

INTUITION AND INFERENCE

We want to have something in our theory of reasoning that accounts for the role of objective evidence. When asked to support a claim, we can, at least in some cases, direct our interlocutor to something in the world and say, “Look and see for yourself” (or “Touch and feel”, “Listen and hear”, etc.). Somehow, when one goes about looking-and-seeing, touching-and-feeling, etc., one may come upon something that can stand as a *reason* to accept or reject some given view. Not only that, but we even *require* that everyone recognize *some* kind of responsibility to accept ‘look-and-see’ reasons for those claims as can stand on such reasons.

In light of this, it seems we must posit something that can stand as a reason for or against a claim, but is not itself a claim. It is the sort of thing that comes across when one looks and sees for oneself, and it plays this role when a claim alone would not amount to a compelling reason. I use the term “intuition” to designate such an item.

An intuition must be a reason to hold some views and not others. In *Mind and world*, McDowell argues persuasively that an item satisfying this role has to belong to the “space of reasons” and has to have traction with conceptually-articulated judgments. He develops this point partly as a reading of certain underappreciated positions Kant takes in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, in the B edition of the *Critique of pure reason*. Following an approach something like McDowell’s, intuition would account for what we understand to be “given” without succumbing to the Myth of the Given, the myth of pure content without logical form, because McDowell understands intuition to be an engagement of our reason, albeit a passive one, and therefore as involving logical form. It follows from McDowell’s account that it would have to be logically articulated without being a proposition and without its terms being concepts. In a word, it is not someone’s way of perceiving the world, but rather *the way in which the world becomes available to us for assessment* (in Kant’s term, the world’s appearance), that stands as a reason to adopt or reject some views about the world.

It has the potential to be misleading, in this connection, to rely on talk of “perception” or “experience”, even as McDowell does. That someone perceives things to be so-and-so is not, of itself, a reason for anyone to take them to be so-and-so on any authority but testimony. It’s only when perception cashes out something normative and binding in the subject’s engagement with the world that we can credit her with a reason to commit to what her perception tells us. McDowell is explicit enough that his own treatment doesn’t all prey to confusion: he understands “experience” as the unmediated engagement of our cognitive freedom by what is outside it, and it is only in this engagement that the “outside” can stand as a reason for taking any position at all. In this sense, “experience” in McDowell’s sense deserves the traditional term “intuition”. Calling it this avoids some of the psychological baggage of words like “perception” and “experience”. An intuition is no more psychological than a proposition is, or than an inference is. Arguably the word “intuition” has always carried with it some ambiguity in this regard. It need not, though; we might understand it in a strictly non-psychological way, in much the same way that physicists use the term “observation”. An intuition is not merely how a thing *seems* to be, but how it *presents itself to be*, as measured and appraised from a certain vantage under certain conditions.

An intuition is logically articulated but it is not conceptual per se. Its content is relevant to the judgments it allows or prohibits. How do we specify this content? We cannot say it is bare, mute content. Here is where inferentialism can come in; the holistic principle of inferentialism allows us to say that the content of an intuition can be specified by concepts, even though the terms of an intuition are not concepts, because an intuition entails or excludes propositions, whose terms *are* concepts. So we describe the content of an intuition by laying out the propositions to which it is related. It is thanks to these relations of entailment and exclusion that we can determine the precise nature of what is being demanded of our spontaneous faculty, what responsibility we must take on regarding our beliefs and judgments about the world. This allows the intuition to remain “given” and pre-conceptual while also putting it within the space of reasons. The move from an intuition to a conceptually articulated proposition is not an inference, if by that we mean the move from one set of propositions to another proposition; however, the move from intuition to proposition *is* a matter of cashing out rational warrant and obligation, which is, loosely speaking, the heart of what an “inference” is for the purposes of inferentialism.
