

A Hegelian Response to Disjunctivism

Abstract: According to epistemological disjunctivism, perceiving that P puts one in a position to know that P and to know that one has a truth-guaranteeing ground for P. The combination of these two claims departs significantly from standard views in contemporary epistemology; the departure is justified by a demanding conception of what an adequate response to skepticism looks like. Significantly, the departure is held by many advocates of the view to be in the direction of Kant and the German Idealists. In this paper, I draw on that same tradition to criticize epistemological disjunctivism. I argue that Hegel's writings, especially his early response to G.E. Schulze, contain a novel and illuminating criticism of epistemological disjunctivism, and specifically of the claim that we can know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds in a way that defeats skepticism. The capacity to know on the basis of perceiving cannot defend itself against skepticism, Hegel thinks – on its own, it leads to skepticism. A successful defense against skepticism, Hegel suggests, requires going beyond the capacity to know on the basis of perception, to a very different kind of knowledge.

Introduction

Epistemological disjunctivism has been described as “the holy grail” of contemporary epistemology because it promises to combine the intuitive internalist idea that one's epistemic support in perception is accessible to one with the intuitive externalist idea that one's epistemic support in perception is connected to how things in fact are.¹ And it combines these ideas in order to furnish a satisfactory response to skepticism.

According to epistemological disjunctivism, perceiving that P puts one in a position to know that P and to know that one has a truth-guaranteeing ground for P.² So, when we claim that P on the basis of perceiving that P, our basis for claiming that P does not “fall short” of the fact that P. The view thus disarms the skeptical threat that the best epistemic basis perception can

¹ Pritchard 2012: 1. Given what it promises, it is no surprise that there has been a flurry of recent interest in it: cf. especially the papers collected in Haddock and Macpherson 2008, the special edition of *Philosophical Explorations* devoted to the topic, reprinted as a book in Willaschek 2012, and the papers in Doyle, Milburn, and Pritchard 2019.

² I will focus on epistemological disjunctivism about perception, though there are disjunctivist views of other topics as well (in general, for every cognitive capacity that we possess, one can be a disjunctivist about the acts of that capacity). Further, in line with the dominant conception of disjunctivism, I will talk about perceiving that P (e.g., perceiving that there is a brown bag on the table) rather than perceiving such-and-such (e.g., perceiving a brown bag on the table). There are some versions of disjunctivism that focus on perceiving such-and-such (cf. Haddock 2011 and French 2016). Exploring whether Hegel's argument applies to these versions of the view will have to wait for another occasion.

provide is compatible with things not being as they seem (because, say, an evil demon is systematically deceiving us).³

Epistemological disjunctivism is difficult to understand within contemporary epistemology. For instance, its defenders claim that it is neither internalist nor externalist.⁴ And (as we will see in §1.2) it is motivated by an unusually demanding understanding of what it takes sufficiently respond to skepticism. As such, it is difficult to position in relation to the standard options within contemporary epistemology, and so difficult to evaluate.

Interestingly, and relatedly, some disjunctivists have departed from the dominant strands of contemporary epistemology in the direction of Kant and the German Idealists. Most notably, John McDowell and Andrea Kern have gone in this direction: they draw on this modern German tradition in working out their account of knowledge as involving, in the fundamental case, a truth-guaranteeing ground for belief that one knows to be truth-guaranteeing.⁵ Many critics of disjunctivism have failed to appreciate the importance of the conceptual resources developed by this tradition, and their importance for the key disjunctivist insights. As a result, the arguments advanced by those critics have missed their target.

³ Epistemological disjunctivism is often distinguished from metaphysical disjunctivism, a view about the fundamental kind to which a veridical perceptual state belongs. Epistemological disjunctivism is most notably defended by John McDowell, and metaphysical disjunctivism by Mike Martin. There is a debate about how to understand the relation between these two views (cf. Byrne and Logue 2008, Pritchard 2008, Lockhart 2012). I will set that debate aside and focus exclusively on epistemological disjunctivism as found in the work of McDowell and others (whatever its relation to the view found in Martin's work).

⁴ Cf. Kern 2017: chapter IV, Rödl 2007: 135ff., and Pritchard 2012. I will not discuss the internalism/externalism distinction explicitly in what follows, but it should be evident from my account of disjunctivism in §1 that I agree that disjunctivism is neither internalist nor externalist.

⁵ McDowell, famously, couches his project in *Mind and World* as a reworking of Kant's project in a Hegelian direction: cf. McDowell 1996: 43-5; for an account of the connection between McDowell's Kantian *Mind and World* project and his disjunctivism, cf. Lockhart 2019. McDowell's debt to Hegel (as he reads him) has since become even more pronounced: cf. McDowell 2009b and 2009c. Kern, whose book on the topic was originally published in German in 2006 and only recently translated into English in 2017, develops her version of disjunctivism in terms of rational capacities, taking her cue from Kant's account in the first critique: cf. Kern 2017: 238ff.

In this essay, I advance a criticism of disjunctivism that takes very seriously the conceptual resources developed within the modern German philosophical tradition. In fact, I advance a novel and powerful criticism of disjunctivism that, I contend, can be found in one of the most significant figures of that tradition: Hegel. I argue that Hegel shows that disjunctivism cannot deliver the anti-skeptical conclusion that its defenders promise. Disjunctivism's combination of a reason for belief that is accessible as such and connected to the way things are may well be right. But it is no holy grail, as it does not yield a satisfactory response to skepticism.⁶ In particular, Hegel's arguments suggest that the capacity to know on the basis of perceiving cannot defend itself against skepticism: on its own, it leads to skepticism. A successful defense against skepticism requires going beyond the capacity to know on the basis of perception, to a very different kind of knowledge.

I proceed as follows: in §1, I lay out what I understand by disjunctivism and its anti-skeptical promise in a more detailed fashion. In §2, I articulate Hegel's criticism of it. In §3 I respond to a possible objection to Hegel's account that draws on a contemporary version of formal idealism. And in §4 I respond to a possible objection grounded in McDowell's quietism. I conclude by considering where Hegel might go when he parts company with disjunctivism.

My focus will not primarily be exegetical, and in particular I will note but not respond to opposing interpretations of Hegel's text – I do that elsewhere. Here I focus on the merits of the argument against disjunctivism as a response to skepticism that, I hope to show, we can at least plausibly find in Hegel's texts.

⁶ Duncan Pritchard, the one who described disjunctivism as the holy grail, has a complicated view of the anti-skeptical merits of disjunctivism: thinks it provides a compelling response to one strand of skepticism, but not to a strand of skepticism that rests on subjecting, at once, all of our beliefs to doubt. To respond to that strand of skepticism, Pritchard thinks, we need to supplement disjunctivism with a Wittgensteinian hinge-epistemology: cf. Pritchard 2016: 46-57, 160-66. It is not obvious how to relate what Pritchard thinks is lacking in disjunctivism to what Hegel finds lacking in it. Exploring this issue will have to await another essay.

§1 Disjunctivism

Disjunctivism is a position designed to avoid a form of skepticism according to which we lack knowledge of the world because, in the best possible case, perception can do no more than yield knowledge of how the world seems to us, not knowledge of how the world is. For, the skeptic notes, in any given case of perception, I might be perceiving that P (where perception is factive). But the case may be misleading, such that I merely seem to perceive that P. The basic disjunctivist thought is that the fact that I am misled in the one case (the “bad” case) is no reason to think that the grounds in the case in which things are as they seem (the “good” case) fall short of putting me in a position to know that P. To arrive at this conclusion, the disjunctivist develops an account of the good case.⁷ In §1.1 I outline the account of the good case; in §1.2 I examine the anti-skeptical motivations for the account.

§1.1 Disjunctivism and the Good Case

Disjunctivism makes two claims about the good case. The first claim is that in the good case one knows (or is in a position to know) that P in virtue of perceiving that P and has grounds that suffice to ensure or guarantee the truth of that which one knows. So, McDowell claims that in the good case one has “indefeasible grounds” for one’s claim: that is, grounds which cannot be defeated, and so suffice to ensure the truth of P (McDowell 2009a: 234-5). We might also say that the grounds for one’s claim are “factive” (Pritchard 2012: 13). Andrea Kern puts this point

⁷ Previously, it was standard to explain (epistemological) disjunctivism simply by appealing to the basic disjunctivist thought: cf., for instance, the introductory accounts of disjunctivism (and epistemological disjunctivism in particular) in Haddock and Macpherson 2008 and Byrne and Logue 2009. Recently, however, thanks largely to work by Duncan Pritchard, disjunctivism has been introduced as an account of the good case, such that the disjunctive account of the relation between the good and the bad case is a consequence of the logically more fundamental characterization of the good case (cf. Pritchard 2012). I will follow his lead on this point. (Pritchard is, I believe, making explicit something left implicit in McDowell’s early writings on disjunctivism: cf. note 13.)

by saying that in the good case one has a “truth-guaranteeing” ground (Kern 2017: 6ff.). In what follows, I will adopt Kern’s idiom.

The second claim that the disjunctivist makes about the good case is that one knows (or is in a position to know) that one is perceiving simply by perceiving, and therein knows (or is in a position to know) that one’s grounds for judging that P are truth-guaranteeing. Indeed, as the disjunctivist understands things, my knowledge that I am perceiving (or my being in a position to know that I am perceiving) is inseparable from my having a truth-guaranteeing ground at all. As McDowell puts it, “If the animal in front of me is a zebra, and conditions are suitable for exercising my ability to recognize zebras when I see them (for instance, the animal is in full view), then that ability, fallible though it is, enables me to see that it is a zebra, and to know that I do.”⁸ That is, my ability to perceive is an ability *both* to be so connected to the world that I have truth-guaranteeing grounds that the world is as I perceive it to be (it “enables me to see that it is a zebra”) *and* to know that I have such grounds when I do (“to know that I...” “see that it is a zebra”). These are not two distinct abilities; the good case is defined in terms of “their” joint satisfaction because the disjunctivist understands “them” to be inseparable, to be one and not two.⁹

As I have formulated the two disjunctivist claims about the good case, there are really two versions of each. According to one version, I know that P and know that I perceive that P in virtue of perceiving that P. According to the other, I am in a position to know that P and I am in a

⁸ McDowell 2009a: 239. For an earlier version of this claim, cf. McDowell 1998: 385. For a helpful account of this aspect of McDowell’s thinking, cf. Haddock 2011: 26. Kern advances a version of this claim at 2017: 122.

⁹ Of course, there are non-rational perceivers who have the capacity to perceive without having the capacity to know that they perceive when they do. The disjunctivist line on this possibility is that they perceive in a different sense; that their capacity to perceive is not a rational capacity to perceive, and that the latter is thoroughly informed or shaped by its rationality. Other than this note, I will not discuss this topic (our relation to non-rational animals) in this paper. For an insightful account that mounts a Hegelian criticism of this aspect of disjunctivism, cf. Gobsch 2017.

position to know that I perceive that P in virtue of perceiving that P. Disjunctivists disagree over which version is preferable. Kern, for instance, prefers the former.¹⁰ McDowell prefers the latter.¹¹ This disagreement does not matter for Hegel's argument: both versions are equally subject to his criticism. In what follows, to avoid needless circumlocution, I will adopt the former version. Those who prefer the latter can supply the needed "position to" whenever pertinent.

With these two claims, we can get to the claim that is responsible for disjunctivism's name. First, add to the two claims about the good case the claim that one can sometimes take oneself to perceive when in fact one is not perceiving (that is, one is sometimes misled). Both disjunctivists and skeptics accept this claim; indeed, almost everyone accepts this claim.¹² From it, and the two claims that define disjunctivism, it follows that the grounds that I have in the good case are different from the grounds that I have in the bad case, and that an explanation of the two cases will have to be disjunctive. The disjunct in the good case appeals to a perception and the disjunct in the bad case appeals to something that merely seems to be a perception. But this conclusion, though it is responsible for the name of the position, is only properly understood when seen as a consequence of the account of the good case given above.¹³

§1.2 Disjunctivism, Skepticism, and Most Contemporary Epistemology

¹⁰ Cf. Kern 2017: 215; for a similar view, cf. Rödl 2007: 144-5 and 154.

¹¹ Cf. McDowell 1998: 390 and 2002: 277; for a similar view, cf. Pritchard 2012: 25-34.

¹² The claim that one can be fooled or misled is sometimes explained in terms of the "introspective" or "phenomenological" indiscriminability of the good and bad cases. Oftentimes the explanations of these notions are quite technical. Haddock has suggested that the right way to understand at least McDowell's variety of disjunctivism might be to avoid deploying such notions: McDowell's point is just that "it can be reasonable for me to take it that my experience is good... when in fact my experience is bad" such that "the notions of introspection and phenomenology need not figure" in this variety of disjunctivism (Haddock 2011: 39-40). I find this suggestion persuasive.

¹³ Consider, for instance, the way McDowell arrives at disjunctivism in "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge": cf. McDowell 1998: 385.

Both of the claims that the disjunctivist makes about the good case are anchored in an idea, key to disjunctivism, of what would count as a sufficient response to skepticism. The idea is that to respond to skepticism, one must have grounds for one's belief that suffice to show that one's belief is true. As disjunctivists see things, skepticism results if, in the best case for knowing that P, I cannot exclude the possibility that P is false. So, to avoid skepticism, I must be in a position, at least in the best case, to exclude the possibility that P is false. And consequently, my grounds must be truth-guaranteeing, and they must be known to be such by me.

In the introduction, I mentioned that many critics of disjunctivism have been accused of misunderstanding it, and that the misunderstanding seems to arise from the fact that disjunctivism departs fairly significantly from most contemporary epistemology. We can gain one vantage point on that difference by considering what the disjunctivist requires of a successful response to skepticism. My point in what follows is not to defend the disjunctivist's conception of what a successful response to skepticism must consist in (though I am sympathetic with it). Rather, I only mean to introduce what motivates disjunctivism, and what separates it from the standard views in contemporary epistemology.

Consider that, as part of the first claim about the good case, the disjunctivist claims that perception must provide truth-guaranteeing grounds. The much more common view in epistemology is that it does not, and that all that perception needs to (and can) provide is grounds that exclude some cases (the "relevant alternatives") in which my belief is false. Accordingly, one knows without having grounds that suffice to guarantee the truth of what one claims to know. So, much of contemporary epistemology rejects the first claim.

To the disjunctivist, any version of the relevant alternatives view leads to skepticism. As Kern puts it, for any such view "it is, in principle, an open question for the subject whether her

belief is true” and “there is nothing the subject can do to extricate herself from this situation.”¹⁴

That is, there is no way for the subject to arrive at a position in which she can exclude the possibility that her perceptually-grounded beliefs are false. So, she must accept skepticism about perceptually grounded beliefs.

There are contemporary epistemologists who accept the first claim, because they too think that demanding anything less than a truth-guaranteeing ground will yield skepticism. However, most who accept the first disjunctivist claim reject the second. They think that one can have a truth-guaranteeing ground without knowing that it is truth-guaranteeing, and that that is enough to answer skepticism.¹⁵

But consider what possibilities the subject is in a position to exclude in light of her truth-guaranteeing ground that is not known to be such. Since I do not need to know that I know, I need not be in a position to exclude the possibility that everything I know is false. Trivially, if it is knowledge, then it is not false. But we are considering only what I am in a position to conclude. And to know, on these views, I do not need to be in a position to exclude the possibility that what I know is false. And, supposing that I happen to be in such a position (because I have done whatever additional work is required to come to know that I know), the skeptic can ascend to yet a higher order of knowledge (for all that I know about what I know about what I know, etc.). The skeptic will eventually arrive at a level at which her target lacks

¹⁴ Kern 2017: 92; McDowell makes the same claim, adding that “I doubt that anyone would go on supposing that a belief based on less than conclusive warrant can be knowledgeable... were it not for being unable to envisage any alternative” way of avoiding skepticism (McDowell 2013: 148; cf. also McDowell 2019: 38-9).

¹⁵ Timothy Williamson, for instance, claims that in non-trivial cases my knowledge cannot be luminous to me, or such that knowing that P puts me in a position to know that P: cf. Williamson 2000: 95ff. Clayton Littlejohn defends this view in response to McDowell’s disjunctivism. He argues that knowledge needs to be safe (where this is not something I need to know about it) to be truth-guaranteeing but does not need to be known to be truth-guaranteeing: cf. Littlejohn 2019.

knowledge, and so will not be in a position to exclude the possibility that all of her lower level beliefs are false. For the disjunctivist, that just is an expression of skepticism.

The disjunctivist does not think that to know that P on the basis of perceiving that P, I have to have infinitely many different pieces of knowledge, knowledge that scales up all of the orders of knowledge. Nor does the disjunctivist think that it is only by scaling the order of knowledge that one can answer skepticism. The disjunctivist's point is rather that my knowledge that P and my knowledge that I know that P on the basis of perception have to come together in an account of knowledge that meets the skeptical challenge: not that one's knowledge must scale the infinitely many orders of knowledge, but that the idea of orders of knowledge (at least in this use of it) is confused. Knowing that P and knowing that one knows that P on the basis of perception are not, on the disjunctivist's picture, two separate pieces of knowledge. And the basis for this thought (or, at least, one basis) is that otherwise skepticism is unavoidable.¹⁶

So, the two claims about the good case are motivated by an unusually demanding conception of what a successful response to skepticism must do. And this unusually demanding conception sheds light on where and why disjunctivism diverges from most contemporary epistemology.

§2 The Hegelian Response to Disjunctivism

Hegel was familiar with a position that had the features of disjunctivism, G.E. Schulze's common-sense realism. In an early essay, he wrote a lengthy critical review of Schulze's work in which he argues (among other things) that Schulze's conception of perception and the

¹⁶ For helpful discussion, cf. Rödl 2007: 144-5 and Haddock 2019: 261-5, 275-6. I have been deliberately vague in my characterization of this aspect of the disjunctivist picture, as disjunctivists differ over how closely to tie knowing that P to knowing that one knows that P. What unites them is that they reject the view that these two can simply come apart, such that the latter is an additional, further piece of knowledge not in any way implicated in the former.

knowledge we have on its basis is incoherent and leads to skepticism. I will first briefly review Schulze's account to show that he is committed to the two disjunctivist claims described above and show that Hegel's response to Schulze involves rejecting disjunctivism as an anti-skeptical strategy (§2.1). Then I will turn to examine Hegel's response in detail (§2.2).

§2.1 Schulze, Disjunctivism, and Hegel's Retort

I contend that Schulze's particular version of common-sense realism is committed to both of the disjunctivist claims I outlined in §1.1.¹⁷ First, Schulze claims that perception provides a truth-guaranteeing ground. Schulze tends to make this claim in psychological terms, by claiming that perception yields "indisputable certainty" (Schulze 1801: 51). That my grounds must be certain is a way of registering the point that I must take them to be sufficient for the truth of my claim. "Certainty," here, is not something one can measure separately from the grounds one has for the certainty – it is just a way of noting that those grounds must be grounds for one, and that one must take them to be sufficient. Moreover, that my certainty is indisputable is a way of noting that it is truth-guaranteeing.¹⁸ (Of course, what I take to be sufficient grounds might not be sufficient, and I might be mistaken about whether I actually have the grounds for my judgment that I take myself to have (cf. Schulze 1801: 77-8).)

¹⁷ My claims about both Schulze and Hegel's response to him are controversial. Beyond quoting some passages from Schulze, I will not defend my interpretation of Schulze here; I do so elsewhere. I work out my case for interpreting Hegel in somewhat more detail. For opposing views of how to interpret both figures, cf. Forster 1989; Bristow 2007; Vieweg 1999. For views that are broadly similar to the one I offer here, cf. Bowman 2003 and Franks 2008. I believe that I am the first to connect Schulze's philosophy to disjunctivism, and so the first to see in Hegel's objection to Schulze a response to disjunctivism.

It is worth noting that Schulze nowhere explicitly draws the conclusion that the good and bad cases must be treated disjunctively. The closest he comes is the claim that the intelligibility of a particular bad case turns on the possibility that the one in the bad case could, in principle, be in a good case with respect to whatever part of the world the bad case is about: cf. Schulze 1801: 77-8.

¹⁸ Most saliently for Schulze, it is a way of noting that my judgment is immune to any skeptical doubts: cf. Schulze 1801: 51 and 592ff. I take that to entail that it is truth-guaranteeing.

Second, Schulze claims that I know that I perceive in virtue of perceiving. He writes that “The perception of something is there at the same time as the knowledge that I perceive it; the latter is completely inseparable from the former, and I cannot maintain the perception and cancel [*aufheben*] the knowledge of what is given in the perception” (Schulze 1801: 77). As the final clause suggests, he takes knowledge that I am perceiving that P to be equivalent to knowing my grounds for knowing that P. And it is reasonable to assume that, on his view, I know that my grounds for knowing that P are truth-guaranteeing (this, anyway, seems to be essential to his strategy of responding to skepticism).

In response, Hegel argues that, on Schulze’s account, one cannot know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. Given that Schulze shares the disjunctivist’s commitments, one might suspect that this argument would also apply to the disjunctivist. I argue that it does.

For the disjunctivist the truth-guaranteeing ground that perception provides must be knowable as such by the perceiver to serve as the perceiver’s ground for a perception-based judgment that withstands the skeptical threat. So, if Hegel’s claim that one cannot know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds turns out to be correct, then perception cannot provide truth-guaranteeing grounds in the sense in which the disjunctivist requires. As Hegel puts it, “the common human understanding itself knows [*erkennt*] very well that all facts of its consciousness and even its finite consciousness itself vanish and that there is no certainty in it” (Hegel 2.240-1/4.216). “Fact of consciousness” (*Tatsache des Bewußtseins*) is Schulze’s term for that which (Schulze thinks) provides indisputable certainty, or truth-guaranteeing grounds, for beliefs. As Hegel puts it here, all of us already know that we cannot have any such grounds, that our consciousness of empirical claims ceases to be and is completely lacking in that kind of ground. His language in the passage is evocative and somewhat metaphorical. But his point is

clearly incompatible with – indeed, directed against – an appeal to perception as a truth-guaranteeing ground for empirical claims. And so it is directed against disjunctivism.

Before turning to examine Hegel’s argument for his anti-disjunctivist claim, I want to address one objection that might have already occurred to readers. Hegel’s claim is that we cannot know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. So, for example, Hegel’s claim is that we cannot know that, if I see that P, then P. But, the objection goes, perception is factive: if I see that P, then P. Moreover, this character of perception is typically thought to be known *a priori*: we know it, simply from reflecting on what “see that P” means.

This argument is too quick. For a disjunctivist cannot simply stipulate that we have *a priori* knowledge that perception is factive: that has to unfold from, or at least be consistent with, the conception of perception that disjunctivism articulates. And while it is true that the disjunctivist intends to arrive at such a conception of perception, Hegel’s argument is directed at their attempt to do so. He argues that to know that perception is factive requires knowing something about the relation between perception and the world: namely, that (some part of) the world is perceivable. And, as we will see, he argues that (on the disjunctivist’s picture) we cannot know that.

In this subsection, I have shown that Hegel rejects disjunctivism as an answer to skepticism. In particular, Hegel claims that one cannot know, in a skepticism defeating way, that perception is a truth-guaranteeing ground. In the next subsection, I will examine his argument for this claim.

§2.2 Hegel’s Argument Against Disjunctivism

Before diving into Hegel's argument, some preliminaries: given my dialectical purposes, I will write as though Hegel's objection is directly an objection to disjunctivism, though of course he is responding to Schulze and not to disjunctivism. Further, it will help to introduce a mildly technical notion of "experiential knowledge" and related terms.¹⁹ Recall that, according to a disjunctivist, to respond to skepticism I must be able to have empirical beliefs with truth-guaranteeing grounds such that I know the grounds to be truth-guaranteeing, and that perception is such a truth-guaranteeing ground. Let "experiential knowledge" mean a belief that (is supposed to) be grounded in perception in this manner and let "experiential belief" mean a belief that one takes to be experiential knowledge. Finally, according to the disjunctivist, without experiential knowledge, no other beliefs can be adequately grounded, and so the ground of other empirical beliefs (for instance, scientific theories) ultimately depends on experiential knowledge (cf. McDowell 2019: 32).

The starting point for Hegel's argument is the uncontroversial point that, like all other empirical claims, experiential claims are such that one cannot determine whether they are true simply from reflecting on their content (cf. Hegel 2.254/4.225). To know some experiential claim, one must consider how things are with what the claim is about, and the experiential claim itself is not what it is about. That is why one needs to invoke (for instance) perception as the ground for the claim.

Hegel then notes that the fact that one cannot determine whether experiential claims are true by reflecting on their content "agrees poorly with what is said about [their] indisputable certainty," the claim that they have a truth-guaranteeing ground (Hegel 2.254/4.225). In his explanation of why these two points are inconsistent with one another, he argues that the best we can do in making experiential claims is "presuppose" the possibility of agreement between our

¹⁹ This is Kern's term, and I am describing it in a way that fits her characterization of it: cf. Kern 2017: 254-5.

claims and what they are about. We cannot “express and know [*erkennen*]” the presupposed agreement (Hegel 2.255/4.226). I may claim that the cat is grey, and the cat may indeed be grey, and I may appeal to perception to ground my claim that the cat is grey. But I will only be in a position to presuppose that perception can provide truth-guaranteeing grounds for my claim; I will be unable to know that it can.

Why does Hegel think that? According to the disjunctivist, I must know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. Either this claim is empirically grounded, such that I can only know it by appealing to something other than the claim itself. Or the grounds for the claim somehow lie in the content of the claim itself, such that it grounds itself or is *a priori*.²⁰ For example, my claim that my capacity to see provides truth-guaranteeing grounds can only be true if (some part of) the world is in fact “seeable” or such as to be known by sight. I either need to go beyond the content of this claim to know it to be true, by considering the world and whether any part of it is indeed seeable. Or I can know that the capacity to see provides truth-guaranteeing grounds by considering the content of the claim alone (so, simply through reflection on the nature of my capacity to see).

According to On Schulze’s picture, the grounds for the claim cannot lie in the claim itself. This follows from Schulze’s thought that all claims about the world are such that they cannot ground themselves: in Hegel’s terminology, Schulze’s “absolute fundamental principle” is that “the *thought*, because it is something thought, as such does not contain a *being* in itself” (Hegel 2.251/4.223). That is, Schulze’s starting point is that claims about the world must have their ground outside of themselves, in the way things are with what they are about. The claim that perception has truth-guaranteeing grounds is a claim about the world (that some part of it is seeable, for instance). So, by Schulze’s lights, it cannot be grounded in itself.

²⁰ I say more about the *a priori* in the next section.

It must, then, be an empirical claim. But if the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds is an empirical claim, then it cannot be known but at best presupposed. The claim is a claim about the grounds for experiential claims in general, and so it cannot be grounded by appeal to any other experiential claim (that would be circular). As all other empirical knowledge is supposed to depend on experiential knowledge, this means it cannot be grounded by appealing to any other empirical claim. And as the claim is an empirical claim, it cannot be grounded by appealing to an *a priori* claim. That leaves us with an appeal to a truth-guaranteeing ground that establishes the truth of the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. That is, on this account, we need to perceive that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

So, we now cite perception in two places: as that which the claim that needs to be grounded is about, and as that which grounds the claim. We are either dealing with the same form of perception in the two places, or different ones. If different, then the problem will recur: how can we know that the newly introduced form of perception grounds judgments about the world? For example, suppose that the grounds for my claim that sight grounds beliefs about the world is a form of perception. One cannot ground that claim by appealing to another form of perception (e.g., touch), without raising the same question about that form of perception. The real question is how we can know that any form of perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

So, we will have to appeal to the form of perception the claim is about as the ground for the claim. But that will not work either. If I cite sight as the basis on which I claim that sight provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, then I simply presuppose that sight provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. And, as Hegel notes, I cannot ground my claim that perception provides

truth-guaranteeing grounds simply by presupposing that it does. So, disjunctivism cannot account for our knowledge that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, and so cannot deliver on its anti-skeptical promise.

At this point, one might conclude that the demands the disjunctivist places on knowledge are too high: to know that P on the basis of perceiving that P, perceiving must provide a truth-guaranteeing ground, but I do not need to know that it does. And if I do not need to know that perceiving provides a truth-guaranteeing ground, then the problem that Hegel raises goes away: I can, legitimately, simply presuppose that perceiving provides a truth-guaranteeing ground. This response abandons disjunctivism, and so, in effect, concedes Hegel's argument against disjunctivism. (Though I will suggest in the conclusion that Hegel himself goes in a different direction.) In any event, I will set this response aside as unavailable to the disjunctivist.

Schulze simply concedes that the agreement between experiential claims and the world that he outlines is a "riddle": inexplicable, but something we must accept since (he thinks) we cannot doubt that we possess experiential knowledge. He writes, "[T]he agreement of representations with things [*Sachen*] is one of the greatest riddles of human nature.... In daily life we constantly presuppose the reality of such an agreement as certain, without in the least concerning ourselves over its possibility."²¹ So, Schulze thinks that we should maintain the disjunctivist account of experiential knowledge (because we cannot do otherwise), even though that account rests on a claim that we cannot make intelligible.

Hegel's response is scathing. Schulze is committed to the indisputable certainty of the claims that we ground in perception. But, Hegel argues, if we cannot make our right to that

²¹ Schulze 1801: 70. This passage is about our representations of the world in Schulze's technical sense, which excludes perception. But he notes elsewhere that the possibility of perception is also an insoluble riddle (though one that is less "great"): Schulze 1801: volume II, 66. For a helpful exchange on this issue in Schulze, cf. Engstler 1996 and Vieweg 1999: 215-7.

certainty intelligible, the certainty becomes merely “psychological” (Hegel 2.256/4.227). In other words, it furnishes us with no reason to think that our perceptually grounded claims do in fact agree with the world. The reassurance that we must presuppose that the world can agree with our representations is ineffectual when we are robbed of our ability to take that very reassurance as objective.

Similarly, it seems like the disjunctivist cannot simply assert that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds that are known to be such by the one who makes experiential claims. They must make this claim at least intelligible. To make it intelligible requires showing how one can know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. What we have seen so far from Hegel is that one cannot know that it does if the claim that it does is an empirical claim. Supposing that we cannot know that it does in general, then the disjunctivist’s claim becomes unintelligible, a riddle that no one can solve.

Schulze’s position is intolerable. One might instead argue that the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds is not empirical, but grounded in itself. I turn to consider this response to Hegel’s argument now.

§3 Disjunctivist Responses Part 1: Kern’s Formal Idealism

In this section and the next, I will consider two possible responses that disjunctivists might make to Hegel’s argument. These are the two responses that I take to be the most philosophically significant, and also the ones I believe a disjunctivist is most likely to make. The first response is to argue that the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds is self-grounding, or *a priori*, and not experiential. Of disjunctivists, Andrea Kern has developed this view most thoroughly. After laying out her account, I will turn to consider Hegel’s response.

§3.1 Disjunctivism, the *A Priori*, and Formal Idealism

Before discussing Kern's conception of the self-grounding nature of the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, I want to consider Schulze's conception of the *a priori* and consider also Hegel's response to it. Schulze too considers the possibility of appealing to *a priori* knowledge as a possible way of solving the riddle of how our representations can agree with the world: perhaps we can know that they can agree, because we can have knowledge of the nature of the world prior to perceiving it. But Schulze quickly dismisses this solution, as the possibility of such knowledge (as he understands it) is just another expression of the riddle and cannot solve it. He writes, in a passage we have already partially considered (but now with the ellipses filled in):

[T]he agreement of representations with things [*Sachen*] is one of the greatest riddles of human nature, and at the same time in this riddle is contained the secret of the possibility of cognition of things *a priori*, that is still before we have intuited these things. In daily life we constantly presuppose the reality of such an agreement as certain, without in the least concerning ourselves over its possibility.²²

In this passage, Schulze considers the possibility that we could know the world to conform to our capacity to perceive *a priori*. But, he claims, making sense of that possibility requires already having solved the riddle; it cannot be the solution to the riddle. As we have seen, Schulze thinks that the riddle cannot be solved. And, in fact, he concludes that we ought to be skeptics about philosophy rather than (impossibly, he thinks) skeptics about experiential knowledge.²³

Hegel mocks Schulze's account of the *a priori*: on Schulze's crude picture, "the things are outside; the capacity for cognition is inside; whenever this capacity cognizes without looking at the things, it cognizes *a priori*" (Hegel 2.255-6/4.226). Schulze thinks of *a priori* knowledge as just like knowledge based on perception (on "looking"), in that it is about what is other than

²² Schulze 1801: 70.

²³ Cf. Schulze 1801: 55-74.

our cognitive capacities (like all empirical beliefs), except somehow it magically occurs without the assistance of perception. This crude understanding of the *a priori* is, Hegel thinks, a symptom of (and not a justification for) Schulze's skepticism about solving the riddle. A disjunctivist need not accept it and can instead understand the *a priori* very differently.

That is just what Kern does. In response to considerations very similar to the ones that we saw Hegel bring to bear in §2.2, Kern notes that the capacity for experiential knowledge must, in a certain sense, constitute itself through its acts, and, in constituting itself, it must constitute the possibility of its objects. *A priori* knowledge, at least the relevant kind of *a priori* knowledge, is then understood in terms of what is known to be true in virtue of the acts by which the capacity constitutes itself. The knowledge had through the self-constituting acts of the capacity for experiential knowledge, Kern says, cannot be like other acts of that capacity. Specifically, the knowledge cannot be grounded in perception, since these acts constitute the possibility of perception. Further, the acts of the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge represent the very capacity that they constitute by articulating the nature of its acts. That is, they are about themselves. Knowledge had through these acts is thus knowledge of the very capacity that is constituted in the acts. As Kern puts it, a capacity for experiential knowledge is “a capacity that constitutes itself by employing concepts of objects that make objects of experiential knowledge possible in the first place and, hence, that constitutes itself through *a priori* knowledge of itself as a capacity for experiential knowledge” (Kern 2017: 256). What we know through these acts would not require a ground outside of the conceptual connections articulated in these acts; what we know through these acts would, thus, not be empirical knowledge but rather *a priori* knowledge.

As I said, on Kern's view the capacity for experiential knowledge constitutes itself *in a certain sense*. It is important to clarify the sense in which the capacity constitutes itself. For the self-constitution of the capacity to have the relevant anti-skeptical conclusion Kern takes it to have, in constituting itself it must also constitute the form of objects in the world: in constituting itself, it makes the "objects of experiential knowledge possible in the first place," as Kern puts it. That is: it makes them possible not merely as objects of experiential knowledge, but therein makes them possible as objects full stop. If the form of objects in the world were independent of the self-constitution of the capacity to judge about the world, then that self-constitution could not amount to *a priori* knowledge of the form of such objects. And if it did not amount to *a priori* knowledge of the form of objects in the world, then it could not yield knowledge that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds for claims about those objects, since it could not be knowledge of the connection between perception and what is perceived. It follows that, on Kern's view, disjunctivism is a kind of *formal idealism*: the form of objects in the world is constituted and known *a priori* in the self-constitution of the capacity to judge about the world. For example, on this view, I know from reflection on the nature of my capacity to see that (part of) the world is seeable.

Formal idealism needs to be sharply distinguished from material idealism, or the claim that the being of worldly objects consists in their being known or perceived. We can distinguish varieties of formal idealism according to which cognitive capacity is at issue. One might argue that to be is to be knowable. Or that to be is to be perceivable. Common to all varieties of formal idealism is that what it is to be is understood in terms of being a *possible* object of cognitive capacities (or of one cognitive capacity). According to (parallel) varieties of material idealism, to be is to be judged, or to be is to be perceived. That is, according to material idealism, being is

understood in terms of being an *actual* object of cognitive capacities (or of one cognitive capacity). Kern adopts a version of the first variety of formal idealism, in particular focusing on the claim that one way of being is being perceptually knowable (cf. Kern 2017: 271). So, on Kern's view, disjunctivism is only tied to formal idealism, and is in no way committed to (and arguably incompatible with) material idealism.

§3.2 Hegel's Response: The Esotericism of Philosophy

Hegel has a response to formal idealism, and so a response to Kern's view, though it is a response that takes us some ways away from what contemporary epistemology understands to be its domain: it concerns what Hegel thinks of as the esoteric nature of philosophy. The basic point of his response is that the kind of act Kern invokes to explain our capacity for experiential knowledge cannot be (as Kern contends) an act of the capacity for experiential knowledge.

Our capacity for experiential knowledge is a capacity to make claims such that the truth of our claims is determined by how things are with the world and not knowable simply through reflection on the content of our claims. Kern invokes the idea of an act of this capacity that is logically quite different, in that its truth is knowable simply through reflection on the content of the claim, specifically because the claim is about itself. How can one capacity issue forth in such logically different acts? Hegel thinks that it cannot.

Importantly, Hegel is no foe to claims that are about themselves in Kern's sense. Indeed, he thinks philosophy consists in such claims. But he argues that the capacity for experiential knowledge (in his terms, "the understanding") is unable to make sense of philosophical claims (in his terms, "speculation"). For instance, Hegel notes that "speculation deems the understanding thoroughly incapable of philosophy" (Hegel 2.258/4.228). And Hegel notes that

“[p]hilosophy is, by its nature, something esoteric, it is not made for the rabble nor is it able to be spread to the rabble [*Pöbel*]; in this way, it is only philosophy in that it is exactly opposed to the understanding...”²⁴

Hegel’s point in these two passages is that philosophical claims, of the sort that Kern appeals to in order to avert skepticism about the capacity for experiential knowledge, cannot be made sense of “from within” the capacity for experiential knowledge. Hegel does not mean that one with such a capacity cannot be made to grasp philosophy, and he does not think philosophy is esoteric in the sense that it is only a possession of the few. As he puts it, “philosophy must indeed cognize the possibility that the people raise themselves to it, but it must not lower itself to the people.”²⁵ His point is that philosophy cannot be understood as an act of the capacity for experiential knowledge, that it is esoteric in that it cannot be explained in those terms.

Though the idea that philosophy is esoteric may seem to transgress the bounds of epistemology, the argument for it is just a continuation of the line of reasoning we saw in §2.2.

²⁴ Hegel 2.182/4.124-5. I have consulted Bristow’s translation in Bristow 2007: 185.

²⁵ Hegel 2.182/4.125. William Bristow has claimed that Hegel’s position on the relation between the understanding and philosophy changes between 1802 (when he wrote the essays I have quoted from about the esoteric nature of philosophy) and 1807 (when he wrote the *Phenomenology*). In particular, Bristow claims that Hegel came to see that the understanding has a right to demand that it be offered a justification for the appeal to speculation (cf. Bristow 2007: 184-203). His reading of various passages from the *Phenomenology* is quite compelling. I find his argument that Hegel came to think that it is *necessary* (and not merely possible) for philosophy to “raise” the people to it, and that that is key to understanding the project of the *Phenomenology*, completely persuasive. But Bristow also claims that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel rejects the idea that philosophy is esoteric, and I find this claim unconvincing. His argument rests on reading Hegel’s earlier works uncharitably. In particular, Bristow understands the claim that philosophy is esoteric to mean “that its principle cannot be justified or made intelligible to the ordinary consciousness through the provision of reasons that ordinary consciousness is capable of recognizing the validity of” (Bristow 2007: 166-7). That is, he takes it that if philosophy is esoteric in Hegel’s sense, then it cannot be made intelligible to ordinary knowers. But that is not what Hegel means by “esoteric”: Hegel means, not that ordinary knowers cannot be made to grasp philosophy and the need for it, but that what they grasp will not be intelligible as ordinary knowledge. As the passage I quote in the main text makes plain, philosophy recognizes the possibility (though Hegel is not yet prepared to say that philosophy recognizes the necessity) that people “raise” themselves to it. (Bristow quotes this passage in a footnote on 186, but he does not try to reconcile his interpretation of Hegel’s claim that philosophy is esoteric with it.)

Further confirmation for my interpretation of Hegel’s understanding of the “esoteric” can be found in his later lectures on the philosophy of spirit and the history of philosophy. There he describes a bad understanding of “esoteric” as the possession of only some, contrasting that with a good understanding of the term, on which it is synonymous with philosophy: cf. 19.21-2, 76-7, 143-4, and the Addition to §573 of the *Encyclopedia*.

The capacity for experiential knowledge is a capacity to know through perceiving. In the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge, according to formal idealism, I am supposed to know this (among other things): perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. But of course I do not yet know that I perceive anything, for that requires an actual and not merely possible connection to a worldly object. So, there must be some condition on experiential knowledge the obtaining of which is not secured by the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge. Indeed, it is easy to specify the condition: we do not know that there is anything to perceive. And if there is nothing to perceive, of course there can be no perception, and so no truth-guaranteeing grounds for any experiential claims. We cannot know whether there is something to perceive from the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge. So, the most that we could know in a self-constituting act of the capacity for experiential knowledge is that, if there is an act of perception, it provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

Hegel makes this point most clearly in his 1816 *Science of Logic*.²⁶ In his discussion of the capacity for experiential knowledge in that work, he notes that “the content still has the determination of *something given*, such that the presupposed *being in itself* opposed to the concept is not sublated” (6.499/12.200-1). That is, the capacity for experiential knowledge always relies on being given what it knows; the availability of what is known for knowledge is a condition the obtaining of which is not something that can be secured by the capacity itself. As noted, it seems like the formal idealist can arrive at this conclusion: if there is an act of perception, it provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. But the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge cannot discharge the antecedent, since it cannot know but must merely

²⁶ For similar arguments, cf. 2.179-181/4.122-124. I quote from Hegel’s later work because it is clearer, and to suggest that he remains committed to this point throughout his career.

presuppose that there is something to perceive (which, as we have seen, is a condition on there being an act of perception).

But what is the problem for formal idealism? Why does it need to arrive at anything more than the conditional? Why, in particular, must it discharge the antecedent by yielding knowledge that there is something to perceive? Hegel describes the problem like this: the capacity “*in its truth* still has *not* come to *the truth*” (6.499/12.200). “The truth,” in this context, is Hegel’s term for that kind of knowledge which can secure the availability of what is known from itself.²⁷ The capacity for experiential knowledge has its foundation in something given, where this means that it cannot secure the availability of the objects it knows. The capacity for experiential knowledge, thus, cannot attain “the truth.”

There are many questions one might raise about why we need “the truth” in Hegel’s sense. But in our context those questions have already been answered by the disjunctivists themselves: we need to arrive at knowledge that can secure the availability of what is known from itself, the disjunctivist thinks, in order to avoid skepticism. Specifically, if there are conditions on the availability of what is known that are not known to obtain, then for all we know, what we believe might be false: what is supposed to be known may not be as we believe it to be. And that is skepticism, according to the disjunctivist. So, to have experiential knowledge, we must know that there are objects to perceive; we cannot merely presuppose that.

We can work out this argument in a somewhat different way. The capacity for experiential knowledge is a capacity to know through perceiving. If there were nothing to perceive, there could be no acts of that capacity. But, according to the formal idealist

²⁷ And also, from the other side, that kind of object which can secure its being known from itself. The need for this further idea, apparently much more difficult, arises as a consequence of Hegel’s alternative to formal idealism; here I only hope to show what Hegel finds wanting in formal idealism. Illuminating the need for and character of this other side of “the truth” falls outside of my scope in this paper.

development of disjunctivism, the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge is an act of that capacity. So, the self-constitution requires that the capacity be in act: specifically, it must issue forth in the act of self-constitution. And so the self-constitution requires that there is something to perceive. It follows that to know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, even in the form of knowing the conditional that if there is an act of perception, then..., one must know that there is something to perceive.

So, to know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds requires knowing that there is something to perceive. We have seen that I cannot know that there is something to perceive in the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge: for that requires an actual connection to a worldly object, as opposed to a merely possible one. And the knowledge that this condition obtains must be logically prior to an act of perception, as it is required for the self-constitution of the capacity to perceive. So, the obtaining of the condition can be known neither through the self-constitution of the capacity to perceive nor through perception. Hence, the most we can do is presuppose that the condition obtains, and therein presuppose that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

One might wonder why I cannot know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds if the condition obtains without my knowledge of it – that is, why I must know that the condition obtains to know that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. Why can't the actuality of the objects that one perceives obtain independently of the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge, as a prior condition on its possibility?

This proposal concedes the conclusion arrived at above, that the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge requires that there are objects of perceptual knowledge. But the self-constitution, recall, is supposed to make those very same objects possible. So, the

actuality of the objects of perception is, on this proposal, a condition on the possibility of their possibility. And that is absurd. Given formal idealism, the actuality of the objects of perception cannot be prior to the self-constitution of the capacity for experiential knowledge.²⁸

Formal idealism was invoked to make intelligible our supposed knowledge that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. But it cannot do what it was invoked to do. So, formal idealism cannot save disjunctivism from Hegel's objection.

§4 Disjunctivist Responses Part 2: Ignoring the Skeptic and McDowell's Transcendental Argument

The second response the disjunctivist might make to Hegel's argument is that it is perfectly legitimate simply to presuppose that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, and that the demand that we be able to "express and cognize" (Hegel's terms) that it does is one that we can reasonably disregard in the argument with the skeptic. One can find something like this argument in John McDowell's essay "The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Grounds for a Transcendental Argument." I will lay out the parts of his argument as it is contained in that essay, and then respond to it. I should note, though, that it is unclear to me whether he intended his argument in that essay to be responsive to the considerations I have drawn from Hegel. But it is clear to me that at first blush it seems like it could be used in such a way, and so it is worth showing why that use of his argument is unsuccessful.

As McDowell explains the dialectical situation, the skeptic about "perceptually acquired knowledge of the empirical world" is one who thinks that the best epistemic basis perception can

²⁸ If one eschewed formal idealism, one could of course invoke the actuality of the objects of perception as an independent and prior condition on the possibility of the capacity for experiential knowledge. But in that case, one would have to advert to perception as that which provided knowledge that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. And, as argued in §2.2, perception cannot provide that knowledge; it can at most presuppose that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

provide does not suffice for knowledge, because it only yields “something less than having an environmental fact directly available to one” (McDowell 2009a: 228). So, it suffices to respond to skepticism if one can show that perception can in fact make an environmental fact directly available to one.

To secure that possibility, McDowell makes a transcendental argument in favor of disjunctivism. He thinks that the skeptic concedes that perceptual experience has objective purport, or that when one perceives “it at least appears to one as if things in one’s environment are a certain way” (McDowell 2009a: 230). And he argues that we can only make sense of the objective purport of perception if environmental facts can be made directly available by perception: otherwise, McDowell argues, we lose our grip on the possibility that, when one perceives, things so much as appear to be a certain way. Here is how he puts it:

In order to find it intelligible that experience has objective purport at all, we must be able to make sense of an epistemically distinguished class of experiences, those in which (staying with the visual case) one sees how things are – those in which how things are makes itself visually available to one. Experiences in which it merely looks to one as if things are thus and so are experiences that misleadingly present themselves as belonging to that epistemically distinguished class. So we need the idea of experiences that belong to the epistemically distinguished class if we are to comprehend the idea that experiences have objective purport.²⁹

Appearing to be some way, McDowell claims, is not an independently intelligible notion. If, in perception, something appears to be some way, then I must explain that in terms of my being able to perceive that something is that way. If that is granted, and it is conceded that things appear to be in various ways in perception, then the notion of perception is intelligible only in virtue of there being a “kind” of perception (genuine perception, not merely apparent perception) which has its objective purport in virtue of presenting environmental facts as they are. So, on

²⁹ McDowell 2009a: 230; for similar arguments, cf. McDowell 1998: 389 and Kern 2017: 107-10. McDowell traces the argument back to Sellars’s *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (cf. Sellars 1997: §§10-23).

pain of losing the idea of the objective purport of perception that the skeptic (on McDowell's view) takes for granted, it must be possible for perception to make environmental facts directly available to one. The relevance of this argument for us is that it purports to entitle us to a notion of perception on which it provides truth-guaranteeing grounds, as that is the epistemic significance of McDowell's talk of the direct availability of an environment fact. McDowell's point is that perception must provide us with truth-guaranteeing grounds, or it could not even have objective purport.

Rather than trying to poke holes in McDowell's transcendental argument, I want to show that even if it is true it does not suffice as a response to Hegel's argument that disjunctivism leads to skepticism. Imagine that I (taking up McDowell's position) am engaged in debate with the skeptic. I have brought her to acknowledge that to make sense of the possibility of the world's seeming to be some way in perception it must be possible for perception to provide truth-guaranteeing grounds. McDowell's argument, however, does not directly engage with Hegel's reasoning as explained in §§2 and 3. Even if we concede every step of McDowell's argument, it just establishes that to make sense of the world's appearing to be a certain way in perception, perception must be able to provide truth-guaranteeing grounds. But it provides us with no way to ground the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. So, it just reveals a further consequence of the skeptical position: perception, it turns out, cannot even provide us with a way things so much as seem to be.

Crucially, my response to McDowell does not consist in raising the standard for what a successful response to skepticism consists in. That standard, according to McDowell, is: make sense of, or reveal to be possible, that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

According to the disjunctivist, for perception to provide truth-guaranteeing grounds, I have to (be

in a position to) know that it does. So, to show that it is possible for perception to provide truth-guaranteeing grounds would require showing how it is possible to have grounds for claiming, of a perception, that it provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. McDowell's transcendental argument does not show how that is possible. And Hegel's argument shows that we cannot show how that is possible. At this point in the dialectic, McDowell's argument can entail nothing more than a further consequence of skepticism, that we can no longer make sense of perception as yielding how things even seem to be.³⁰

Moreover, Hegel already saw that this further consequence was the right conclusion to draw. As he puts it, if we draw out the consequences of Schulze's position, then "no rational being can even consider itself to be in *possession of a representation* of something" (2.254/4.225). So, Hegel's response to Schulze already concluded that, on Schulze's view properly thought out, neither perceptions nor any other mental item have objective purport.

One might respond, on behalf of McDowell, that Hegel's skepticism is different from the skepticism McDowell responds to, and that it is not reasonable to object to disjunctivism's response to one kind of skepticism by noting that it is not a satisfying response to another kind. McDowell invokes disjunctivism to respond to skepticism of a Cartesian sort, skepticism that is grounded in the argument from illusion. He does not offer disjunctivism in response to what appears to be a more radical, post-Kantian form of skepticism, the skepticism that exercises Hegel. McDowell even explicitly notes that his transcendental argument is not meant to "do all the work" against "a skepticism willing to doubt that perceptual experience purports to be of

³⁰ Lockhart notes that all that McDowell needs to do to show that "we need not be troubled by Cartesian skepticism" is to show that it is "intelligible" that perceptions make environmental facts available to one (Lockhart 2012: 338). I agree with him. My point is that McDowell has not done that, at least in relation to the skeptical argument that Hegel presents. For the kind of availability in question is one that grounds claims; and McDowell requires that I recognize the grounds for my claim to be sufficient, which in this case means truth-guaranteeing. So, the intelligibility of the availability turns on there being grounds that would be known to be truth-guaranteeing by the claim-maker, and that is just what Hegel's argument reveals to be impossible.

objective reality” (McDowell 2009a: 233). He further notes that to respond to that skepticism we might instead appeal to the possibility of being self-conscious; regardless of how that would go, McDowell reasonably notes that “we cannot dismiss an argument that pivots on the disjunctive conception of perceptual appearance, on the ground that it does not itself establish the characteristic of perceptual experience that it begins from” (viz. objective purport) (McDowell 2009a: 233).

The first point to note in response to this defense of disjunctivism is that the more radical kind of skepticism is not actually directed at the idea of objective purport; it is directed at the possibility of grounding experiential knowledge, which is just what disjunctivism attempts to make sense of with its appeal to perception as providing truth-guaranteeing grounds. The problem is that the disjunctivist strategy for responding to Cartesian worries about that possibility in fact raises more radical worries, because they appeal to perception as a truth-guaranteeing ground that is known to be such. That is precisely Hegel’s point against Schulze.

The second point to note is that it is not at all clear that any strategy of the transcendental type that McDowell recommends can respond to the more radical kind of skepticism. Consider the possible response that McDowell sketches: it is a condition on the possibility of being self-conscious of our mental states (in Kantian terminology: transcendently apperceiving them) that at least some of them have objective purport. Suppose that is right, and that we can only make sense of any mental state having objective purport if we can make sense of perception having objective purport. Still we would lack an account of how we could be justified in judging that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds. If such a transcendental argument succeeded, it would only make the skeptical consequences yet more severe, by rendering self-consciousness unintelligible. The problem is that transcendental arguments of the sort that McDowell envisions

do not respond to the basic skeptical worry that disjunctivism generates: that it is impossible to ground the claim that perception provides truth-guaranteeing grounds.

I do not pretend to have shown that there is no strategy for responding to the more radical kind of skepticism that is consistent with disjunctivism. Perhaps there is some strategy that does not consist in transcendental argument. In any event, disjunctivism itself seems to generate the more radical skeptical threat, which makes the conjectured defense of it (that it was not meant to respond to the more radical kind of skepticism) at the very least incomplete.

Conclusion

I have argued that Hegel would claim that disjunctivism leads to skepticism. Hegel is not a skeptic about empirical knowledge.³¹ Where exactly would Hegel depart from disjunctivism?

Readers will likely suspect that Hegel would depart from disjunctivism's appeal to perception as a truth-guaranteeing ground for claims, and instead try to respond to skepticism with some form of holism, in the manner of Donald Davidson or Robert Brandom. After all, the idea that Hegel rejects any appeal to immediacy is widespread. And this view is arguably compatible with an appeal to some form of reliability condition for knowledge that need not be known to obtain, such that the contradiction that Hegel thinks besets the disjunctivist attempt to answer skepticism can be avoided. Brandom's inferentialism might just be more Hegelian than McDowell's disjunctivism.³²

³¹ This claim is controversial: there is a long history of reading Hegel as a monist, and defenders of that view have often attributed some kind of skepticism about empirical knowledge to him. For a sophisticated defense of this view that makes explicit contact with contemporary epistemology, cf. Bowman 2013. Ultimately, I think this view is unsatisfying, though (as should become clear) I think there is a great deal of truth in it.

³² For a discussion of the inferentialist response to skepticism in Hegel, cf. Brandom 2019: 35ff., 94ff. For the idea that this view is compatible with appealing to a reliability condition on knowledge that need not be within one's ken, cf. Brandom: 1994: 217-221.

For all I have established in this paper, Hegel may well be an inferentialist. But in fact I do not think Hegel is an inferentialist. In particular, I think Hegel would grant the two claims that define disjunctivism: he would grant that, in an account of empirical knowledge, we need to appeal to perception as a truth-guaranteeing ground that is known to be such in perceiving, and he would not find the inferentialist's response to skepticism satisfying. On my view, Hegel would depart from disjunctivism by claiming that the capacity for experiential knowledge cannot, on its own, be saved from skepticism. That is, he would claim that the self-understanding we have in making empirical claims is necessarily skeptical, that it leads to skeptical despair. The skeptical despair is simply not avoidable from "within" the capacity for experiential knowledge.

Hegel (again on my view, which I can only dogmatically lay out here) does not think skeptical despair is the last word, however. He thinks that we need to appeal to another form of knowledge ("speculation") which enables us to make sense of the capacity for experiential knowledge. That, I think, is the force of Hegel's infamous claim that philosophy is esoteric – the point is not that only a few can comprehend philosophy, but that insofar as we, all of us, relate to the world as to something other, we cannot comprehend philosophy, and we are driven to despair when we try to comprehend ourselves. All of us are able to comprehend philosophy (and, therein, comprehend our capacity to judge about the world), but only by advancing to a very different form of knowledge.

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