Illusory appearances: why we should not be representationalists and why it matters

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Abstract: It is quite natural to think of perception as providing us with inner representations of the world - in cognitive science, namely, talk of representations and computation of representations in agents often goes without further reflection. Yet according to many philosophers such representationalism proves to be quite an untenable philosophical view of perception (Byrne & Logue 2009). Although in 20th century analytic philosophy an antirepresentationalist approach to perception can be retraced to people such as L. Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953) and J. L. Austin (Austin 1962) the issue has become central in analytic philosophy in the last fifteen to twenty years, through the works of influential philosophers such as John McDowell and M. G. F. Martin, under the name of ‘disjunctivism’. In this talk I will consider disjunctivism from a historical point of view: more specifically I want to make clear why McDowell’s 1982 article Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge (McDowell 1982), which prima facie deals with epistemological issues regarding evidence in the context of the problem of other minds, should be regarded as a ‘founding text’ of disjunctivism in the philosophy of perception.

1. I want to dedicate this talk, which will be about antirepresentationalism in the philosophy of perception, to Hilary Putnam; his readings of history of philosophy in the 20th century have guided and inspired it. Putnam’s work itself is extremely important for the way thought-world relations are dealt with in contemporary philosophy and questions regarding thought-world relations are bound to come up in this conference, as the work of people such as Spinoza or Damasio is discussed. Putnam, whose work from the 90s Instituto Piaget has translated into Portuguese, is a very central reference in contemporary philosophy of mind and language. He is also someone who has not stepped back from radically changing his own views to the point of becoming a critique of some mainstream positions in these fields, positions which he himself had helped formulate (such as functionalism, as it became associated with the representational-computational view of the mind, for instance in the work of this student Jerry Fodor). What makes Putnam important for my talk today is the fact that having started out as a philosopher of science, interested in logic, mathematics and physics, having done very important work in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, he gradually became more interested in perception. There was a time, as he himself admits, when perception did not

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1 This work was done in the context of project The Bounds of Judgement, which is taking place in the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Porto as part of the research agenda of MLAG (Mind, Language, Action Group, cf. O Blogue do MLAG – Filosofia contemporânea no Porto, mlagflup.wordpress.com). An early version of the paper was given at the annual meeting of the Episteme Group at the University of Santiago de Compostela (June 2009).

seem to him to be a particularly important topic in philosophy. Coming to believe otherwise made him look closer upon the history of philosophy, and made him look in different ways (two noticeable differences in recent Putnam being his ‘reconciliation’ with Wittgenstein and his discovery of Austin\(^3\)). It also had an impact on his lifelong interest in the issue of realism. So what I will do here today is in fact no more than following Putnam’s rediscovery of the origins of so called ‘disjunctivism’ in 20th century philosophy of perception, with the hope that it might prove illuminating, both for thinking about perception and for thinking about the history of 20th century philosophy. ‘Disjunctivism’ is admittedly a strange word, it is anyway under that heading that a critique of representacionalism, of qualia, and a return of direct realism is currently being discussed in some quarters of analytic philosophy.

Here goes the story then, as I said inspired by Putnam and centering on John McDowell, one of the most important English-speaking philosophers today. I would like each one of us to ask himself or herself the following question: why is the idea that representations are occuring inside our heads when we are visually perceiving the world quite untenable, if it seems so natural? Isn’t that the way so many people, namely in cognitive science, think about the mind? In trying to come to terms with this question I propose that we concentrate efforts on a particular piece in the history of recent philosophy, J. McDowell’s 1982 article *Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge*\(^4\). I suggest that we try to understand why this particular article was selected by A. Byrne and H. Logue for their recent collection on disjunctivism – disjunctivism is supposed to be an approach to perception, and the article does not even deal with perception but rather with the epistemology of evidence, focusing on questions regarding ‘criteria’ and ‘defeaters’, and on the problem of other minds\(^5\).

The answer will have to do with an early articulation of disjunctivism as antirepresentationalism, in which McDowell spells out several things that may be going wrong when we identify what we call ‘mental’ with representations inside our heads. The representacionalist approach to perception associated with the minds-inside-the-heads view appears in the title of this talk as ‘illusory appearances’ and throughout the talk I will be speaking about ways of misconceiving the nature of illusion and deception. Disjunctivists share an intent to deconstruct a certain way of thinking about illusory appearances, the very way which allows us to conceive, for instance, of a world put together by a cartesian Evil Genius, a world which appears to us to be completely different from what it really is, or a Matrix world, where things appear to us a certain way and we are radically wrong about how

\(^3\) Putnam considers Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962) the ‘most powerful defense of natural realism in the history philosophy’ (Putnam 1999, p. 11). ‘Natural realism’ is Putnam’s own preferred term.

\(^4\) J. McDowell is, according to Alex Byrne and Heather Logue, the editors of a 2009 anthology on disjunctivism (Byrne and Logue 2009), ‘one of the members of the trinity of senior disjunctivists’, the other two being Paul Snowdon and J. M. Hinton (Introduction, p. xiv).

\(^5\) The problem being ‘How do I know that there are other minds?’.
they really are. Anybody familiar with introduction to epistemology courses will be familiar with such examples: in fact I must say that what I will do here will go directly against an initial moment, in my own introduction to epistemology courses, when I try to make people feel the appeal of global skepticism about the external world. What if everything which appears to be a certain way, everything we see and feel and think, were an illusion? This seems to be plainly possible, very easy to conceive, and it is not at all hard to make people feel such appeal – yet disjunctivism helps point out some problems there.


What is McDowell’s 1982 article *Criteria, Defeasability and Knowledge* (CDK) about? At first sight, what we find there is an epistemological discussion about evidence, centering on so called ‘criteria’, more specifically on the defeasibility of knowledge claims supported by criterial warrants (Ex: I know he is in pain by seeing him grimacing and twisting). We are confronted with a distinction between two kinds of evidence, “criteria” (whose status as evidence is a matter of convention or grammar) and “symptoms” (whose status as evidence is not a matter of convention or grammar but rather of empirical theory). Defeasibility (in Portuguese ‘revogabilidade’) that is, the epistemic liability or vulnerability of knowledge claims, their liability to loose their epistemic status, is different for claims warranted by symptoms than it is for claims warranted by criteria. What is at stake anyway is ‘ways of telling how things are’ whether these ways are based on criteria or on symptoms. To take two examples from CDK, we have certain sensations of wet and cold and think it is raining, we look and see that someone is in pain.

In the background of McDowell’s article are the then (early 1980s) ongoing discussions of ‘criteria’ by people like P.M.S. Hacker, G. Baker and C. Wright. Criteria were supposed to afford among many other things a foundation for semantics («The notion’s primary role would be to be an element in a novel anti-realist conception of meaning, to replace the realist, truth-conditional conception of Frege and the Tractatus»⁶) and also a ‘novel response to the problem of other minds’ (formulated as: how is knowledge of other minds possible?). This is what McDowell is focusing on in CDK.

The notion of criterion was introduced by Wittgenstein in his later work and he himself used it in dealing with the problem of other minds in the *Investigations*. One example of such use is the passage McDowell quotes in CDK: “What is the criterion for the redness of an image?

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⁶ McDowell 1998, p. 374. References to the full version of the article appear when necessary. The article was originally published in 1982.
For me, when it is someone else’s image, what he says and does” (Philosophical Investigations, § 377). Now Wittgenstein’s idea of criteria leads to a conception of pretence, and his commentators, whose positions McDowell is discussing, see things like this: in successful deception criteria for something internal are satisfied, yet the ascription for which they are criteria would be false (for example, I see the expressions of pain, I think the person is in pain and the person is not in pain). Criteria are thus supposed to be a defeasible kind of evidence, and the possibility of pretence is supposed to make this seem obvious. In CDK McDowell criticizes this way of thinking of pretence (as being a case in which criteria for something internal are satisfied, although the ascription for which they are criteria would be false; thus showing criteria to be defeasible):

“In Wittgenstein’s view...there are criteria in behaviour for the ascription of ‘inner’ states and goings-on (...). Commentators often take it to be obvious that he must mean a defeasible kind of evidence; if it not obvious straight off, the possibility of pretence is supposed to make it so. But really it is not obvious at all.”

McDowell says he’s less interested in exegesis, and in the specific exchanges between people such as Hacker and Wright around criteria, other minds and pretence, that with the ‘epistemological assumptions’ of the whole discussion. This is what will prove to be the basic reason for this paper’s importance for the ‘historical origins of disjunctivism’. I myself am interested in doing a bit of hermeneutic work on the paper as a way to look at the historical origins of disjunctivism; that is why I posed my very pedestrian question: ‘Why is this paper one of the papers selected for a collection on disjunctivism in the philosophy of perception, if it is about the epistemology of evidence and the problem of other minds? What is the connection?’

I will put forward a sketch of the answer before going into the details, so that we don’t get lost in the details: the reasons are that (i) it was in this paper that the idea of ‘highest common factor’ was introduced, and (ii) it was in this paper that the relation of the idea of highest common factor with a certain conception of illusion was explored. The result amounts to a new way of regarding (iii) psychological indistinguishability. Both the rejection of ‘highest common factor views’ and a view of psychological indistinguishability are essential tools for the disjunctivist approach to perception.

3. Pretence, criteria and other minds. Pretence and illusion. ‘Highest common factor’.

Let us then start with the criterial approach to the problem of other minds and with the discussion of how it reflects on a conception of pretence. According to the traditional way of

7 J. McDowell 2009, p.75.
framing the problem of other minds, when we ask ourselves how is knowledge of other minds possible what seems to be at stake is inferring mental life from non-psychological evidence (behavioral information, let us call it). This behavioral information (‘psychologically neutral’) is supposed to be shared by good cases and bad cases. The good case is that in which there is behavioral information to that there is mental life and indeed there is mental life, the bad case is that in which there is behavioral information to that there is mental life and yet there is no mental life. To take an example: I see someone gesticulating as if in agony. In Case 1 there is pain, in case 2 there isn’t. Still, behavioral information is the same. The skeptic move is to say that, then, since such behavioral evidence, which is all that we have and will ever have, is shaky, we will never know that another being is in pain.

What McDowell is interested in in CDK is the assumption, the skeptic’s assumption, that a crossing from something blatantly external (behavioral evidence, taken to be psychologically neutral) to something internal (mental life) is involved here. His point is that this assumption already underlies the description above, of Case 1 versus Case 2, and it also underlies the particular interpretation of pretence above. His alternative interpretation of pretence within the framework of criteria is the following:

“in pretending one causes it to appear that criteria for something internal are satisfied (i.e. one causes it to appear that someone else could know by what one says and does, that one is in, say, some ‘inner state’) but the criteria are not really satisfied, that is, knowledge is not really available)”

Now, as McDowell’s puts it in CDK, and this is a central step in the article, in the epistemology of other minds pretence plays a role analogous to that of illusion when considering the problem of external world. According to McDowell, when we ask ‘How is knowledge of external world possible if all we have are impressions?’ the problem of the external world is being framed in a way structurally similar to the framing of the problem of other minds above:

“In the traditional approach to the epistemology of other minds, the concept of pretence plays a role analogous to the role of the concept of illusion in the traditional approach to the epistemology of the ‘external’ world. So it is not surprising to find that, just as the possibility of pretence is often thought to show the defeasibility of criteria for ‘inner’ states of affairs, the possibility of illusion is often thought to show the defeasibility of criteria for ‘external’ states of affairs.”

What is structurally similar? Basically that the idea that there is something the good and the bad cases share (something like ‘appearances’) and so the bad cases (pretence, illusion) become mere appearances. The skeptic’s conclusion is then, obviously, that we never know

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8 J. McDowell 2009, p.76.
9 J. McDowell 2009, p. 76.
the world, namely through perception, the same way we can never know that another human being is in pain.

McDowell thinks there is something wrong here, something wrong in very setup of the problems (of other minds, of the external world), and in CDK he aims at putting forward an alternative approach. What is wrong and what is the alternative approach? This is where McDowell’s wittgensteinianism enters — and we do not need to go much further into the interpretation of Wittgenstein since what matters is not so much Wittgenstein but skepticism, more specifically a particular way to face skeptic problems about other minds and the external world. According to McDowell what Wittgenstein is doing (with his proposal about criteria, namely) and he wants to follow is “not to propose an alteration of detail within the sceptics position; what Wittgenstein is doing is rejecting the assumptions which generate the sceptics problem”\(^\text{10}\). Which assumptions are those? Crucially, the assumption that there is something the good and the bad cases share, a ‘highest common factor’, which then makes it possible to think of bad cases as mere appearances.

So, what is it exactly that McDowell does not agree with in the descriptions above of pretence and illusion in terms of good and bad cases? First of all, he thinks is that there is no such thing as a ‘highest common factor’ to good and bad cases. The good case and the bad case are epistemologically very different: in particular, in the good case, one knows what one knows without any inference from a highest common factor. What then is the alternative way of conceiving of things, the alternative to the highest common factor view? That is what McDowell is looking for in CDK and this is what he proposes:

“But suppose we say – not at all unnaturally – that an appearance that such and such is the case can either be a mere appearance or the fact that such and such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive case is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive case too the object of experience is a mere appearance and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer. So appearances are no longer conceived as in general intervening between the experiencing subject and the world.”\(^\text{11}\)

The passage I just quoted is the central passage of CDK (the “either …or…” is what accounts for the label ‘disjunctivism’ – I will come back to this). What we have to understand now is how this relates to the Argument from Illusion, or rather to a conception of illusion, since McDowell’s point in CDK is that highest common factor views are applications of the Argument from Illusion. The point of the Argument from illusion is to make us accept that we are not in a position to distinguish in any non arbitrary way, from the first person point of view, between the phenomenology of perception and the phenomenology of illusion. It may be formulated roughly along the following lines: When we are under an illusion we perceive

\(^{10}\) J. McDowell 1998, p. 383.
\(^{11}\) J. McDowell 2009, p. 80.
properties that objects do not have / Yet we do perceive something / That which we perceive cannot be the objects themselves / Thus, we do not perceive objects directly (neither in illusion nor in veridical perceptions) / Thus, naïve realism (which would have us think that we do perceive objects directly) is false. Now, McDowell’s thinks the Argument from Illusion forces us think something like this: we have a capacity to tell by experience whether such an such is the case; in deceptive cases this capacity falls short of the fact (what is embraced is a mere appearance); so, in consequence of that, we end up thinking of what is experienced in non deceptive cases as being appearances as well. He points out that the argument effects an unwarranted transition from sheer fallibility – pyrrhonian scepticism – to a veil of ideas scepticism: even in non deceptive cases we end up having something interposing itself between the experiencing subject and the fact itself. McDowell thinks that those who accept a highest common factor view are prey to this way of thinking. His alternative proposal to highest common factor views, eschewing this application of the Argument form Illusion, is, in the case of perception of the world as in the case of other minds, to think that in the good case that which is made manifest (here now, by perception) is known without any inference from a highest common factor and does not fall short of the fact.

Let us consider again the passage I quoted earlier: “As before, the object of experience in the deceptive case is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive case too the object of experience is a mere appearance and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, the appearance that is presented to one in those cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer. So appearances are no longer conceived as in general intervening between the experiencing subject and the world.” Needless to say, it is from here that we get characteristic McDowellian expressions such as ‘psychological fact is directly presented to view’ or ‘experience is openness to the world’.

So this is the original formulation, in CDK, of the rejection of ‘highest common factor’ views in their relation with a conception of illusion. What makes McDowell think he is following the lead of Wittgenstein in the Investigations is the fact that the epistemological assumptions being rejected were those of the skeptic, and rejecting the epistemological assumptions of the sceptic is what Wittgenstein, throughout Investigations, is doing. So, the reason for considering McDowell one of the initial proponents of disjunctivism is this rejection of certain epistemological assumptions, skeptical assumptions to start with, but in fact McDowell is also saying something more about them, i.e. that they are also behaviorist and empiricist assumptions.

As I said, what is going on in CDK seems to concern not directly perception, which is what disjunctivism is supposed to be primarily about, but behavior and the way to take it in the epistemology of other minds. What we see happening is that the idea that we get behavioral information in ‘facing surfaces of other human bodies’ has lost its epistemological innocence – how so?

In fact, in his discussions of pretence in the framework of criteria, what McDowell is doing (following – he thinks – Wittgenstein) is criticizing a ‘objectifying view of human behavior’: he thinks we should fight the temptation to think that behavior cannot itself be expressive, but only something like the manifestation of an interior, the outwardly observable effect of internal goings-on:

“The sceptic’s picture involves a corpus of ‘bodily’ and ‘behavioral’ information, unproblematically available to us in a pictured cognitive predicament in which we are holding in suspense all attribution of psychological properties to others. One way of approaching Wittgenstein’s response is to remark that such a picture is attainable only by displacing the concept of a human being from its focal position in an account of our experience of our fellows, and replacing it with a philosophically generated concept of a human body. Human bodies, conceived as mere material objects, form the subject matter of the supposed unproblematically available information. The idea is that they may subsequently turn out to be, in some more or less mysterious way, points of occupancy for psychological properties as well; this would be represented as regaining the concept of human being. Wittgenstein’s response to the sceptic is to restore the concept of a human being to its proper place, not as something laboriously reconstituted (…) but as a seamless whole of whose unity we ought not to have allowed ourselves to lose sight in the first place.”

What is the connection between rejecting a view of human behavior as mere symptoms – rejecting behaviorist assumptions regarding behavior – and perception of the ‘external world’? It is to the view of human behavior as mere symptoms that Wittgenstein opposes the notion of criteria, thus stepping back from identifying ‘human being’ with ‘human body’ (human being being the pre-philosophical concept that we have, and which is replaced by the ‘philosophically generated concept’ of human body as ‘point of occupancy for psychological properties’). Wittgentein, as McDowell sees him, is moving the concept of human being back to its proper place (‘his response to the sceptic is to restore the concept of human being to its proper place’).

In more general terms, the rejection of these assumptions goes together with the rejection of an interface of experiencing subject and external reality:

“If we adopt the disjunctive conception of appearances, we have to take seriously the idea of an unmediated openness of the experiencing subject to ‘external’ reality, whereas the ‘highest common factor’ conception allows us to picture an interface between them. Taking the epistemology of other minds on its own, we can locate the highest common factor at the facing surfaces of other human bodies. But when we come to consider perceptual knowledge of bodies in general, the ‘highest common factor’ conception drives what is given to experience inward, until it can be aligned with what goes on at our own sensory surfaces. This promises to permit us a satisfying conception of an interface at which the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ make contact. The idea that there is an interface can seem compulsory; and the disjunctive conception of appearances flouts that intuition.”

“Without the highest common factor view of experience, we can leave the interface out of the picture, and the traditional problems (about other minds, external world) lapse.”

14 J. McDowell 2009, p. 78.
15 J. McDowell 2009, p. 78.
4. H Putnam: endorsing disjunctivism and giving an example of what we do not mean by ‘indistinguishability’

So, idea number one in CDK that makes it a landmark in the history of disjunctivism is the rejection of highest common factor views; idea number two is making explicit the way highest common factor views relate to a certain conception of illusion. I will now bring in H. Putnam for idea number 3 of disjunctivism – a certain conception of indistinguishability. In his endorsement of disjunctivism, in The Threefold Cord, he gives a very clear example of what we do not mean by ‘indistinguishability’. He says:

“The opposed point of view defended by Austin and more recently by John McDowell and myself in the lectures I mentioned (he is talking about his Dewey Lectures which are Part I of The Threefold Cord) may be called the disjunctive view. On this view when I say that in both of the cases I described “I saw a wall covered with roses” all I am entitled to infer is that the following disjunction is true: Either I saw a wall covered with roses or it seemed to me as if I saw a wall covered with roses, but I am not at all entitled to infer that there is some significant object that is literally present in both cases”

What does is this view opposed to? In Putnam’s words, the idea criticized is the idea according to which ‘When we see a tree (or a wall covered with roses) there is some internal phenomenal state going on: some internal representation of a tree will be present in us’. According to that view, the highest common factor view, Putnam notes, an internal state is necessary and sufficient for the appearance in question (sense datum or internal phenomenal state; we should keep in mind that in The Theefold Cord, Putnam is making his general case against qualia). What is wrong with the highest common factor view (that is, the representationalist view), is, again in Putnam’s words, that if the highest common factor view is right, then there are some internal states whose esse est percipi. This involves a view about indistinguishability – one that people disjunctivist philosophers of perception like Martin have taken lots of efforts to ‘deconstruct’. Putnam’s counter example in The Three Fold Cord aims at this same deconstruction and thus at illustrating his support of disjunctivism with the example of R. Parikh’s pack of cards:

R. Parikh’s pack of cards

C1 C2….C100 are one hundred cards
C1 and C2 look exactly alike to a subject
So the colour quale must be the same, let us call it C 1/2.

C2 and C3 look exactly alike to a subject
So the colour quale must be the same, let us call it C 2/3.
C3 and C4 look exactly alike to a subject
So the colour quale must be the same, let us call it C 3/4.

(...)

The problem is, in R. Parikh’s pack of cards C1 and C20 are different colours, and they look
different to the subject – what shall we make of this then? According to Putnam what we
should make of this is that the principle of the highest common factor must be false. Being
able to say x and y were absolutely indistinguishable on two occasions should not license the
inference that there is such thing there as a numerically identical phenomenal state of the
subject\(^{21}\). Indistinguishability for the subject is not necessarily a sign of identical phenomenal
states (as I said, Putnam wants to go further here, he wants to defend that we don’t know
what we are doing when we talk about phenomenal states – Putnam is no fan of qualia).
So, as Mike Martin puts it in *The Limits of Self-Awareness*, another of the papers of the
Byrne & Logue collection, the key to a disjunctivist approach is in fact not the characteristic
paraphrasing of looks statements as ‘Either I am perceiving or I am suffering an illusion, or
hallucination’ but the recognition that there are things we cannot know about ourselves ‘just
through reflection on the situation we find ourselves in’. In other words, the mark of
disjunctivism is ‘a suitable modesty in the approach to the problem of experience\(^{22}\).

5. Back to McDowell

Let us now go back to McDowell’s article *Criteria, Defeasability, and Knowledge*. As I said at
the beginning a background issue of the article is the distinction between “criteria” (whose
status as evidence is a matter of convention or grammar) and “symptoms” (whose status as
evidence is not a matter of convention or grammar but rather of empirical theory). Criteria are
a proposal of Wittgenstein, namely for the problem of other minds. So, we ask: how do we
know that there are other minds? We have criteria, Wittgenstein says, not symptoms and we
have seen how that reflects in making it that the response to the sceptic involves restoring
the concept of human being to its proper place, replacing the philosophically generated
concept of human body. We know that McDowell is a wittgensteinian – what does that mean
here? First of all, that he takes Wittgenstein’s position about criteria as a response to the
sceptic; that is what he wants to take up, and, of course, if he is doing that, he can not agree
with the interpretations of Wittgenstein as a behaviorist. What is behaviorism? For both

\(^{21}\) H. Putnam 1999, p.132.
\(^{22}\) M. G. F. Martin 2009, p.272.
Wittgenstein and McDowell behaviorism is an untenable symptom-view of human behavior. McDowells sees the very introduction of the notion of criteria by Wittgenstein as marking his rejection of this view, and his favoring of another view – a view McDowell thinks is closer to that of P. F. Strawson in *Individuals* (1959) – the idea that the concept of a person is primitive. So the first thing McDowell rejects in the interpreters of Wittgenstein who take Wittgenstein idea of criteria for specific purposes is that they see Wittgenstein as a behaviorist. Back to the initial example: “What is the criterion for the redness of an image? For me, when it is someone else’s image, what he says and does!” (*Philosophical Investigations* §377). This should not to be read in a skeptical way, as not being enough – the point is, this should be enough. The satisfaction of a criterion constitutes a fully adequate answer to a ‘How do you know?’ question about other minds such as this one. If someone does not accept this answer what this betrays is non participation in a convention, not ignorance of a theory. It is this distinction that is reflected on the distinction between symptoms and criteria.

Another way to put things, one McDowell himself uses in CDK is to say that Wittgenstein is rejecting the sceptic’s conception of what is given, and he, McDowell, wants to follow him there. The skeptic (whether he is an empiricist, or a behaviorist) defends a conception of what is given, which makes it look when we are dealing with human bodies as if there were nothing but symptoms (this is how Wittgenstein puts it) and a conception of what is given, when it comes to the world, as impingements at our sensory surfaces.

6. Conclusion

This was about disjunctivism in the history of philosophy of perception and the importance of McDowell’s article *Criteria Defeasability and Knowledge* therein. My practical question was why was this paper one of the papers selected for a collection on, if it is a paper about evidence, the epistemological problem of other minds and the use of Wittgenstein’s notion of criteria in that context. I think we can answer it now: the key is ‘to resist an epistemological outlook’, an outlook associated with a certain empiricism cum skepticism cum behaviorism, whether we are speaking about other minds or the world.

So the paper is there because the (i) idea of ‘highest common factor’ was introduced in it and (ii) it was described as related to the argument of illusion, and a highest common factor view plus the argument from illusion were explicitly associated with empiricism cum skepticism cum behaviorism. This new setting for discussions amounts to a new way of regarding (iii)

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24 J. McDowell 2009.
psychological indistinguishability – that’s what I tried to illustrate with Putnam’s example. Both highest common factor and a view of psychological indistinguishability are essential ‘tools’ for the disjunctivist approach to perception. The next step for disjunctivists, following this mostly negative case, is to understand why (as M. G. F. Martin puts it) disjunctivism saves naïve realism – but that I will leave for another occasion.

I want to finish by saying a bit more about why it matters not to be a representationalist. This an issue which clearly exceeds the philosophy of perception and an issue which brings us back to Putnam. The point is that thinking about perception and developing an antirepresentationalist view of the nature of perception proves to be particularly illuminating as a starting point for criticizing widespread conceptions of physicalism that go along with the dominance, in certain quarters of analytic philosophy, of what H. Putnam called ‘reactionary metaphysics’25. What is this ‘reactionary metaphysics’ and what harms does it provoke? Reactionary metaphysics is what Putnam sees as ‘the majority of analytic philosophers celebrating materialism cum cognitive science’ associated with a ‘misterious’ ‘absolute conception of the world’26. The problem is, this may appear as the sole alternative to what Putnam sees, on the other hand and on the other side, as ‘a majority of new wave thinkers in literature departments celebrating deconstruction cum Marxism cum feminism’. The fact that such alternatives may seem the only ones available in the intellectual landscape, the fact that humanities (or at least philosophy) are polarized as never before between anti-realist deconstruction-like strands and the good old fashioned realism of reactionary metaphysics does much harm to the humanities, according to Putnam. This is a strong theme in his recent work, and in fact the motiv behind this talk, but I won’t explore it further today.

References

Austin, J. L. 1962, Sense and Sensibilia, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

26 Putnam 1999, p.4.