

ARTICLE

Charles Travis on Truth and Perception

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Abstract

Charles Travis has developed a distinction between “the historical” (the sensible world) and “the conceptual” (thoughts and concepts), which underlies his influential contributions to the philosophy of language and perception. The distinction is based on the observation that there are, for any thought, indefinitely many different circumstances that would render it true. The generality of thoughts and concepts contrasts with the particularity of the sensible world. I challenge the assumption that what exhibits such generality cannot belong to the sensible world. I also defend a version of the claim that perception involves the exercise of conceptual capacities.

Keywords: Truth; perception; conceptualism; Charles Travis; J. L. Austin; Myth of the Given; scheme-content dualism

1. Introduction

It is often thought that our surroundings are particular in a way that contrasts with the generality of discursive thought. Here is one way—perhaps an unusual way—of drawing such a distinction. Say that I look up at the sky and see that it is blue. Before my eyes is the particular way that the sky is on this February afternoon. When I recognise it as blue, I bring this unique way under a generality. Part of the contrast has to do with “fineness of grain”: the sky is a precise shade of blue, a little lighter towards the horizon, which is poorly captured in the single word “blue.” But the issue is not only about fineness of grain. The world is particular, thought is general, in endlessly many ways. An indefinite range of circumstances counts as the sky’s being blue. The sky still counts as blue if it only looks blue when observed from the ground, or if it is obstructed by a tower, or if a flock of birds passes by, and so on. The particular way that the sky is now, on the other hand, is not such a range of circumstances—it is only one instance of a range.

This example is typical of the way Charles Travis spells out the intuitive idea, his particular brand of nominalism. Travis concludes that what exhibits generality is not to be found in our surroundings. What is before our eyes is *the* way things are, or “things being as they are,” understood in such a way that if things were in any way different, they wouldn’t be the way they are. Here “things” is used in what he calls “its catholic sense”—that is to say, its all-encompassing sense—so that it would be a solecism to ask, “Which things?” It is of course true that ordinary objects of reference are also “in the world.” But it takes a concept to pick them out as the particular things that they are, that is, as discrete entities distinguished from other things in their surroundings. So although a particular object is not itself a generality, it is closely associated with one. For Travis, what is present in perception must be devoid of generality; it is ‘things being as they are’, not already structured in terms of particular things and ways for things to be:

The particular case is that which the thought represents as a certain way. Which is just: things being as they are. Things being as they are, so far as that goes, does not bring anything under any given generality; or present anything to consciousness as so falling. . . .

The generality of a thought consists of its representing things as some way that might be instanced in an indefinite variety of ways. What does the instancing *has* no such generality. If we call what has this generality (*the*) *conceptual*, we might call what lacks it (*the*) *nonconceptual*.” (2013, 331)

“The nonconceptual” has since been renamed “the historical,” and, instead of particular cases, Travis now speaks of “episodes,” but the basic idea is the same. The historical/conceptual distinction forms the bedrock of his philosophy and underlies his more specific and more widely discussed contributions to the philosophy of language and perception. Since our surroundings are not conceptually structured, perception better not already be a matter of bringing things under concepts; if it were, we would be deprived of the opportunity to judge for ourselves how things fall under concepts. Perception “simply places our surroundings in view; affords us awareness of them. There is no commitment to their *being* one way or another” (2013, 31). Bringing things under generalities is something we must do in response to perception. When we do, we partition things being as they are in ways that are relative to our sensibilities and interests (the “parochial,” Travis 2011) and the demands of the occasion (“occasion-sensitivity,” Travis 2008). In these ways, Travis defends a certain traditional conception of realism, of the mind-independence of the sensible world: what is given in perception is devoid of generality; in response we carve up what is given according to our conceptual scheme.

But although such a division of labour can seem attractive, it has also often been criticised as “a dualism of scheme and content” or “the Myth of the Given” (I will use these terms interchangeably).¹ In the course of a protracted debate, John McDowell has indeed accused Travis of falling into the Myth of the Given (McDowell 2008). There has however been much disagreement on what exactly the Myth is and why it should be mistaken; as McDowell remarks, “Wilfrid Sellars, who is responsible for the label, notoriously neglects to explain in general terms what he means by it” (2008, 1). Sellars spoke of a “framework of givenness” which may be exemplified in various philosophical areas. For our purposes, the issue may be narrowed down to the question of how to conceive of what is given in perceptual experience. I will take for granted, with Travis and many philosophers nowadays, that our surroundings are immediately present in perceptual experience. The worry is then that a dualism of scheme and content amounts to an alienated conception of our surroundings as they are present in perception—alienated from discursive reason, that is, so that it becomes mysterious how perception, and what is perceived, can bear rationally on what we are to think and do. I am intentionally choosing a vague characterization in order to allow for disagreement about when exactly an account is problematic in this way: philosophers may disagree on what constitutes alienation.²

Despite this unclarity about the exact target, and without wanting to go in for the more rhetorical aspects of the tradition,³ I do believe there is a general problem of that broad shape. My hope is that we can get clearer on the general problem by seeing the problems that Travis’s account runs into. This, then, is a case study. My approach will mostly be negative: by arguing that Travis is mistaken in

¹*Loci classici* for such criticism are Sellars (1956), Davidson (1973, 1986), and McDowell (1994). I will draw especially on McDowell.

²For example, Davidson once famously claimed that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (1986, 310). Then anything that is not a belief would be alien to reason in the relevant sense. McDowell softened the stance, replacing the second “belief” by “proposition,” in the sense of what comes to expression in a that-clause (McDowell 1994, 27–28). In more recent work, partly in response to Travis’s objections, he has further weakened the thesis by claiming that what is given need not be propositionally structured but must at least have the structure of a substance falling under a substance-concept, a “this-such” (McDowell 2008). See also Kalderon 2011 and Travis 2018 for critical discussions.

³I prefer the label “dualism of scheme and content” because it does not presuppose the falsity of the view under discussion. A philosopher may self-ascribe this label, as Travis in fact does: “a thought’s generality is also a scheme for partitioning the world” (Travis 2013, 2); “to represent things as a certain way is to impose, or deploy, a particular scheme for categorizing things being as they are” (Travis 2008, 162).

thinking that generalities cannot be present in our surroundings, I motivate the alternative that they are present in their own general kind of way. Of course, the sensible world is not made up of words or concepts in the way that a sentence is composed of words. But a true description is true because what it speaks of is there in the scene described. When I say (looking up at the sky) that the sky is blue, and what I say is true, what my words speak of is there before my eyes. Corresponding to my words “the sky” there is the sky, which is an object in a logically broad sense. Corresponding to the predicate “is blue” there is (to use Travis’s terminology) a way for a thing to be: being blue. Things and ways for things to be (objects and properties) are both to be found in our surroundings, though in different ways. For example, a particular thing cannot be in multiple places at once, whereas multiple things can simultaneously be blue. But that is no reason to exclude generalities from the world. The sky’s being blue, or the fact that the sky is blue, can be manifest before us. If this is denied, I believe, what is given in perception does come to seem alien to discursive thought.

I will proceed as follows. In [section 2](#), I critically discuss the motivations for Travis’s formula, tracing these back to Gottlob Frege and J. L. Austin. Then in [section 3](#), I argue that his conclusion is untenable, as it amounts to an alienated conception of the sensible world. In [section 4](#), I discuss how my rejection of Travis’s conception of the sensible world bears on his influential account of sense perception.

2. Travis’s Move

Let me call to mind the central formulations of the historical/conceptual distinction. Travis holds that representation is a three-place relation between a representing subject, a particular case, and the generality of a thought, which is a way for things to be: things being such as they are thought to be. For someone to represent the pig as snuffling is really this: it is for them to bring the particular case of things being as they are under the generality of the thought that the pig is snuffling. “Things being as they are (history being as it is, or has been so far) is, or is not, things being such that a pig is snuffling” (Travis 2013, 4). They represent truly when the particular case does fall under the thought. “If the thought is true, then it is things being as they are which is (a case of) things being as represented” (4). In Travis’s terminology, the particular case then *instances* the thought; the thought *reaches* to this particular case. This is probably not meant as a theory of truth in any substantial sense of “theory.” We can take it as a gloss on truth: for it to be true that p is for things being as they are to be a case of things being such that p .

This formula should, I think, elicit surprise. It seems more natural to say that in thinking of the pig that it is snuffling, one brings the pig (not the way things are) under a generality; namely, the concept of snuffling (not the concept of things being such that the pig is snuffling). But as we saw, Travis thinks there is still something general about the pig. Although the pig does belong to the historical, it takes (at least) the concept of an animal to pick it out as the distinct entity that it is. The world in itself—what thought answers to and what is given in perception—is not already partitioned in that way (Travis 2013, 19). Travis concludes that what is truly particular is things “in a catholic sense,” as in the expression “Things have been slow around here lately” (93). What is brought under a generality is not an element of the world, but the world as such. And the generality it is brought under is not a way for an element of the world to be, but the generality of a thought, which Travis thinks of as a way for the world to be. To represent the pig as snuffling is really to represent the world as being such that the pig is snuffling. Here the world (things being as they are) is treated as itself a particular (the only particular), and the generality of a thought as a concept of a way for the world to be.

Why does Travis make this move from ordinary objects of reference to a special all-encompassing particular? Reading Travis’s recent work, it seems the particularity of the historical—for anything that one can think, there are endlessly many ways for things to be accordingly—is already supposed to justify his move. He often⁴ starts by quoting Frege’s *Kernsatz* 4: “A thought

⁴Travis (2011, 1, 8, 233, 264, 306) and Travis (2013, 6, 93, 149, 187, 198, 236, 269, 320).

always contains something by means of which it reaches beyond the particular case to present this to consciousness as falling under something general” (Frege 1979, 174; as quoted in Travis 2013, 6).⁵ Then he illustrates the point in ways that I have quoted and paraphrased and concludes that it would be a mistake to look for “a way for a thing to be” in the historical. But this seems too quick. The argument only establishes that a way for a thing to be, such as being blue, exhibits a certain generality: things can be many different ways while still being such that the sky is blue. Indeed, by describing the sky as blue, I capture only one aspect of how it is, and of how “things” are, leaving others indefinite. This contrasts with “the way things are” or “things being as they are.” Such an expression lacks generality because it is at once completely determinate and completely indeterminate: it completely determines everything in every respect by being entirely silent on specifics. We might equivalently speak of “all the ways all things are,” “the world,” “the facts,” “what there is.” But seen in this way, we do not yet have a justification for the thesis that only what is absolutely particular can be found in our surroundings. That the sky is blue is only one aspect of my surroundings; it is general in that sense, but is it not, for all that, an aspect of my surroundings manifest before my eyes?

What we need to understand is why Travis resorts to describing what is given, as such, in the least specific terms. This requires a look at his deeper motivations. He is impressed by the particularity of the changeable world and the way this seems to contrast with the discreteness and finitude of words. In the background, less explicit in recent work, is the idea that our concepts, as we use them on an occasion, reflect some merely human point of view, one determined by our interests and sensibilities. I find it helpful to compare his view to one of the philosophers who most influenced him. J. L. Austin warned against modelling the world on the word, and wrote, “[S]tatements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes” (Austin 1950, 124). He describes the world as exhibiting relations of similarity and dissimilarity but not already structured in the ways that we structure it when we say how things are.⁶ The relations of similarity are natural; those between words and world are conventional. The first allows conventions to get a grip on things, so to say. This suggests a picture on which the sensible world is continuous in a way that contrasts with language, which carves the world up in discrete blocks, in things and properties. That picture seems apt for certain forms of conceptual activity. For example, it seems a matter of convention how the world’s seas and oceans are demarcated. That *this*—pointing at the North Sea—is the North Sea is partly due to where *this* finds itself, but partly to how we happen to have drawn the boundaries—how we carve things up. The way of carving up is something we language users are responsible for, not the world. According to Austin, in philosophy we have to get clear on who is responsible for what, “above all in discussing truth, where it is precisely our business to prise the words off the world and keep them off it” (1950, 118).

Travis does not appeal to relations of similarity and dissimilarity, but in other respects he inherits the core of Austin’s view. His way with Austin’s idea involves a transition from words to concepts. Here concepts are individuated according to what they are *of*: ways for things to be. So the concept of being blue and the concept of being purple are different insofar as they are of different ways for things to be: being blue, being purple. The English sentence “The sky is blue” is for speaking of the sky as being blue. Using these words for what they are for, we may, on an occasion, use them to say that the sky is blue. But how we are then to be understood depends on the circumstances of speaking, and on our sense for when, given those circumstances, things would count as being such that the sky is blue. What thus admits of understanding are not just words. Circumstances may fix that the words “the sky” speak of the sky as it is above this city on this February afternoon. But even

⁵Although the pressures underlying Travis’s thesis are present in Frege, the latter rejected any attempt to define truth and in particular the attempt to define truth as a relation between a thought and something else (Frege [1918] 1956). It seems to me that the thesis is closer to J. L. Austin’s conception of truth (1950, 116) and at least one of Hilary Putnam’s (1991, 115).

⁶“The world must exhibit (we must observe) similarities and dissimilarities . . . : if everything were either absolutely indistinguishable from everything else or completely unlike everything else, there would be nothing to say” (Austin 1950, 115).

having fixed what a word speaks of—a thing or a way for things to be—there are still indefinitely many ways of understanding what it is to be that way. On some, a sky dispersed with clouds may count as blue, on another not. On some, a sky that looks blue from ground level but not from a space station may count, on another not . . . and so on indefinitely (cf. Travis 2008, 2–3). No predetermined theory or algorithm can determine for us when things would count as being blue as this is to be understood on an occasion (Travis 2013, 316). A human thinker, with their parochial sense of what is normal and how to deviate from the norm, is the ultimate judge of this, and the shape of what we say thus reflects human sensibilities and interests.

Travis wants to accommodate this irreducibly human perspective of discursive activity while hanging on to a traditional realism. Although concepts, as they are understood on an occasion, reflect our point of view, this is a matter of our selecting shapes of thought that are anyway there to be thought. This selection having been achieved, the rest of the story is extensional: it is intrinsic to any thought to reach to the historical as it does. If it did not so reach it would not be *this* thought. There can be an issue about how a historical act of representing reaches to the world; that is, how the speaker is to be understood, which thought they are to be taken to have expressed. But having fixed that, it depends all on how things are, on things being as they are, whether the thought is true. “An assertion might reach in this way or that, depending on whether it expressed this thought or that, but where we take it to have expressed some given thought, we cannot then take that thought to reach in this way or that” (Travis 2011, 9). In this way, the objectivity of thought is secured in the face of what Travis calls “the parochial,” human sensibilities and interests: even though the parochial plays a role in selecting thoughts, the truth of what we say (now hearing “what we say” as what does not anymore stand in need of determination) turns all on an intrinsic relation between two realms that are free of human determination.

Although I’ve just done my best to give a motivation internal to Travis’s philosophy, I do not believe it makes his conclusions mandatory. The observation that our concepts and the things and ways they speak of reflect our point of view does not have to trigger an Austinian attempt to prise them off the world. And it attests to the richness of Travis’s thought that even this point can be made in terms familiar to him. Conceptual capacities, rather than limiting us to see only a reflection of ourselves, open our eyes to the ways things anyway are. That thought lies behind his antipsychological conception of thought. Parochial sensibilities, we have seen, do not shape the conceptual but rather select shapes that are anyway there to be thought. They are anyway there to be thought because they are ways for things to be, and these are independent of us. “Had evolution omitted sloths,” Travis writes, “there would be no such thing as judging that sloths like bananas” (2011, 264). But if what there is to think is thus independent of us, then why the need to prise it off the world? The concept of being a sloth, as understood, say, from the point of view of a biologist, may reflect our interests in biological classification, but that reflection does not preclude us from apprehending, by means of this concept, a certain slothy unity that is simply to be found in the world, one that can serve as the subject of predication for such predicates as “likes bananas.” It is just an interest in seeing such unities as they really are. That a concept, as understood on an occasion, reflects our interests should not be confused with its reflecting our tastes or whims.

Moreover, this second Fregean line of thought seems to defeat the first Austinian line entirely. Travis takes it to be intrinsic to any bit of the conceptual that it reaches to the historical in the way that it does. A thought would not be the thought it is unless it reaches to the particular cases that it does. That is the difference between speech acts and thought: a thought is the understanding of a speech act and as such is fully determined, not standing in need of further interpretation. But if it is intrinsic to the thought to reach as it does, then how can there be this distance between the thought and what it reaches to? Would it not be equally intrinsic to things being as they are to be a case of things being so? Surely it wouldn’t be *this* particular case if it did not fall under the generalities that it does: if things being as they are were not things being such that the sky is blue—that is, if the sky were not blue—then things would not be as they are. But if that is so, and the fact that the sky is blue is intrinsic to the way things now are, it seems to be this aspect of things being as they are that

renders true the thought that the sky is blue, and not “things being as they are” generically. In this way, the formula “Things being as they are is a case of things being such that the sky is blue” collapses into the proposition that it contains and through which it is understood: *that the sky is blue*. This suggests that to think truly is to think of something that it is some way that it really is, or to think it is not some way it really is not—as opposed to: to think of the world as a whole that it stands in some relation to one’s thought as a whole. At best, the latter now appears as merely a more convoluted way of saying the same.

3. Out of mind’s reach

Let me recap. Travis moves from the commonplace idea that in thinking a thought, one represents something (the sky) as being some way (blue), to the more contentious idea that one represents “the particular case of things being as they are” as being some way (such that the sky is blue). His central motivation for this move is the difference in generality between a way for things to be and *the way things are*, as well as the idea that in thought we carve up “the way things are” in ways that are relative to our sensibilities and interests. I have argued that we can resist this move. That a way for things to be exhibits generality and reflects our interests and sensibilities does not preclude it from being there in the sensible world. The arguments considered so far do not show why we should let go of the commonplace conception of representation as bringing some ordinary object of reference (e.g., the sky) under some ordinary generality (e.g., being blue).

That is to say that we need not follow Travis in making this move. But the accusation of “the Myth of the Given” amounts to a stronger conclusion: Travis’s move renders the world alien to discursive reason. That conclusion may seem *too* strong; although Travis rejects what I am calling a commonplace conception of representation and truth, he can give his own formulation which is just as articulate. He could say: *It is true to think that the sky is blue because the particular case of things being as they are is things being such that the sky is blue*. This formula is supposed to express a relation between the particular case and a thought; it invokes this relation in order to explain why it is true to think that the sky is blue. It is, however, not hard to see that the relation cannot do this kind of work, even by Travis’s own light. After all, “Things being as they are is things being such that the sky is blue” is itself the expression of a thought, which is an item within “the conceptual,” not “the historical.” (This thought is even, as we saw at the end of the last section, the same item within the conceptual as that expressed by “The sky is blue.”) But according to Travis, the truth of a thought is determined by things being as they are—the historical. If the formula serves any purpose, then, it is not to express a relation but to point to the worldly *relatum*. What really does the work (of truthmaking, of justification) is not the relation but the particular case. After all, whether it is true or false for me to think that the sky is blue is determined by what is before my eyes when I look up at the sky; and what is before my eyes, according to Travis, is the particular case of things being as they are.

But once we see that not the relation but the particular case does the work, we can understand the accusation of the Myth of the Given. For given this, an explanation of why it is true to believe that the sky is blue would have to take the form: it is true to think that the sky is blue because *that* . . . and here one points at the particular case. Being reduced to such an act of pointing is what McDowell took to be symptomatic of the Myth of the Given: “The idea is that when we have exhausted all the available moves from one conceptually organized item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience” (McDowell 1994, 6). But, one might think, what is wrong with pointing? Pointing to something may be a valid move within a discursive practice. That is true, but insofar as pointing is a move within a discursive practice, it cannot serve the current purpose. Say that I justify my belief that the pig is snuffling (to shift examples) by pointing to the pig. Even if I only say “that,” it is implicit that I mean “that pig” or “that animal.” Moreover, if I am asked “What about that pig makes it so that it can be truly described as snuffling?” I can answer by saying something about what I pointed to, such as its making funny

noises and contracting its nose. But these remarks are, so to say, moves within the conceptual sphere and there is nothing analogous to them for pointing to the particular case. On further reflection, then, we cannot even so much as point to the particular case, for we do not want to distinguish it from anything else or say anything about it. The particular case now appears to be out of mind's reach. The conclusion should be, I think, not that there is something of which we cannot speak, but rather that we have nothing in mind when we use this phrase as Travis does.

The problem could be put in this way: if what is present in perception bears on what we are to think and do, there must be a way of making it available for discursive reason. But to do that is to bring things under concepts, not to present an unarticulated particular case. Such a particular case would be ineffable and, moreover, since it is not distinguished from anything else it could not even be pointed out. Travis might respond that of course we can only say what we can say, and not the worldly things that make it true. This response can be heard in a passage by Austin, a favourite of Travis: "When a statement is true, there is, *of course*, a state of affairs which makes it true and which is *toto mundo* distinct from the true statement about it: but equally of course, we can only describe that state of affairs *in words* (either the same or, with luck, others)" (Austin 1950, 117). It seems one may accuse a philosopher of trying the impossible when something thoughtlike is supposed to be ineffable—an ineffable insight, an ineffable idea. But what could be the problem with unsayable things in the world? To say that the sky is blue is not to say the sky, but to bring the sky under a generality.

It is indeed true that one cannot say—express—an ordinary object of reference, and it would be silly to complain about that. But Austin, like Travis, does not speak of ordinary objects of reference; he speaks of states of affairs, and he construes them, like Travis, as standing in a relation of truthmaking to a thought: "A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it 'refers') is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions" (Austin 1950, 116). What creates the present problem is this conception of a state of affairs or particular case as a thing that stands in a relation to a proposition. In one way, such talk accommodates an important truth: the world is incompletely described by listing all things in it. The world is not merely the totality of ordinary particulars (the sky, a tree, its leaves), but how all things are in all respects. Travis acknowledges this when he speaks of "things being as they are" or "the way things are"; he might as well, I think, have used the phrase "how things are." But by construing "how things are" as a particular, which stands in relation to a proposition, another important truth goes missing. Thus construed, we can only speak *about* "how things are," refer or point to it. And on further reflection, as we found, we cannot even do that. The problem is that "how things are" is forced into a logical role, that of an object of reference, which does not suit "it"; for in speaking about ordinary things, we do not speak *about* how things are—we *say* how they are. That truism goes missing on a view such as that of Austin and Travis. (They can give another interpretation of the phrase "saying how things are." That now means: relating a particular case to a proposition. But the particular case is meant to *be* how things are, and the particular case cannot be expressed; in that sense the truism goes missing.)

I want to suggest that instead of Travis's "things being as they are," it would be better to think of the (sensible) world as how all (observable) things are in all (observable) respects. It is then a truism that there is no distance between discursive thought and the world; though we cannot say everything, we can say anything: we can say how something is in some respect. In calling this a truism I am echoing McDowell (1994) and Hornsby (1997). They defended a conception of the world as how things are or, as they put it, as "everything that is the case . . . the totality of facts, not of things" (Wittgenstein 1922, § 1-1.1; McDowell 1994, 27). Given that conception of the world, McDowell can put the truism as follows, "But to say that there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world is just to dress up a truism in high-flown language. All the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that very same thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case" (27). However, it has seemed to Travis and others that a substantial metaphysical view is

smuggled in here and, moreover, one that is false. Although it is true that the very same thing that one can think can also be the case, that sort of thing cannot be present in our surroundings; it lacks “the particularity, the concreteness, of the non-conceptual” (Travis 2013, 127; see also Dodd 1995). Looking around, the only things I see are ordinary objects of reference, not *that things are thus and so*. The latter sort of thing, after all, does not have a career in space and time. Travis quotes Frege’s remark: “That the sun has risen is no object which sends out rays that reach my eyes, no visible thing such as the sun itself is” (Frege 1918, 61, as quoted in Travis 2013, 123).

It seems to me that this objection arises because both sides of the debate reify what is said and how things are, referring to items of the form “that things are thus and so” and treating them as things of some sort. To some extent, this is unavoidable; in thinking about the logical role of thoughts and facts, we are bound to refer to them, as I am now doing. But it would be better, and I believe also better in line with McDowell’s and Hornsby’s intentions, to shift our focus. Although we can refer to a thought or fact, when we do so we do not reveal their logical role. A thought is primarily something to think, and only secondarily something to think about.⁷ When we think a thought, we think that things are so; and when things are, in fact, so, the very thing we think of is the very way we think it is. Even when the thought is false there is still a certain structure shared with the fact it answers to since then the very thing one thinks of is precisely not the way one thinks it is (*cf.* Wittgenstein 1956, § 429). Here a combination of a subject and predicate (a thought, what is said), and of a thing and a way for thing to be (a fact, how things are) are correlated in one move: thinking that the thing is that way. At one point, Hornsby puts the truism in just this way:

Perhaps it is also a platitude that true sentences say how things are. And this again is unobjectionable, so long as the “things” in question are ordinary objects of reference: the true sentence “that book is red,” for example, says something about how things are by saying how one of the things (*sc.* that book) is (*sc.* red). (1997, 7)

In this explication of the idea, there is no need to refer to propositionally structured items and relate them from such a perspective. That is to say, we can avoid reifying what is said and how things are, and this also means that we can look for how things are in a different way. That the sky is blue is not among the things that I see, but that is just to say that it is a mistake to look for it as if for an object. It is clear where and when one must look in order to see that the sky is now blue: at the sky, thereby seeing how it is coloured. In that sense the sky’s being blue, or the fact that it is blue, is an aspect of the spatiotemporal world, of our surroundings.⁸ Indeed, Frege is right: *that the sun has risen* is no object which sends out rays that reach my eyes—the sun does insofar as it has risen. As long as we do not understand a fact as a certain kind of thing, we can acknowledge Frege’s point and think of the world as how all things are in all respects—that is, the totality of facts, not of things.

4. The silence of the senses

I have argued that Travis construes the sensible world in a way that is alien to discursive reason. To Travis it will seem that such a sense of alienation must be based not on his restricted conception of the sensible world, but on my restricted conception of reason’s reach. He diagnoses opposition to scheme-content dualism or the Myth of the Given as motivated by an inability (a “dogma,” [Travis 2018]) to see that reason can reach to the particular case as such—that perception simply presents us

⁷The point is made by Wittgenstein, I think, in a rather opaque way (1922, § 5.54–5.542) and more straightforwardly by A. N. Prior (1971, 3).

⁸Some philosophers draw a distinction between a state of affairs, the sky’s being blue, and a fact—that the sky is blue. But this difference seems to me to be merely grammatical, not ontological. For example, it is bad grammar to write “I know that it won’t rain because of that the sky is blue.” It should either be “because the sky is blue” or “because of the sky’s being blue” or “because of the fact that the sky is blue,” but all these formulations say the same.

with the particular case and, only in response, do we recognise it as falling under generalities. But the conviction that reason cannot reach to the particular case need not be based on a restricted conception of reason. Such resistance can be motivated by a well-warranted discomfort with the attempt to construe “how things are” as an object of reference rather than as what is stated when one says how things are. That is not to say that reason’s reach is restricted in any way; reason indeed reaches to everything or even, if you will, “things being as they are”—but here “everything” or “things being as they are” must mean all things that one can think of, being all the ways that one can truly think them to be.

This is not yet to say anything about perceptual experience, only about the structure of the sensible world. But these issues are closely related. Travis has been influential in arguing for antirepresentationalism about perception. Again the view goes back to Austin: “[O]ur senses are dumb—though Descartes and others speak of ‘the testimony of the senses,’ our senses do not *tell* us anything, true or false” (Austin 1962, 11; as quoted in Travis 2013, 30). The point of the metaphor, at least for Travis, is that perception is not a matter of representation; to see things is not to represent things as being one way or another. It seems worthwhile to consider to what extent that argument is based on the metaphysics that I have rejected. If what is before our eyes is devoid of generality, as Travis thinks, it seems awareness of generalities, such as awareness that the sky is blue, cannot be perceptual awareness—and so it does seem to Travis. But if what is before our eyes includes ways for things to be, as I have argued, having the scene in view may be, in part, awareness of such generalities. I will now briefly develop this suggestion.

At the heart of Travis’s philosophy of perception lies a realist conviction:

[P]erception, as such, simply places our surroundings in view; affords us awareness of them. There is no commitment to their *being* one way or another. It confronts us with what is there, so that, by attending, noting, recognizing, and otherwise exercising what capacities we have, *we* may, in some respect or other, make out what is there for what it is—or, again, fail to. It makes us aware, to some extent, of things (around us) being as they are. It is then up to us to make out, or try to, which particular ways that is. (2013, 31)

Perception confronts us with what is there. To be confronted with something is not already to take a stance on how it is. We cannot be given that something is the case; we must judge what is the case on the basis of what is given. So Travis thinks that one cannot see, in the sense of visual awareness, that the sky is blue, that one coin is larger than another, that it is raining outside, or that a pig is snuffling around the roots below. He will, of course, acknowledge that there is the expression “seeing that such and such is the case” and that it is used correctly in the familiar way, but he claims that this expression should not be understood in the sense of visual awareness. It is not a mere receptive achievement. To “see that something is the case” is really to tell that something is the case on the basis of seeing things being as they are (Travis 2017):

[A]wareness-that is not access to how things are. It is not a channel through which to learn anything as to this. It is responding to what one has access to in registering something as to how things are.

Although such an epistemology can motivate the kind of scheme-content dualism that Travis defends, he usually argues the other way around, from his ontological commitment to his epistemology. What is given in perception is a particular case. A particular case is not the sort of thing one can know in the sense of knowing that something is the case (French, *savoir*). It is rather the sort of thing one can know in the sense of acquaintance (French, *connaître*). So perceptual awareness, insofar as it is receptive, cannot already be knowing that things are a certain way. It is mere acquaintance with what can be proof that things are a certain way, a conclusive ground for believing so. To be acquainted with this ground is unlike what people

normally understand by being acquainted with a person. When you're acquainted with someone, you thereby know some things about the person—it is not enough merely to have encountered one another without knowing it. But on the relevant philosophical understanding, acquaintance is in itself not yet knowledge that things are a certain way. When one is acquainted with a particular case, one will undoubtedly, simultaneously and psychologically inseparably, also know some things about the case, but to know this is to bring what one is acquainted with under a generality on the basis of the acquaintance and so, logically, speaking as a response to it. Since what is given is not the sort of thing one can know to be the case, reception cannot be knowledge that something is the case; knowledge that something is the case adds something to reception. Perception is logically, even if not always temporally or psychologically, prior to such knowledge and other conceptual acts.

On this view, even seeing, in a certain common sense, has to be construed as a response to what is given. Speaking of a sense of “seeing” that for him has to be a special sense, Travis writes, “Searching the kitchen counter for my favourite knife, it might be ten minutes before I finally see what was all along in plain view. Here seeing is registering” (2013, 11). Travis thinks of “seeing” in the sense of registering as a response to the scene before our eyes. He will acknowledge that in order to respond to the scene before our eyes, we must be aware of it in some sense. But he construes such awareness—perception properly so-called—as a bare encounter with the scene, which affords but does not already involve any conscious act of the subject. Sight properly so-called is merely to have the scene in view, merely to have one's eyes open, not yet using them to notice anything. “Sight affords awareness of what is before the eyes. ... If it thus puts opportunities on offer, enjoying awareness would be taking these up” (11).

However, to have a scene in view without noticing anything is not yet to possess—have in mind—that on which the truth of a thought depends. When I see a snuffling pig without noticing that there is some animal there making funny noises, I do not yet have any awareness of that which makes it true to think that the pig is snuffling. Perhaps I am “aware” of the scene in a subpersonal sense, but that is not the relevant sense when it comes to me giving an explanation or justification of why it is true for me to think that the pig is snuffling. So it seems that what Travis calls “perception” comes, so to say, before perception in the relevant sense, which he calls “enjoying awareness.” Only by conflating these two moments can he hang on to the thought that what is given is “things being as they are” generically, rather than something more specific. Only in the first moment (“perception”) do we have nothing specific, but then again, nothing is yet given to the mind. Only in the second moment (“enjoying awareness”) is something given to the mind, but then it is always already more specific: such as a knife on the kitchen counter, recognised as such.

It is true that there are certain kinds of judgement that are made in response to perception, or in any case can be abstracted from perceptual experience. We can, for example, easily abstract away our knowledge of the names for various things and people that we find around us. But it is harder to hold apart the perceptual presence of a scene from our grasp of its spatiotemporal and causal structure. It does happen, sometimes, that we enjoy sensory awareness without thereby seeing how things are arranged. Say that I see a cloud in the sky against such a clear uninterrupted expanse that I am unable to place it. Then I see that it is, in fact, a cloud of smoke coming out of a factory chimney and, now, tracing the chimney down to the rooftops and the surrounding houses, I see where it is: things fall into place. But although it happens that we find ourselves in the position before things fall into place, this cannot generally be what perception is. If perception as such did not involve any grasp of how things are shaped, coloured, positioned, and moving about, then how could it afford recognition, as Travis claims that it does? For me to recognise that this is a weather cloud requires my understanding of where it is and where it came from, and that understanding is not itself a matter of recognition on the basis of perceptual awareness. Similarly, in order to recognise that this is a pig I must at least see how it is shaped, coloured, and perhaps how it is moving. To have a scene in view, then, is already a matter of seeing how things hang together in

various ways. We cannot entirely disentangle our cognitive grasp of how things are from the presence of things in perception.⁹

Travis postulates a nonconceptual moment of perception because otherwise, he thinks, perception would be prejudiced. So my proposal may seem to come down to saying that our senses bring things under concepts “for us” and then we are deprived of the opportunity to judge for ourselves. On this issue, I want to make two final remarks. First, it seems to me inapt to describe perception as something that our senses do for us, as if the senses are external to the subject. It may be true that the senses do not tell us anything, but the senses also do not see. *We see*, with our senses—not with the help of our senses, as I may be said to see with the help of my glasses. My glasses do some correcting for me, bringing together light waves in the appropriate locations of my retinas. My retinas do not do my seeing for me. They don’t tell me anything, because no part of me tells me anything. So the fact that telling how things are is something I must do for myself, as Travis rightly emphasises, does not mean that it is external to perception. If perception is perceiving how things are (shaped, coloured, positioned and moving about . . .) then this is, so to say, to have our feet in the world, to be in our surroundings—not waiting for them, not merely to have outsourced a task to the senses.

Second, that sense perception is passive is supposed to ensure its objectivity: the world, what is independent of the mind, is *given* in perception. But as has often been remarked, even when we think of perception as active, it can still be understood as putting us in touch with what is mind-independent. In the contrasting metaphor, perception is a matter of *taking in* our surroundings. Just as we cannot decide what to believe (other than deciding where to gather information), we cannot decide what to see (other than deciding where to look), but both belief and perception are acts of the subject. On my preferred conception, perception is a receptive act, a matter of taking in how things are around us. And we can make sense of this as a receptive exercise of conceptual capacities once we have available, in accordance with the previous section, that the sensible world is itself structured in terms of the things we can speak of and the ways we can say they are. Just as hearing a melody or chord as such is the exercise of a musical capacity, so seeing that a cloud of smoke is coming out of a chimney is the exercise of a capacity for grasping spatial relations. Nothing is doing this for us; we are doing it. And what we are doing is not adding anything to what is given, bringing it under a generality, partitioning the whole, carving it up, or imposing some form on it; we are just receiving what is anyway there: how things are—and that is, how things can be truly said to be.

Conclusions

Travis holds that generality is the mark of the mental, not of the world, and so a generality cannot be present to us in perceptual experience. I have argued first that we can resist the motivations that lead him to this conclusion. That a way for things to be is general, and that its shape reflects human interests and sensibilities, does not mean it cannot be present in our surroundings—present in a certain sense, different from the sense in which particulars are present. If I look for a way for things to be, such as being blue, or the sky’s being blue, as if it were a particular object, I will not find it around me. But that is the wrong way to look. Looking at a particular, I also see some of the ways it is: in that sense, a way for things to be can be present. Moreover, we not only can but must resist Travis’s conclusion: “things being as they are” would be out of mind’s reach, since it can neither be expressed nor be an object of reference. On my alternative, “things being as they are” is shorthand for how all things are in all respects, which is also how they can be truly said to be. I further developed this opposition by turning to Travis’s account of perception. It may have seemed that

⁹See Putnam 2012 and Stroud 2018 for two accounts similar to what I can here only suggest. My suggestion differs from McDowell 1994 in that I think of perception not as a matter of being under the appearance that things are a certain way (an appearance which would still need to be confirmed by a judgement), but simply as seeing, and thereby knowing or understanding, that things are a certain way. Correspondingly, I think of perception not as a matter of “passively drawing on” conceptual capacities but of exercising them. But relative to Travis’s account these differences are mere details.

when I spoke of seeing the way something is, I was using “seeing” in an attenuated sense, a response to seeing in the strict sense of receiving visual stimuli. But that would mean that a scene can be present to me without my taking any stance on how things are. It is true that some stances are taken in response to perception but for this to be possible, perception must be at least a matter of perceiving the ways things are shaped, coloured, positioned, moving around. Given my rejection of Travis’s ontology, such perception of ordinary particulars and the ways they are can be a matter of taking in what is before one’s eyes.

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