

Therapy for the Therapist: A McDowellian Critique of Semantic Externalism in Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics*

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Semantic Externalism and “Therapy” in Kevin Hector’s *Theology without Metaphysics*

In *Theology without Metaphysics* Kevin Hector takes himself to be engaged in the exercise of a kind of theological “therapy” inspired by the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* (Hector 2011, 1).¹ The image conjured up by Wittgensteinian “therapy” is that of the anxious philosopher seated at the therapist’s couch, afflicted with a conceptual worry that has prompted him to construct theoretical fantasies.² Rather than engaging the theorist at the level of those constructions, however, the therapist attempts to diagnose what they are *really* about. Her job is to uncover the fundamental issue motivating the theorist’s anxieties – the heart of the matter which his flights of theorizing have blinded him from seeing clearly for himself. So rather than helping to navigate the terrain as *he* sees it, the therapist exposes the underlying motivations that prompted his philosophical anxiety, revealing them to be false, needless, or incoherent. In so doing, she shifts the terms of his worry onto new terrain. Once repositioned on this higher ground, the theorist can see clearly the mistaken path that led him inexorably to a philosophical puzzle in need of resolving. He now does so, however, from the vantage of a new path not encumbered by any such obstacle.³

If Hector is our therapist, then who are we, the afflicted? And what afflicts us? It is not, as his book’s title may at first seem to suggest, “metaphysics” *per se*, but as he later clarifies, one particular conception of it – namely, what he calls

¹ All subsequent citations from this source are cited with page numbers only.

² See Baker (2004, 144-178). He makes the case that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy was guided by a psychoanalytic conception of the dissolution of philosophical problems, albeit largely indirectly, by way of Wittgenstein’s mediation through Friedrich Waismann: “The analogy with psychoanalysis is not developed very far or at all systematically in these or other texts, and this makes it impossible to establish exactly what Wittgenstein had in view in drawing it. But it seems to have struck Waismann as holding the key to unlocking Wittgenstein’s distinctive method of conducting philosophical investigations” (145).

³ Compare, e.g., Wittgenstein (1979, 1), “[W]e must uncover the source of error: otherwise hearing what is true won’t help us”; Wittgenstein (2009, 98): “The philosopher treats a question, like an illness [*Krankheit*]”; and Baker and Hacker (1983, 228) quoting Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*: “You are under the impression that the problem is *difficult*, when it’s *impossible*. I want you to realize that you are under a spell” (MS 158, 37).

“essentialist-correspondentism” (henceforth, ‘EC’). EC, as he defines it, is comprised of

essentialism, the supposition that that which is fundamentally real about an object is an idea-like ‘essence’ (which stands at a remove from that which one experiences); and *correspondentism*, the claim that human minds or words are in touch with this reality in virtue of their enjoying a kind of privileged access to it (45-6).

Hector’s characterization of EC makes it out to be a theory of intentionality – a theory of how what we think and say manages to “reach out” to the world and how the world manages to “reach in” to our thought and language, so that the semantic structure of our words and concepts can rightly be said to be “about” reality, to have semantic content. But while EC is a contestable claim about intentionality, it has become our common-sense assumption about how our minds put us in touch with reality.

On Hector’s story, the assumption of EC by theologians has presented us with a problem about the way in which our thought or language puts us in touch with God. The idea that God has an “essence” to which our concepts could correspond amounts to “ontotheology” – a kind of idolatry in which one “does violence to God” by cutting him down to the size of our predetermined conceptual categories” (100). We therefore seem to stand in need of a theory that can describe how we can be in touch with God while putting the appropriate distance between God himself and the adequacy of our language to reach out to him and make him available to us. “Apophatic theology,” then, represents a theory of God-talk that we anxiously project in order to navigate around the obstacle of ontotheology. Playing the part of the therapist, Hector suggests that apophatic theologies do not succeed in diagnosing what *really* gives rise to our anxieties, which is not primarily ontotheology, but its presupposition of EC. EC is the underlying theory of intentionality that both entails the ontotheological objection and prompts the apophatic theologian’s attempted solutions.

Accordingly, Hector’s therapeutic move is to shift the terms of theological debate from the problem of ontotheology to the problem of intentionality in general. His claim is that if we can abandon EC as the picture of intentionality that motivates that problem, then we won’t have to solve it, because it will never need to arise for us in the first place.⁴ We thus need, it would seem, an account of how the problem of ontotheology arises from EC and an alternative theory of intentionality to function as the “higher ground” from which to avoid the theological anxieties that go along with it – anxieties about how what we think, say and do can possibly succeed in referring us to God. How then, does EC entail the problem of ontotheology, and what alternate path does he suggest which would render our confrontation of that problem optional?

⁴ Compare Wittgenstein (1979, 1): “It cannot penetrate when something is taking its place. To convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state it, we must find the *road* from error to truth.”

EC, on Hector's description, proceeds from a particular sort of theory of semantic content. According to that theory, the layout of reality is constituted by mind-independent "essences" (essentialism) which, while "standing at a remove from that which one experiences" (45), are nevertheless capable of figuring into thought and language by furnishing the mind with some sort of non-conceptual representational content. "Essences" in Hector's terminology are thus the means by which "objects are immediately available to one, prior to and apart from one's application of concepts to them" (15). For EC, this account of semantic content serves as the basis for deriving an account of semantic structure. That is, once we accept an EC thesis about essences and corresponding ideas as the objects of thought, EC analyzes the structure of concepts in whatever sorts of terms are required for them to function as bearers of semantic content thus understood. On Hector's characterization an EC conception of content motivates a theory of concepts as "containers" for the fixed content imposed on us by the essences of objects. The fashioning and deployment of such containers as exhibited in our use of language aims at achieving an isomorphic relation between the descriptions and categorizations of our conceptual repertoire and the non-conceptual representational content presented to us by object-essences (correspondentism). When such an isomorphism obtains for our concepts, then our linguistic expression of those concepts succeeds in picking out objects or referring. When these object-involving concepts figure into judgments whose predications likewise exhibit an isomorphism with whatever the layout of reality makes available to us, then our judgments (or assertive statements) are true.

The language-independent purport conveyed by objects themselves thus serves as the rational tribunal or *norma normans* for our concept-use, "such that the concept-free perception of an object can (and should) be the means by which concepts are judged" (151). The layout of reality – including the way it stands independently of thought – can thus rationally constrain our thinking precisely *internal* to thought. We directly take in the objective layout of reality by taking in object-essences and then marking them out to figure into the rational relations of thought by applying concepts to them. But it is just this internalism which gives rise to the problem of ontotheology. If our language-use is a matter of conceptually "carving out" a representation of essences which have already been "given" to our awareness, then God-talk inevitably becomes a problem: God presents us with an essence whose content by definition is incapable of being "contained" by any humanly devised concepts. Language must therefore fail in the presence of God, and we are faced with puzzles about how our God-talk succeeds in referring to God or predicating truths about God without thereby domesticating him, "cutting him down to size" or otherwise doing violence to him through the subjection of his essence to a human standard of measure. Jean-Luc Marion is paradigmatic of the theologians who have taken this problem on board. A central aim in Marion's phenomenology of revelation is to make sense of the way in which God breaks free of our conceptual control rather than being mastered by our categories of thought and language (16).⁵

⁵ See Marion (1977) and (2001).

Whereas EC seeks to account for the mind/world relation with an order of explanation that proceeds from a theory of semantic content and derives a theory of semantic structure suited to it, Hector's proposal exactly reverses that procedure. Rather than taking as primitive a "metaphysical" conception of objective purport (one dependent on our intake of concept-free essences) as in the EC picture, Hector aims to "defend an account of language which begins with ordinary practices and then explains how one could use these practices to arrive at (suitably deflated versions of) that which the metaphysical picture purports to provide...notions such as meaning, truth and reference" (37). The idea is that once we have in place a social-practical account of semantic structure, we can derive an adequate account of semantic content in whatever sorts of terms are minimally required for "concepts" thus understood to be meaningful, referential, and true.

Crucially, whereas the EC order of explanation requires an internalist account of how it is that the mind-external world constrains our conceptual responses to it, Hector's alternative order of explanation turns out to demand an externalist account. That is, our conceptualizing of mind-external objects is not on his view a rational responsiveness to the direct presentation of objective content in our conscious awareness, but a "differential responsiveness characteristic of both organic and inorganic objects" (71). Our relation to mind-external objects is thus fundamentally embedded within our discursive practices in the same way that, e.g., an ice-cube's relation to heat is embedded in its melting, or a sunflower's relation to the sun is embedded in its leaning sunward, or the relation of a capillary to an increase in body temperature is embedded in its dilation (*ibid.*). What distinguishes our normative relation to the world from the non-normative relation borne by ice-cubes and capillaries is just that we have capacities to respond not merely to objects in our environment, but *meta-responsive* capacities: we can reliably respond not only e.g., to the warming effects of the sun on us, but also to our responses to that response (72). The norms of concept-use exhibited in our linguistic behavior thus precipitate "out of nothing" – i.e., out of a dispositional relation to our environment which is non-normative – a causal relationship to the external world that we share with mindless objects.

Once we endorse this externalist account of the way objects figure into our norm-governed discursive practices, we have no need to secure the objective purport of our concepts in the internalist way pictured by EC, by positing an intentional relation to concept-free mental content imposed on us by the world itself. We can see objects as constraining and guiding our concept-use without needing to impart something to us such as an "essence" in response to which our concepts must conform. But if the word/world relation is always already embedded in our discursive practices, then we can explain conceptual content – what our linguistic expressions mean, their referents, and the truths they pick out or fail to pick out – entirely in terms of those practices without any residual hankering for the "metaphysics of presence" offered by EC to objectively anchor thought to the world. In other words, with the strictly dispositional picture of object-involvement in place, a theory aimed at explaining the relation between thought and the world borne by language can invert the order of explanation given by EC. We can proceed from an

account of the social-practical structure of concepts already “bound up with objects” (212) and derive our analysis of conceptual content (meaning, reference and truth).

And this is just what Hector’s theory does. On Hector’s pragmatic theory of semantic structure, concepts are that particular species of norms “by which one orders the manifold of one’s experience...by treating certain aspects of the experience as the same as other aspects” (72). Since what we are willing to count as sameness in our mutual recognitions “is neither uniform nor predictable” (69), our use of concepts must be understood in terms of the evolving normative trajectories of intersubjective linguistic performance. The meaning of our linguistic expressions “precipitates out of” this pragmatic theory of concept-use as a species of mutual recognition. An agent’s words “mean” x if and only if x is capable of being recognized to carry on “the normative trajectory implicit in a series of precedents” (105-6). Similarly, our words refer insofar as our use of referring expressions inherits a precedent commitment in a chain of use-instances which stretch back to the original institution of the social practice of naming (165). Since objects are dispositionally “bound up” with our acquisition and use of such expressions (187-189), reference can be spelled out fully in terms of anaphora, our attempt to go on with my use of a term “in the same way” as members of the linguistic community involved in the initial “baptism” of a referring term (165). Finally, the mind-external connection of objects and our norms of discursive practice allows us to analyze the truth of an expression in terms of “the ordinary practice of taking-true” (243). Since our dispositional relation to mind-external objects externally correlates (or tracks “side by side,” as it were) with the conceptually constituted “subject-matter” of our discursive practices in a reliable way, we can regard the evolving norms that govern our “taking as true” as simultaneously restricted to a function of rational relations among our held beliefs and also as incorporating all the “objectivity” we could want (214-217).

On the reading of Hector I’ve been defending, what makes the EC picture “metaphysical” in the sense that gives rise to ontotheology is just that it requires a kind of semantic internalism: concept-use is a kind of intentional relation to concept-free content that reality makes available to us. God must therefore make himself available to thought in a form of concept-free content which we can single out by our concepts, and this makes God susceptible to human mastery. Accordingly, Hector’s proposed therapeutic alternative is “anti-metaphysical” just insofar as it denies semantic internalism and embraces semantic externalism. If objects can figure into thought as a causal basis for our inclinations to respond in some ways and not others, and if our discursive norms precipitate out of those responses, then we will have no need to suppose that objects figure into semantic content via concept-free presentations, because objects don’t enter *into* thought at all (whether by way of resemblances, forms, essences, etc.). Our relation to mind-independent objects is not intentional and mentalistic but causal and dispositional. Such a conception allows us to picture the causal relation between thought and the world as direct and the intentional relation as irreducibly normative. Our God-talk, therefore, can be seen as directly responsive to God’s presence and agency in the world as exhibited in the Church’s evolving intersubjective recognition of the normative Spirit of Christ.

McDowell on Semantic Externalism

While Hector's therapy uniquely depends upon the plausibility of semantic externalism as an alternative to the internalism of EC, semantic externalism as a broad philosophical perspective is hardly unique to Hector. It is constituent in a variety of philosophical strategies deployed by many of the philosophers on whom Hector regularly relies throughout the book.⁶ The structural feature that these various externalisms have in common is their strict separation between the causal dimension that establishes our direct relation to the objects in our environment and the discursive or representational dimension that establishes the normative relations between our concepts and beliefs. While committed to the idea that the representational dimension presupposes the causal dimension, the externalist's key philosophical scruple is to claim that our words and concepts do not represent reality by any mentalistic internalization of our causal relations to reality. Indeed, on the semantic externalist's diagnosis, it is the positing of just such internalizations which leads us to mistakenly understand our words and concepts as attempts to formally resemble, describe or ostensibly define the non-discursive content which is internalized. Externalism therefore implies a "two-ply" view of the relation between thought and the world, in the sense that it tightly coordinates and correlates the relationship between the causal dimension and the normative representational dimension, but it does not permit any "leakage" between the two. On Hector's version, reliable differential dispositions to respond to our environment are slotted into the causal dimension, and his pragmatic account of language and concept-use as a form of mutual recognition in one's attempt to "go on in the same way" is slotted into the normative or representational dimension. He succeeds in avoiding a "container" view of concepts just insofar as he denies that the norms governing our concept-use are responses to any prior and concept-free representations of the causal bearing that our environment has on us.

In *Mind and World*, John McDowell raises an important objection to an externalist account of perceptual experience. While his immediate target is Davidson's account of experience, what he finds objectionable is just the two-ply structure common to all semantic externalisms, including Hector's. Specifically, McDowell complains that on such accounts, "experience is causally relevant to a subject's beliefs and judgments, but it has no bearing on their status as justified or warranted." As a result, "[this] picture depicts our empirical thinking as engaged in with no rational constraint, but only causal influence, from outside" (McDowell

⁶ For example, semantic externalism is a key feature of Brandom's inferentialist semantics, to which Hector appeals both in his pragmatic account of concepts (55), and his account of meaning (106). Similarly, it is implicit in Davidson's "triangulation" theory of reference to which Hector also appeals (158) in coordination with Kripke's causal theory of reference (165). In each case, Hector appropriates some features of these figures and not others to construct his own theory, but semantic externalism as I've characterized it is a key feature incorporated and negotiated within those appropriations. In an earlier critique, I wrongly laid Hector's externalism squarely at the feet of Brandom. Hector quite rightly pointed out that he does not appropriate Brandom's inferentialism "whole hog." However, my underlying mistake was not to claim that Hector is an externalist of some sort, but to presume that it was of an indiscriminatingly Brandomian sort.

1996, 14). The point is that while reliable dispositions to differentially respond to our environment might constitute a causal constraint on thought and language, they also strongly encourage us to picture our experiences as entirely free of normative constraint by reality. But normative constraint is just the kind of constraint we need if the meaning, reference and truth of what we think and say is determined by the external world itself and not merely by us. For while the bearing of objects on our experience is causally direct, and while the discursive responses it makes available to us might be non-inferential and immediate, the directness and immediacy are of the wrong sort.

So in a paradigmatic instance of perceptual experience on Hector's account, I may be reliably disposed toward various mind-independent features of my environment such that those features causally "wring" from me certain concepts consonant with the relevant precedent instances (as described, e.g., in 187-189).⁷ Since the causal impact in question is not internalized in such instances, the only form of awareness that "shows up" in thought and is available to inform or justify my ordinary judgments about reality is a direct and non-inferential awareness of my inclination to deploy a word or concept. But while such an awareness might in fact be reliably correlated with the causal bearing of external objects upon me, what Hector's story denies me is an awareness of the causal bearing *as* the causal bearing it is (McDowell 1996, 179). While I can be aware of my discursive dispositions to respond to my non-discursive dispositions to respond to my environment, I can no more be aware of these most fundamental or lowest-level dispositions out of which my discursive dispositions arise than an ice-cube can be aware of its inclination to melt in the presence of heat or a sunflower can be aware of its inclination to lean sunward. On the two-ply picture of semantic externalism, what reality makes available to thought is not reality itself, but only our reliable differential dispositions to respond to reality.

As long as the structural correspondence between our normative framework and reality outside it remains merely causal and non-representational, minds must remain out of touch with the world. But this makes the problem to which Hector addresses his therapy even worse than it was initially – it began as an EC-driven problem about how our concepts can possibly be thought to direct us on God, but on Hector's alternative to EC it turns out to create a problem about how our concepts can be thought to direct us on anything at all. If, on the other hand, we stipulate that the relation between our non-normative dispositions and our normative discourse *is* representational, then we have come back to the internalism of EC and with it the problem of ontotheology. Two thought experiments help to bring out this worry.

First, consider any one community's norm-governed system of discourse and its dispositional way of being "bound up" with objects as Hector has spelled this out. It might be that the coordination of this system of norms to the world is as we ordinarily take it to be, so that our seeing that this is a table is a function of our

⁷ The image of a perceptual experience as a kind of perceptual taking which is passively "wring" from the perceiver by the object perceived belongs to Wilfrid Sellars (1997, §16, 40). Whether we should read Sellars' use of the image as an indication that his own view endorses a two-ply view, as Brandom seems to suggest, is a contested matter. See Brandom's study guide in Sellars (1997, 179).

being reliably disposed to use the word or concept “table” when in the presence of a table. But we might equally well suppose that this very same system of norms has arisen not out of our reliable differential responses to tables, but out of an entirely different underlying system of causal stimuli. Our discursive inclinations and the norms establishing what counts as “going on in the same way” could equally well be just as they are even if we (or perhaps even our entire discursive community) are in fact, e.g., free-floating brains being kept alive by a mad scientist in an external environment that consists in a vat of chemical soup. We might suppose in such a case that our brains are disposed to differentially respond in a reliable way to regular patterns of electrical stimulation, or to the molecular impacts of the chemical soup upon our neo-cortices. Either way, while it is possible on Hector’s view that my thinking or talking of “this table” has the identical semantic content as in our ordinary situation,⁸ it remains the case that the actual objects in the world from which such content arises in each case would differ radically. In the ordinary scenario the relevant object causally corresponding to our discursive practice is a table, while in the mad scientist scenario it is not a table but a probe or a chemical reaction. Despite the incompatibility of the soupy environment with the environment we ordinarily suppose ourselves to inhabit, the patterning of our purely causal *inclinations to respond* to our environment might well be identical in both instances.

What this scenario shows is just that the same dispositional response patterns which externally guide a normative framework can be equally well generated by very different configurations of reality. Nor is this a merely “epistemological” worry, since what is at stake is not primarily the question of whether in such a case I could have any genuine *knowledge* of tables, but rather the question of whether it is so much as possible for me to know what table-talk *means*, or what it could mean for such talk to be *true*, or how such talk so much as succeeds in *referring to* or being *about* tables. We can consider a second thought experiment which establishes the same point from a slightly different direction, one which McDowell draws from Michael Dummett (McDowell 2009a, 296).⁹ He asks us to imagine an alien world whose inhabitants possess an external environment that in every respect resembles the one we inhabit. Furthermore, the denizens of this world possess a behavioral repertoire of linguistic moves and transitions in the social practice of holding one another accountable that exactly resembles ours, with one crucial difference. For them, the entire framework of discursive norms (type-identical to ours to the minutest detail) is governed by a further meta-belief that we do not have, namely, the belief that the normative system of discourse in question is precisely meant to be a game and nothing more. That is, the sole distinguishing feature between their social-practical lives and ours is that they do not intend any of what they do to point to anything outside the game of holding one another accountable for his or her discursive activities. There is for them simply no point to playing the game external to the game itself.

⁸ That is, the two cases exhibit a type-identity both with respect to dispositional response patterns and with respect to their patterns of governance by discursive norms.

⁹ See Dummett (1973, 295ff). I’ve modified the illustration slightly in service of the point at issue.

Thus, whereas *we* take up our normative framework of linguistic moves and transitions with the intention of asserting things about the way the world is external to our norms and informing one another about it, they have no such aims. On Hector's account, their utterance of "here is a nectarine" would involve mind-external nectarines in just the same way ours does. But unlike us, they never intend to predicate any meanings of nectarines or refer to nectarines or assert any truths about nectarines. They are concerned not with nectarines but with keeping track of patterns of usage that deploy the word or concept "nectarine," and what matters exclusively for them is the normative status of the discursive players and never with how anything stands outside the game. Whereas the mad-scientist scenario reveals the inability of Hector's account of semantic content to track with mind-external objects in the way we ordinarily presuppose, the alien scenario reveals the insensitivity of his theory of concept-use to the relevant kind of object-involvement at issue in our concept-use.

Either scenario, however, suffices to show that his dispositional account of the way mind-independent objects figure into thought and speech leaves us without any entitlement to the idea that such objects are available to us in thought and speech. We can only be entitled to that idea if, as McDowell puts it, "the status of what is responded to" is actually "in the view of the responder." (McDowell 1995, 293) That is, what is needed in order to make sense of semantic content as having objective purport is the idea that the impact of reality on the mind is not a blankly causal impact, but one that can enter into thought. My perception of a nectarine cannot be ultimately grounded in any inclination to think or say "nectarine" when in the presence of a nectarine. It must be grounded instead in the *presentation* of the nectarine itself to my awareness *as* a nectarine, a direct form of object-awareness which is fundamentally suited to figure into the normative relations governing what I think and say. Without a directness and immediacy not merely in the causal domain but also in the normative one, we are forced to conceive of our thought and language as cut off from reality in just the way illustrated by the scenarios above. But it is just that sort of directness that Hector's externalism denies us, because of its strict division of labor between the causal/dispositional dimension and the normative/discursive dimension.¹⁰

The paradoxical result is that Hector's therapeutic proposal not only fails to dissolve the ontotheological problem – the problem of how our concepts can refer us to God – but it democratizes that problem, making it difficult to see not only how our concepts can intentionally refer us to God but to reality as a whole.¹¹ We seem

¹⁰ That is, a division of labor in which the job of the causal/dispositional dimension is to secure object involvement, and the job of the normative/discursive dimension is to secure intentional or representational relations.

¹¹ Victor Preller deploys a very similarly structured two-ply account drawn from Sellars – a reading that sharply separates the causal stimulus-response system from the normative conceptual system in a manner that presages Brandom's own appropriation of Sellars. See Preller (1967). But it is interesting to compare Preller's deployment of that account with Hector's. Hector deploys it in order to show how the two domains which hold together to yield our ordinary experience of everyday objects can equally well be seen to hold together in our experience of God, thereby avoiding a

to be thrown back not merely on an apophatic account of theological discourse, but an apophatic account of discourse *per se*. If Hector endorses the two-ply externalism I attribute to him, he is stuck with an unintelligible account of the objective purport of our intentional relations to the world. In that case, the therapeutic cure turns out to be worse than the disease, since we lose touch not only with God but the world as well.

But couldn't Hector simply disavow a two-ply externalism? While that is certainly an advisable line to take, taking it leaves me wondering what is left of his proposal. He would owe us some account of how his derivation of meaning, truth and reference from a pragmatic theory of concept-use succeeds in being object-involving without a collapse back into his own characterization of EC, one in which the bearing of objects on thought must be internalized in order to be conceptualized. How does his account as it stands manage to furnish us with the direct availability of objects themselves to the normative domain of thought and language without implying either the two-ply view or EC?

Therapy for the Therapist: McDowell and the Problem of God-talk

Having shifted the terms of the dispute from one about how our concepts apply to God to one more fundamentally about theories of intentionality, theologians now seem to have a new worry and a more general one, namely, whether we have the right theory of intentionality. Drawing centrally on McDowell, I've suggested that there is good reason to suspect that Hector does not have the right theory. So now what? One option is to continue to play out the debate at the level of alternative theories of intentionality. Having been left with the problem of how reality can furnish us with a rational constraint on what we think and say, we can go looking for a theory of content that allows the world to impress us with objective mentalistic phenomena capable of informing and justifying our concepts – that is, we can return to EC.

But this isn't our only option, and it is not the one that McDowell himself takes. Rather than going looking for an alternative theory of intentionality, we can instead subject this entire dispute about intentionality itself to therapy. The shared assumption of EC's internalism and Hector's externalism is that one of the two elements of our intentionality – either our concepts or the non-conceptual objects in the world – is more fundamental than the other. The theoretical task involves giving logical or metaphysical primacy to one as the basis upon which to explain the other. In this sense EC's view is every bit a "two-ply" view as Hector's, only an internalist as opposed to an externalist one. That is, on both Hector's view and EC, a mind-independent world is construed as a non-normative or non-conceptual

"referential problem" in theology. But Preller exploits the logical separability of the two systems precisely to *re-formulate* the referential or "ontotheological" problem. Hector seems not to notice the consistency of externalism with a reformulated version of the ontotheological problem, and Preller seems not to notice that the relevant referential problem is not particularly theological, but global.

domain which has to be “conceptualized” by human thinking and speaking. The question is whether such conceptualization involves “taking in” a concept-free external world in a form of non-conceptual content to which we then apply concepts (EC) or whether it involves a merely causal and dispositional relation to that world out of which our concept-use precipitates (Hector). For the problem of intentionality itself to undergo therapy, therefore, would be to provide an alternative to that assumption. What McDowell suggests is that both internalist and externalist theorists fail to “question whether semantic explanation should be linear, with some concepts selected as primitive” (McDowell 2009a, 292).

This question of explanatory priority, on McDowell’s diagnosis, is what gets theories of intentionality going in the first place. But he insists that on an ordinary view, the norms governing our concept-use and the content that the world impresses on us to constrain what we think and say are not logically separable from one another. The very idea that our minds are in touch with the world rules out assigning any priority to one over the other, or elucidating one independently of the other. Putting this point in terms of the Kantian distinction between the “spontaneity” of our conceptual norms and the “receptivity” of our experiential intake, McDowell’s therapeutic suggestion is that “[w]e must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its cooperation with spontaneity” (McDowell 1996, 41). In other words, we should reject a two-ply view altogether, whichever way the order of explanation goes. This would be to regard the layout of reality as it is independently from us as already exhibiting a normative and conceptual structure. The very idea that what we think and say is “about” the world presupposes that its causal impact on us is not *merely* causal but also rational.

On McDowell’s account, the two-ply view only arose with the advent of the modern sciences. Once it became possible to conceive of our environment in a way that abstracts from any normative significance it exhibits as a rational order – that is to say, once it became possible to conceive of reality exclusively in terms of its governance by natural laws – it became tempting to regard reality as most fundamentally inert of the rational relations we ordinarily take it to exhibit. So we try to conceive of semantic content arising from our experiential intake as most basically non-rationally constituted. Or else we try to conceive of it as most basically rationally constituted by us, while externally guided by a non-rationally constituted world. Both sorts of views can (and have) been made serviceable for theology. In this sense, both internalist (EC) views such as Marion’s and externalist views such as Hector’s therefore reflect characteristically modern theories of intentionality.

But, McDowell contends, the modern discovery of the capacity to describe reality in law-governed terms never required that we give up the idea that reality is also fundamentally constituted in terms of rational norms. What modern philosophy has led us to forget is our ordinary capacity to directly take in the world precisely and most fundamentally in normative terms. To experience the world in that way – as the objective home of meaning – is simply “second nature” for us – it is the product of an ordinary upbringing (McDowell 1996, 91).¹² This isn’t the place for

¹² While the notion of “second nature” for McDowell is a distinctively Aristotelian one, it is deeply intertwined with the Hegelian conception of *Bildung*.

any detailed elaboration of this proposal or its relevance for theology, but I think we have enough of a sketch to raise the question: if successful, where might a McDowellian therapy leave the initial debate, the debate about our intentionality of God?

One consequence in this regard is very suggestive. Suppose that the recent to-and-fro between apophatic and non-apophatic conceptions of theology is predicated on characteristically modern theories of intentionality. It follows that in implicitly incorporating a modern internalism/externalism debate about the mind/world relation into their accounts of God-talk, many contemporary advocates of apophatic theology *and* their detractors have failed to capture the theological concerns that motivated apophatic theology in the first place, as a *premodern* phenomenon. And if McDowell is correct about our entitlement to sidestep modern disputes over theories of intentionality then perhaps what we ought to be asking is how to identify and recover those earlier theological concerns.¹³ To do so in a way cut free from the debates about intentionality that have come to dominate contemporary philosophical discourse might prove therapeutic for therapists such as Hector.

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¹³ See MacDonald (2009) and cf. McDowell (2009b, 255). MacDonald deploys McDowell in order to recover a reading of Thomas Aquinas on the mind/God problem that underlies traditional apophatic theology. For another recent example see Wahlberg (2009).

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