discrimination; Epistemic Externalism/Internalism Distinction; Epistemology; Reasons; Scepticism.

0. In a number of rightly influential articles, Crispin Wright (1985; 1991; 2000; 2002; 2003*a*; 2003*b*; 2004*a*; 2004*b*; 2004*c*) has argued for a distinctive epistemological proposal, one that has implications, amongst other things, for the perennial debate regarding scepticism. The purpose of this essay is to cast light on one issue raised by Wright's work in this respect which I think is particularly significant. This issue is the status of the very different approach to scepticism sketched—for it is merely *sketched*—by John McDowell (e.g., 1982; 1986; 1994; 1995; 2002*a*; *forthcoming*), and which Wright goes to great lengths to distance his own anti-sceptical strategy from.

1. Central to Wright's programme is a certain conception of what gives rise to the sceptical problem. In particular, Wright argues that the main sceptical arguments—both Humean and Cartesian—make use of what he calls a 'I-II-III' structure. Consider the following 'Moorean' anti-sceptical argument:<sup>1</sup>

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Type-I Proposition:   | It seems to <i>S</i> as if she has two hands.        |
| Type-II Proposition:  | <i>S</i> has two hands.                              |
| Type-III Proposition: | <i>S</i> is not a brain in a vat (BIV). <sup>2</sup> |

Notice that the type-I proposition in effect describes the evidential position that *S* is in, at least as Wright sees it (more on this below). Moreover, it is crucial that this evidence offers merely *prima facie* evidential support for belief in the type-II proposition, and certainly does not entail the truth of this proposition. The type-III proposition, in contrast, is entailed by the type-II proposition. The sceptical problem is made vivid, according to Wright, once one notices that the *prima facie* evidence that *S* has for believing the type-II proposition—encapsulated in the type-I proposition—is only *ultima facie* good evidence in this regard provided that *S* already has independent grounds for believing that she is not a BIV. After all, that it seems to *S* as if she has two hands is only good reason for believing that she actually does have two hands provided that she can reasonably treat the way the world seems to be as a guide to how the world is. If the BIV hypothesis is true, however, then the way the world seems is no guide at all as to how the world is, and hence the inference to belief in the type-III proposition is illegitimate if it is undertaken merely on this basis.

The sceptical crux of the matter is that the required independent grounds are not to be had and that, furthermore, there is no other route to knowledge of the type-III proposition than via this I-II-III inferential route. Moreover, the import of putting this point in terms of a schematic I-II-III structure is to highlight that this problem is not peculiar to this case, but arises for any argument which has the same relevant features. If all this is correct then scepticism seems to quickly follow, since our knowledge of both type-II and type-III propositions is now called into question.

One way of disputing the sceptical reasoning here is to reject the (restricted form of) evidentialism in play. That is, it is taken as given in the sceptic's reasoning that if the type-II and type-III propositions are to be known at all, then they are known in virtue of the agent's possession of appropriate supporting evidence. One might find this thesis independently questionable, however, especially since it is certainly contentious to suppose that *all*

empirical knowledge is evidentially grounded.

In effect, this is the route that Wright takes, though he does not put the point in quite these terms. He argues that we need to allow that some epistemic support—“warrant”, as he calls it—can be possessed even in the absence of supporting evidence. In particular, he argues that the special ‘framework’ role that type-III propositions play—such that they need to be known in order for much of our knowledge to be possible, and yet there is no adequate way of providing inferential epistemic support for belief in such propositions—enjoins us to treat them as having a special epistemic status such that the epistemic support they enjoy is default and thereby non-evidential—“unearned” as Wright terms it.<sup>3</sup>

By allowing that our beliefs in type-III propositions are epistemically unsupported in this way, Wright is making a large concession to the sceptic. Nevertheless, his argument is that such a concession is essential to any response to the sceptical problem and thus that we must learn to live with it, where this means learning to work around some of the problems that it generates. I will here briefly describe two of these problems in order to provide a flavour of the difficulties facing the view.

For example, notice that for Wright’s anti-sceptical strategy to work it is essential that the unearned ‘warrant’ in question be genuinely knowledge-supporting, since if it amounts to less than this then this will allow the sceptical problem to re-emerge. In order to see this, we just need to note the plausibility of the closure principle for knowledge which for our purposes can be formulated as follows:

*Closure for Knowledge*

If *S* knows *p* and *S* competently deduces *q* from *p*, thereby coming to believe *q* on this basis while retaining her knowledge of *p*, then *S* knows *q*.<sup>4</sup>

With closure in play, provided that we agree with the sceptic that we are unable to know the target type-III proposition then it follows—at least given that the competent deduction in question is not in doubt, as I take it isn’t—that we are unable to know the type-II proposition as well, and that is tantamount to scepticism. Simply using the ‘unearned warrant’ strategy to rescue a positive epistemic standing as regards belief in the type-III proposition that falls short of knowledge will do nothing to mitigate scepticism of this sort. The problem, however, is that since it is essential to Wright’s proposal that one lacks any good reason for supposing that the type-III proposition is true, it is far from obvious how it could be that the unearned

warrant that one has for belief in this proposition could ever be robust enough to be knowledge-supporting.

Moreover, it is also important to the strategy that the unearned warrant is of a sort that could legitimately support *belief* in the type-III proposition, rather than some distinct propositional attitude like acceptance. After all, if knowledge entails belief, as many suppose,<sup>5</sup> then it follows that if one may not legitimately believe the target proposition then one cannot know it, and the closure-based scepticism just canvassed will then immediately resurface. The problem, however—as Wright (e.g., 2004c, §2) recognises—is that the strategy in question does not obviously license belief in the type-III proposition since it is part and parcel of the strategy to allow that one has no good reason for thinking that this proposition is true. But given the truth-directed nature of belief, it is hard then to see how a rational agent could legitimately believe—as opposed to merely accept, say—a type-III proposition on this basis.

Perhaps these problems, and others like them, can be surmounted. It is certainly true that Wright has some compelling things to say about these issues. What I am interested in for the purposes of this paper, however, is whether an epistemic internalist like Wright needs to make this concession to the sceptic in the first place, for if this concession can be avoided then that would surely be a preferable way of dealing with the sceptical problem. This is where the debate between Wright and McDowell becomes salient, for McDowell explicitly offers an anti-sceptical conception of perceptual knowledge which, while also being epistemically internalist, does not make this key concession to the sceptic. Wright has argued that McDowell's strategy is incoherent. I will argue that it is far more plausible than Wright supposes.

2. McDowell's approach to scepticism is meant to explicitly disallow the possibility of such a I-II-III argument for scepticism ever getting off the blocks. The reason for this is that McDowell claims that at least in paradigm cases in which one has perceptual knowledge the rational support that one's belief in the target proposition enjoys is *factive*—i.e., it entails the target proposition. For example, McDowell claims that in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge one's rational support for one's belief in the target proposition, *p*, is that one *sees that p* is the case, where seeing that *p* entails *p*.

What is significant about this conception of factive rational support is that it enables one's belief in the relevant type-II proposition—in the case under consideration, that one has two hands—to enjoy an epistemic support which, unlike the support offered by the relevant type-I proposition (that it seems to one as if one has two hands) entails the target proposition. Accordingly, the epistemic standing of one's belief in the type-II proposition is not hostage to one's lack of independent grounds for believing the type-III proposition, and hence the I-II-III sceptical problem is unable to get a grip.

There is thus no need for McDowell to make the kind of concession to the sceptic that we saw Wright making above in the light of the challenge posed by the I-II-III argument. Moreover, it is not as if McDowell evades this problem by opting for a form of epistemic externalism.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, central to his proposal is a thorough-going commitment to epistemic internalism: by McDowell's lights, the rational support one has for one's belief is by its nature reflectively accessible.<sup>7,8</sup>

3. There are a number of features of this view that are contentious. To begin with we need to notice that agents are only in a position to possess factive epistemic support of this sort for their beliefs in epistemically friendly environments. In contrast, in epistemically unfriendly environments—where, say, there is undetectable deception taking place—even if the agent happens to form a true belief via her perceptual faculties, she will still not thereby acquire factive epistemic support of the relevant kind. Instead, the epistemic support that her belief enjoys will be of a type-I sort, in that she will only *seem to see* that *p*, an epistemic standing which is clearly not factive. In short, then, seeing that *p* is epistemic in the sense that it puts one in a position to know such that environments which would by their nature frustrate such knowledge are thereby environments in which one is unable to see that *p*.<sup>9</sup>

Call an epistemically friendly environment 'the good case', and call an epistemically unfriendly environment 'the bad case'. According to McDowell, in the good case the epistemic support one's belief enjoys can be factive and yet in the corresponding bad case (i.e., the environment is no longer epistemically friendly but everything else about it stays the same) the epistemic support one's belief enjoys is non-factive. The reason why this is thought controversial is that every party to this debate—including McDowell—grants that the good and the bad cases may well be indistinguishable to the agent. The worry, then, concerns how

the type of reflectively accessible rational support that one's belief enjoys on the McDowellian picture can nevertheless be contingent on factors obtaining (i.e., whether or not one is in the good case) which one is not in a position to determine have obtained. In short, the concern is that epistemic internalism is incompatible with such a conception of factive epistemic support, and thus that if one wishes to endorse epistemic internalism then one is obliged to opt for a much weaker conception of epistemic support, one which is more in keeping with that offered by Wright.

Indeed, Wright (e.g., 2002, §10) takes this line with McDowell himself. He argues that since even McDowell grants that one cannot tell the difference between the good case and the bad case it follows that the only rational support for one's belief that is reflectively accessible to one is that *either* one is in the good case and in possession of factive reason in support of one's belief *or* one is in the bad case and so being undetectably deceived. Epistemic support of this disjunctive variety is, however, non-factive, and thus McDowell is unable to block the I-II-III argument by appeal to the distinctive epistemic support that one has for one's perceptual beliefs in good cases.

I take it that we can re-cast the argument that is implicitly in play here as follows:

- (1) In the bad case, the reflectively accessible epistemic support one's belief enjoys is non-factive.
- (2) One cannot tell the difference between the good case and the bad case.
- (C) In the good case, the reflectively accessible epistemic support one's belief enjoys is non-factive.

That is, given that one cannot tell the difference between the good and the bad case, it follows that the reflectively accessible epistemic support one's belief enjoys can be no better than it would be in the bad case, even if one is in fact in the good case.

It is precisely this line of reasoning that McDowell rejects, however, since he explicitly argues that we should not allow one's epistemic standing in the bad case to determine one's epistemic standing in the good case. Indeed, McDowell is quite explicit that because in the good case the epistemic standing of one's belief can involve the possession of reflectively accessible factive grounds this epistemic support is *not* dependent upon any further inaccessible factors at all. That is, once one is in possession of such epistemic support for one's belief then there is no gap between epistemic support and fact at all, and thus there is no fissure between epistemic support and fact that would need to be 'bridged' by further

epistemic support. Furthermore, McDowell argues that it is the collective failure amongst contemporary epistemologists to recognise that (1) and (2) fails to entail (C) that has led them to succumb to the sceptical problematic in the first place, at least where the sceptical argument is amenable to a I-II-III characterisation.

What we have here is, I think, a fundamental clash of intuition. On the one side, there are those like Wright who hold that McDowell is guilty of an obvious philosophical error; on the other side there is McDowell insisting that no error has been made and (presumably) regarding himself as being read unsympathetically. In order to adjudicate this debate it is necessary to dig a little deeper regarding the putative problems facing McDowell's view. There is an excellent rationale for taking the trouble to explore a position that McDowell himself offers so little argumentative support for. This is that if the McDowellian proposal could be made palatable then it would constitute the *holy grail* of epistemology, in that it is offering a *bona fide* internalist conception of knowledge which is able to nonetheless allow that the rational support that one's belief enjoys can be genuinely truth-connected and thus sceptic-proof. This is a bewitching combination of theses, and certainly a proposal that is worth exploring further. Moreover, for our purposes it is also worth noting that many—including Wright—would surely accept that if McDowell's view were viable, then it would constitute a direct and elegant response to the problem of scepticism, a response that would, indeed, avoid many of the problems facing Wright's own anti-sceptical proposal precisely because it does not make the concession to the sceptic that we saw Wright making above.

4. I take it that one key worry which underlies the charge that McDowell's epistemic internalism is incompatible with his account of factive epistemic support is that the view is subject to a 'McKinsey'-style problem. In standard McKinsey-style arguments an agent has reflective access to the wide contents of her thoughts and then, via her *a priori* knowledge of some suitable form of content externalism, she is able to competently deduce that a certain empirical proposition (previously unknown) is true. In this way the agent comes to acquire knowledge of an empirical proposition via a completely non-empirical route, and therein lies the puzzle, since it seems that empirical knowledge cannot be acquired in this way.<sup>10</sup>

A similar sort of problem may be thought to beset McDowell's proposal. After all, if



one has reflective access to the factive reason one possesses in support of one's perceptual belief, and one also knows—*a priori*, presumably—that one is only able to possess factive epistemic support provided that one is in the good case, then surely one is able to competently deduce that one is in the good case. Moreover, the knowledge that results from this competent deduction will be of an empirical proposition and yet, nonetheless, seems to have been acquired in an entirely non-empirical fashion.

I think that it is, in part at least, a worry of this sort that prompts some commentators, such as Wright, to suppose that McDowell's proposal to allow reflectively accessible and yet factive support reasons cannot be taken at face-value. Significantly, however, although McDowell does not himself comment on—or even recognise—this problem, as it happens he does have the resources available to him to defuse this difficulty.

In order to see this, we need to note that what is worrying about McKinsey-style arguments is precisely the *acquisition* of non-empirical knowledge of an empirical proposition.<sup>11</sup> After all, while perhaps contentious, it is far from absurd to hold that one could come to know, by purely non-empirical means (by reflecting on the nature of one's empirical evidence, for example), that one has knowledge-supporting grounds in support of one's belief in a certain empirical proposition. Given that one already has empirical knowledge of the target proposition, however, such a reflective process would at best deliver non-empirical second-order knowledge that one has empirical first-order knowledge; it would not deliver the first-order empirical knowledge that is advertised for the McKinsey-style argument.

Crucially, however, it is at most only this weaker conclusion that McDowell's conception of perceptual knowledge generates. In short, the reason for this is that on McDowell's account of perceptual knowledge one is only able to undertake the competent deduction at issue in the relevant McKinsey-style reasoning provided one already has empirical knowledge of the target proposition, and thus there is no route via such reasoning to the acquisition of non-empirical knowledge of the target empirical proposition.

This is not because McDowell holds that there is no gap between being in possession of a factive reason in support of one's belief in an empirical proposition and knowing that proposition since on his view being in possession of the factive reason merely puts one in a position to know the target proposition; it does not guarantee knowledge of that proposition.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, McDowell does hold that being in possession of a factive reason and forming a belief in the target proposition on this basis *does* suffice for knowledge. Accordingly, given

that it is impossible to undertake the competent deduction in play in the McKinsey-style argument without forming a belief in the target proposition on the basis of the relevant factive reason, it follows that even if one is in possession of the factive reason while lacking empirical knowledge of the target proposition, one still cannot acquire non-empirical knowledge of the target proposition by undertaking the competent deduction in play in the McKinsey-style reasoning.<sup>13</sup>

5. A related worry that one might have regarding McDowell's internalist account of factive reasons is that although it might not be in any direct tension with the concession that agents cannot distinguish between good and bad cases, it can nevertheless be brought into tension with that concession by bringing the appropriate inference to bear. For suppose that one does indeed know that one has two hands in virtue of possessing a factive reason in support of this proposition. With one's knowledge so supported, there can hardly be anything wrong with one competently deducing, and thereby coming to know, that one is not a BIV. It seems, then, that one knows that one has two hands rather than that one is a (handless) BIV. But how can that be, given that all parties to this dispute agree that one is unable to tell the difference between the good case in which one is genuinely looking at one's hands, and the relevant bad case in which one is a BIV who merely seems to be looking at one's hands?

As one might expect, there is nothing in McDowell's writings which indicates how he would respond to this problem, but even so there do seem to be some plausible options available to him in this regard. In particular, it is far from obvious on closer inspection why possessing better grounds in favour of believing that one scenario obtains rather than another known to be incompatible scenario should entail that one thereby possesses the relevant discriminatory abilities to distinguish between the two scenarios. Moreover, as we will now see, this point is independent of any claim about factive reasons.

Imagine, for example, that one is a reasonably sophisticated individual with normal background beliefs and cognitive powers. Now suppose that one sees what appears to be a zebra in the zebra enclosure at the zoo, and so forms the belief that one is looking at a zebra. Given one's background beliefs, doesn't one have better reason for thinking that one is looking at a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule? After all, in possessing these background beliefs one is aware of a number of epistemically relevant considerations, such as

the low likelihood of such a deception occurring, the penalties involved were one to be caught undertaking such a deception, the likelihood that such a deception would be found out, and so on. These considerations, when coupled with one's perceptual evidence for believing that one is faced with a zebra—even when that evidence is construed non-factively—surely supply one with better reason for believing the target proposition over the specified error-possibility. Nevertheless, this is entirely consistent with one lacking the relevant discriminative abilities—*viz.*, the ability to discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules.<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as one is willing to grant that one might have better reason to believe that one scenario obtains rather than a known to be incompatible scenario even while lacking the relevant discriminatory abilities, then one ought not to find the McDowellian picture of perceptual knowledge in this respect all that puzzling. In the good case, one has grounds which decisively favour one's belief in the target proposition over belief in the alternative sceptical hypothesis even though one is unable to tell the difference between being in the good case and being in the corresponding sceptical bad case. But given the distinction just drawn, there is nothing inherently mysterious about that.

6. This distinction between what we might term 'favouring' as opposed to 'discriminating' epistemic support is vital when it comes to applying McDowell's account of perceptual knowledge to the sceptical problem. On the standard account of type-III propositions, it is held that one has no good reflectively accessible grounds in favour of believing them at all, and thus any claim to the contrary—such as McDowell's—looks immediately suspect. But McDowell does have a plausible story to tell regarding how such grounds could be possessed, at least provided that the distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support is in place. For while it is certainly true that there are no reflectively accessible *discriminating* reasons available in support of one's beliefs in type-III propositions—i.e., reasons for thinking that one can undertake the relevant discrimination between the non-sceptical and the corresponding sceptical scenario—it does not follow on this view that there are not adequate reflectively accessible *favouring* reasons available.

Moreover, according to McDowell, in the good case such favouring reasons could

well be factive—such that they *entail* the falsity of the relevant sceptical hypotheses. If this is right, then it is hard to see why they should not suffice to support the relevant anti-sceptical knowledge. Since Wright does not recognise that this dialectical option is available to McDowell, he is too quick to suppose, *contra* McDowell, that the only relevant reflectively accessible grounds available to the subject must be non-factive grounds.<sup>15</sup>

7. Furthermore, this distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support is essential to understanding why the argument from (1) and (2) to (C) outlined above fails to go through by McDowellian lights. True to form, McDowell in effect simply denies the intuitions in play here and proffers an alternative picture of perceptual knowledge in support of his opposing viewpoint. It would obviously be better, however, if one could deal with the intuitions that motivate this argument head-on.

This is just what the distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support allows us to do, since we can now see that there is an equivocation in the argument. Whereas (1) and (C) are simply talking about epistemic support *simpliciter*, (2) is clearly referring to specifically discriminatory epistemic support. Accepting (1) and (2) is therefore compatible with holding that one lacks reflectively accessible *discriminatory* epistemic support in the good case, something that McDowell would not dispute. Crucially, however, it does not commit one to holding that one lacks *favouring* epistemic support in the good case, including favouring epistemic support which is factive.

8. A final worry that one might have about the McDowellian strategy concerns whether or not it is permissible by the lights of this view to explicitly argue for anti-sceptical knowledge by appeal to factive reasons, and thereby claim knowledge in the denials of sceptical hypotheses as a result. Wright is, I think, rightly suspicious of this apparent consequence of the McDowellian strategy (see, e.g., Wright *forthcoming*, §5). After all, arguing for anti-sceptical knowledge on this basis does seem illegitimate. Moreover, claims to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses always jar on the ear. The problem for McDowell, however, is to explain why such apparent dialectical illegitimacy and conversational impropriety exists, since surely the factive reasons in play ought to be more than enough to ensure that this is not

the case.

Indeed, McDowell seems to be at least implicitly aware of this problem, even though he does not engage with it head-on, for he is clearly reluctant to actually draw the relevant anti-sceptical implication of his view himself, even though he argues that his account of perceptual knowledge does suffice to deal with the sceptical problem.<sup>16</sup> This is not a satisfactory situation, however, for some account is needed of why, on this view, drawing such conclusions is seemingly both dialectically illegitimate and conversationally improper.

Perhaps, though, there is an explanation at hand here which is consistent with the McDowellian account of perceptual knowledge. Indeed, the explanation seems to also fit very neatly with the distinction just drawn between favouring and discriminatory epistemic support. Let us take the conversational impropriety of the anti-sceptical assertions first.

In claiming to know a proposition one typically at least (if not universally) represents oneself as possessing adequate and relevant evidence in favour of that assertion. Moreover, when it comes to claims to know which concern the denials of error-possibilities—such as ‘I know that I am not a BIV’—then the evidence in question is almost always evidence which would indicate that you could make the relevant discriminations.

To see this, imagine that one were to hear someone claim, without qualification, that they know that the zebra-shaped object over there is not a cleverly disguised mule. Wouldn't you take them to be representing themselves as being able to offer supporting grounds for their assertion which would show that they are able to discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules (e.g., that they have special training, or have made special checks)? If this is right, then we should expect the same to apply when it comes to claims to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, in that in making such an assertion one represents oneself as being able to offer grounds which would indicate that one could discriminate between, say, having two hands and being envatted and merely seeming to have two hands. The problem, however, is that such grounds are not available, by anyone's lights, and thus assertions of this sort are by their nature problematic (unlike the corresponding ‘cleverly disguised mule’ assertions).<sup>17</sup> Thus, the distinction drawn above between favouring and discriminatory epistemic support can again work in McDowell's favour.

9. This still leaves the apparent illegitimacy of drawing the anti-sceptical conclusion. Notice,

however, that an argument can be perfectly good—in the sense that it leads one to new knowledge—while nevertheless being dialectically ineffective. The paradigm case of this, as Wright (e.g., 2002, §2) notes, is that of question-begging arguments. One type of question-begging argument is where one groundlessly assumes, in one's premises, a claim that one's dialectic opponent will not accept. Accordingly, the conclusion that one draws from those premises will inevitably be dialectically impotent even if, provided the premises are known and the deduction competent, the agent will come to know the conclusion through this reasoning. Question-begging of this sort is certainly a vice. Is it, however, a vice that McDowell succumbs to?

Given the limited argumentative support that McDowell offers in favour of his view, it is fair to charge him with this dialectical vice. Notice, however, that we can distinguish in this regard between McDowell's own writings on this topic and the *McDowellian* response to scepticism, where the latter includes the additional argumentation offered here (argumentation that McDowell doesn't give). With this additional argumentation in play, it is far from obvious that any specifically dialectical vice is being displayed.

10. In short, then, my claim is that Wright has not given McDowell's strategy a proper run for its money and that, once we add the further theses to McDowell's view that I have described here, there are grounds for supposing that his strategy is at least viable (which is not of course to say that it is right). Furthermore, McDowell's proposal is able to avoid the key concession to the sceptic that Wright makes, and which creates so many problems for his view, even whilst staying within the confines of a thorough-going epistemic internalism. There is thus far more to commend the McDowellian anti-sceptical strategy than Wright supposes.

It is crucial to remember, however, that McDowell himself never explicitly offers this further supporting argument, and rests content instead to offer his view in a broadly quietistic manner (as if simply outlining the main contours of the position would suffice for his audience to recognise its truth, and thereby exit the fly-bottle of scepticism). Perhaps there are some philosophical issues that are best approached in this manner, but scepticism is not one of them, and Wright does us all a service by ensuring that McDowell is further pressed on this score. Moreover, by approaching this issue in this way McDowell has unintentionally

managed to sabotage interest in the style of anti-scepticism that he recommends. Since, as we have seen here, his proposal is in fact far more plausible than it first appears, this is a most unfortunate result.<sup>18,19</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is not actually an argument that Moore himself ever offered, of course, but it does bear certain structural analogies to the famous anti-sceptical offered by Moore (1939).

<sup>2</sup> Following Moore (1939), Wright and McDowell typically focus in this regard not on the denial of a sceptical hypothesis but on the thesis that there is an external world (although this is itself in effect the denial of the sceptical hypothesis that there is no external world). While the distinction is, of course, philosophically important, for our purposes the denial of any radical sceptical hypothesis will do and since the BIV hypothesis—suitably understood, at any rate—does not raise the same sort of metaphysical issues as the hypothesis that there is no external world, we will confine our attention to this error-possibility.

<sup>3</sup> Wright sees a precursor to this approach in Wittgenstein’s (1969) famous remarks on “hinge propositions”. Personally, I have my doubts whether it is wise to read the Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical strategy in this way, but I will not expand on this issue here. For further critical discussion of Wright’s construal of hinge propositions, see Pritchard (2005; *forthcoming*) and Williams (*forthcoming*).



<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, the standard Williamson-Hawthorne way of defining single-premise closure for knowledge. See Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Even those, like Williamson (2000), who argue that knowledge cannot be analysed into belief plus some further condition(s). See Williamson (2000, 202).

<sup>6</sup> This is, for example, effectively how Williamson (2000, ch. 8) avoids the problem. Like McDowell, he argues that the epistemic support one's belief enjoys can be factive; unlike McDowell, he lodges this conception of factive epistemic support within an externalist epistemology.

<sup>7</sup> For textual support for the thesis that McDowell endorses a form of epistemic internalism, see Neta & Pritchard (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Notice that I have here described McDowell's view in exclusively epistemological terms. This is important because often he is read—especially by Wright (e.g., *forthcoming*)—as primarily offering a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of perceptual experience. While it is true that there is a live 'disjunctivist' metaphysical proposal of this sort in the literature which is inspired (in part at least) by McDowell's writings on perceptual knowledge—see, for example, Martin (e.g., 2003; 2004)—the role, if any, that this metaphysical thesis plays in McDowell's response to scepticism is far from clear. Indeed, as I note elsewhere—see, e.g., Pritchard (*forthcomingb*)—the corresponding metaphysical thesis seems largely inessential to McDowell's view in this regard. Accordingly, in what follows I will treat McDowell's disjunctivist view as primarily an epistemological thesis.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, notice that on this view one can see an object without that putting one in a position to know. For example, suppose that I am in the famous 'barn façade county' in which almost every barn-shaped object is in fact an undetectable fake. Even if I happen to look at the one real barn in that environment, I cannot come to know that what I see is a barn and, relatedly, I cannot *see that* there is a barn before me. Nevertheless, I do see a barn.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on McKinsey-style arguments is now vast. For an excellent collection of articles on this topic, see Nuccetelli (2003).

<sup>11</sup> More precisely, it is the acquisition of non-empirical knowledge of an empirical proposition which makes a very specific empirical claim. After all, it is telling that transcendental arguments are not usually charged as succumbing to the McKinsey problem (though they are controversial in other respects of course).

<sup>12</sup> Stroud (2002) reads McDowell as offering the view that if one sees that *p* then one knows that *p*. See McDowell (2002b) for a rejection of this reading.

<sup>13</sup> See Neta & Pritchard (2007) for the full argument.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this distinction and its epistemological ramifications, see Pritchard (2007).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Wright (2002, §10) where he moves quickly from the claim that the sceptical scenario is "subjectively indistinguishable" from the corresponding non-sceptical scenario—i.e., the agent lacks the relevant discriminatory abilities—to the claim that the rational support for the agent's belief in the type-II proposition—and hence, ultimately, the type-III proposition as well—is properly encapsulated in the non-factive evidence at issue in the type-I proposition.

<sup>16</sup> As McDowell (1995, 888) writes at one point, his anti-sceptical proposal is "not well cast as an answer to skeptical challenges; it is more like a justification of a refusal to bother with them".

<sup>17</sup> It is not as if one can simply cancel the relevant implicature either, since what would possibly motivate an assertion like 'I know that I am not a BIV, but I can't distinguish normal experiences from BIV-generated experiences'? In the right circumstances such an assertion would be true, non-misleading, and supported by appropriate evidence. Since it would not respond to any particular conversational move, however, it would also be pointless and thus at least to this extent incoherent (like saying 'good morning' in the middle of a conversation (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, §464)).

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of my reading of the McDowellian account of perceptual knowledge and its application to the sceptical problem, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Jesper Kallestrup and Sven Rosenkranz for feedback on an earlier version of this paper.