

# **Do Perceptions Justify Beliefs? The Argument from “Looks” Talk**

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*Abstract:* Why should we believe that perceptions justify beliefs? One argument starts with the premise that sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*” may be used to justify conclusions of the form “*a* is *F*”. I will argue that this argument for the claim that perceptions justify beliefs founders on the following dilemma: Either “*a* looks *F*” does not report the content of a perception or, if it does, then it does not justify the conclusion “*a* is *F*”.

*Keywords:* Perception, belief, looks, justification, conceptual content

## *1. Introduction*

In the past twenty years, it has become commonplace for philosophers to claim that perceptions justify beliefs. One of the few direct arguments for this position that one encounters starts with the premise that one may justify the conclusions of the form “*a* is *F*” by citing premises of the form “*a* looks *F*”. I will argue that, on the contrary, while claims of the form “*a* looks *F*” may justify claims of the form “*a* is *F*”, they do not do so in a way that supports the thesis that perceptions justify beliefs.

The question whether perceptions justify beliefs is important not only for epistemology but also for the philosophy of mind. One alternative in epistemology is to suppose that the entry-level justifiers, not justified by any more basic kind of mental state, are beliefs that are not perceptions but are somehow grounded in perceptions. That

alternative raises questions about the nature of the grounding of entry-level justifiers in perceptions, given that it is not a kind of justification. The question for the philosophy of mind is what kind of content perceptions have. We want to characterize the content of perceptions in order to know what goes into forming a perception and in order to define a sense in which that content may be accurate or inaccurate. (Are concepts involved? Is that accuracy comparable to the truth of a proposition?) If perceptions justify beliefs, then that would be a reason to think that perceptions must have a kind of conceptual content in common with beliefs; otherwise, we will be free to characterize the content of perceptions as some kind of nonconceptual content.

My own view is that, while perceptions do have a content of a kind, and can be accurate or inaccurate, they do not have propositional, or even conceptual, content at all (Gauker 2012), and so they do not have a content that can be expressed in a sentence of the form “*a* looks *F*” or “*a* looks like an *F*”. But I do not want to take that point of view for granted here. Rather, independently of that view, I want to argue that “*a* looks *F*” does not justify “*a* is *F*” in a way that warrants the conclusion that perceptions justify beliefs. One reason to do that is to take away one argument that has sometimes been used to argue that perceptions must have conceptual content.<sup>1</sup> So in this paper I will play along with the idea that for some predicates *F* and in *some* sense of “looks”, sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*” express the contents of perceptions, and I will try to clarify the pertinent sense of “looks”. For the sake of definiteness, I will assume as well that this content is a kind of

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<sup>1</sup> See McDowell 1996, pp. 165–6, where he clearly infers that since, as he supposes, a reason is “articulable” with “looks”, then “experiences” must have “conceptual content”. See also McDowell 2009b, p. 257, where he says that the “rational intelligibility” of “epistemic entitlement” in “light of the subject’s experience” is also “exemplified when a subject judges that things are thus and so because her experience merely seems to reveal to her that things are thus and so” and then, on the next page, seems to infer that, in order to explicate this fact while avoiding the myth of the given, one must follow Kant in allowing that experiences must have conceptual content (even if he now holds that that content is “intuitional”, not “discursive”).

propositional content, but probably everything I will say could be rewritten to address views according to which the content of perceptions is not propositional, provided only it is a kind of content in virtue of which perceptions could justify beliefs. My objection to the argument from “looks” talk will put in stark relief the question, “What do ‘looks’ sentences really mean?” So at the end I will broach a tentative answer to that question.

Throughout, I will assume that the properties  $F$  that we ascribe to things when we say they look  $F$  are properties of a sort that physical objects actually have. So if we say that something looks green, we are talking about the greenness that physical objects can have. So I will ignore altogether the notion that what we are really talking about is the properties of purported psychological objects such as sense data (*pace* Jackson 1977).

## 2. *Reasons to doubt that perceptions justify beliefs*

It is not just obvious that perceptions justify beliefs. The alternative is to suppose that the entry-level justifiers, not justified by any other mental states, are non-perceptual beliefs. Even on this alternative, the entry-level justifiers may themselves be *justified*, because they are the products of a reliable process or because of some other fact about their provenance. But they are not *justified by* any other mental states in the sense that those other mental states constitute premises from which such beliefs may be derived by inference or in some other way constitute evidential support for such beliefs. If I look at table, I may form a belief that there is a table in front of me. My belief may be justified, but it is not justified *by* my perception. On a rare occasion, I may reassure myself that there really is a table in front of me by reasoning that I would not be having such a visual experience unless there were a table in front of me (because I am not on drugs, I am not dreaming); but in that case, it is my belief that I would not be having such an experience unless there were a table in front of me that persuades me and that I take as justification

for my belief that there is table in front of me. As I start my day, I may wonder whether I remembered to brush my teeth. If I can still taste toothpaste, I reason, then I must have brushed my teeth. Doesn't my perception of the taste of the toothpaste then justify my belief that I brushed my teeth? No, what justifies my belief is my belief that I can still taste toothpaste.

The idea that perceptions justify beliefs is a relative newcomer in the analytic tradition. It appears to have gained steam with the appearance of John McDowell's *Mind and World* in 1994 (second edition 1996), although McDowell was not the only advocate at that time. Before that, the dominant view had been that entry-level empirical justifiers are beliefs of a certain kind, namely, beliefs that constitute apprehensions of what is given in perception. These perceptions and their doxastic apprehension have been variously conceived. For Russell (in 1912), sense data are not themselves justifiers; the entry level justifiers are beliefs in which sense data are literally components. For C. I. Lewis, experience has a “given” sensory content, but the sort of thing that has the epistemic status of certainty is not that sensory content itself but rather our *apprehension* of the given (Lewis 1946, pp. 182–83). For Chisholm (1947, p. 62), the entry-level justifiers are statements on the order of “I am appeared to blue”, but he says nothing to suggest that these express a mental state of being appeared to; rather, they *describe* an event of being appeared to and, one might add, they *express* the belief that such an event is taking place.

There is a presumption in some quarters that unless perceptual experiences provided justification for our empirical beliefs, they would lack rational grounding altogether. That idea seems very clearly to be at work in the following passage from McDowell:

When we trace the ground for an empirical judgment, the last step takes us to experiences. Experiences already have conceptual content, so this last step does not take us outside the space of concepts. But it takes us to something in which

sensibility—receptivity—is operative, so we need no longer be unnerved by the freedom implicit in the idea that our conceptual capacities belong to a faculty of spontaneity. We need not worry that our picture leaves out the external constraint that is required if exercises of our conceptual capacities are to be recognizable as bearing on the world at all. (McDowell 1996, p. 10)

At the start of this passage, McDowell is clearly speaking of experiences, by which he means *perceptual* experiences, as representations; only as representations could they have conceptual content. The claim is not that the “last step” is itself the perceived state of affairs. His claim is that perceptual experiences are mental representations distinguished from beliefs in being tied down to what is perceivably going on in the vicinity of the thinking agent. He characterizes this special character of experiences in terms of passivity (p. 10), friction (p. 18), and openness (p. 72). Mere beliefs, by virtue of their “spontaneity” (p. 60), could not be tied down in the way they would need to be in order to serve as entry-level justifiers.<sup>2</sup>

This attempt to bestow a privilege on mental representations that are perceptual experiences is not persuasive on its own. Suppose I look out the window and see a horse. I do not know of any sense in which, in that case, I am free to not believe that there is a

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<sup>2</sup> The interpretation of McDowell as referring to perceptions as representations might seem to conflict McDowell’s disjunctivist conception of perception, and that conflict might raise a doubt about whether I have correctly understood the passage here quoted. If disjunctivism is the thesis that perceptions are not mental representations at all but relations to perceived objects or states of affairs, then, it is true, that doctrine cannot be reconciled with the present passage from *Mind and World*, in which McDowell is clearly taking the “last step” to be a mental representation inasmuch as it is supposed to have conceptual content. But I am not sure that McDowell’s disjunctivism has to be understood as such a thesis. As it is presented in McDowell 1998 (1986), disjunctivism could be a thesis about the contents of perceptions, considered as mental representations, namely, that those perceptions that succeed have only a world-involving kind of content while others, those that do not succeed, may merely appear to have that kind of content without having in addition a thinner, immediately accessible layer of content that the successful ones have as well. In later writings, especially his 2009b, McDowell explicitly revises his conception of perception in ways that may render it incompatible with the present passage from *Mind and World*, but that is no reason to question my reading of that passage.

horse out there. Whether or not other sorts of beliefs possess a kind of freedom that renders them incapable of providing the necessary tie to reality, we can certainly allow that there are beliefs that the extra-mental world imposes on us by means of a process that begins with sensory experience and which in that respect are suitable to serve as the entry-level justifiers.

Moreover, the idea that perceptions justify beliefs seems to conflict with a conception of justification that is commonplace both in philosophy and in everyday life. A justification, one might suppose, is something one can *give*, something that one can express in words in order to justify one's beliefs to another person. That is not to say that one will always share with others a language of the sort that one would need in order to give the justification in words. But a justification is the sort of thing that could be expressed in some possible language that might be used for communication between two people. A justification ought to be persuasive, and it is hard to see how we could recognize persuasiveness in a justification that could not even in principle be expressed in words. So if a perception justifies a belief, then the content of the perception must be capable of being expressed in words. That it can be expressed in words can be doubted on the basis of the following dilemma: On the one hand, we might suppose that the words that express the content of a perception are generic at some level (cube-shaped, six-sided); but then we face an indeterminate choice between various generic expressions. On the other hand, we might avoid an indeterminate choice between determinables, by supposing that the words that express the contents of our perceptions are exclusively words for completely determinate properties (such as a completely determinate shape); but it is easy

to see that in fact our perceptions do not represent completely determinate properties. (For elaboration, see Gauker 2012).<sup>3</sup>

Authors who find it simply intuitively obvious that perceptions justify beliefs do not always take care that their intuitions pertain to perceptions themselves rather than to propositionally contentful thoughts directly grounded in perceptions. Consider for instance James Pryor’s “defense” of what he calls *dogmatism*, which he defines as the view

. . . that when it perceptually seems to you as if *p* is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing *p* that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument (even an ampliative argument) for *p*. (2000, p. 519)

In the section of his paper that Pryor describes as defending this dogmatism (2000 p. 532 ff.), he first distinguishes his claim from various others that he says might be confused with it, and then just says that “for a large class of propositions” dogmatism is “intuitively very natural” (2000, p. 536). The trouble with this appeal to intuitions is that it does nothing to guard against a tempting confusion. On the one hand, there is the perceptual experience itself. On the other hand, there is the conceptual response to this perceptual experience. That conceptual response might be characterizable as a propositionally contentful thought (such as the thought that *that’s* a table), which, because it has not been checked against background beliefs, does not qualify as a belief, a conviction. It might be true, and intuitively obvious, that propositionally contentful thoughts-not-yet-beliefs provide prima facie justification for beliefs proper, and yet that would fall far short of

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<sup>3</sup> McDowell seems to accept that justifications ought to be expressible in words (1996, p. 165; 2009b, p. 265). One challenge he thinks he has to meet, if he is to maintain that that is so along with his claim that perceptions justify beliefs, is the “fineness of grain” objection, which he meets by invoking what he calls “demonstrative concepts” (1996, 170-3). In addition I think he has to meet the dilemma I have sketched, which is something quite different.

showing that perceptions *per se* justify beliefs. It is clear from his alternative formulations of dogmatism – the *senses*, he says, provide immediate justification (2000, p. 534) – that that is not what Pryor thinks is intuitively very natural. But I think it is not obvious that the intuitively obvious truth is what Pryor says it is and not this other one.

### 3. *The meta-argument from “looks” talk*

For all these reasons, if perceptions really do justify beliefs, it ought to be possible to provide some evidence or argument to show that that is so. Contemporary authors who hold that perceptions justify beliefs often just take it for granted without argument.<sup>4</sup> However, one argument that has been offered more or less in passing, merely as an elaboration on the claim that perceptions do justify beliefs, rests on the claim that statements about how things look justify claims about how things are.

Thus, McDowell writes:

But suppose one asks an ordinary subject why she holds some observational belief, say that an object within her field of view is square. An unsurprising reply might be “Because it looks that way”. That is easily recognized as giving a reason for holding the belief. (McDowell 1996, p. 165; cf., 2009b, p. 257)

While it might be argued that this passage is not meant to stand on its own as an argument for the conclusion that perceptions justify beliefs (it occurs in the context of a critique of Christopher Peacocke), it is hard to brush aside McDowell’s assertion that the claim about how something looks is *easily recognized* as give a reason for holding the belief.

Similarly, Glüer quotes precisely this passage from McDowell approvingly, and then adds:

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Siegel and Silins, their “The Epistemology of Perception” (2015, p. 781) candidly admit that they are just making an assumption.

We routinely cite experiences as reasons for what we believe: I can, for instance, explain to you why I thought a certain tomato was ripe by telling you that it looked red. . . . I can point to the tomato and say: ‘It looks red. It’s ripe.’ (Glüer 2009, p. 316)

On this basis, Glüer grounds her claim that, “It is an essential part of our ordinary, everyday conception of experience that experience provides reasons for empirical belief” (2009, p. 316). Or again, Pollock and Oved write:

What is it about my perceptual experience that justifies me in believing, for example, that the apple is red? It seems clear that the belief is justified by the fact that the apple looks red to me. (Pollock and Oved 2005, p. 311)

From this example, they abstract a general principle:

For appropriate P’s, if S believes P on the basis of being appeared to as if P, S is defeasibly justified in doing so. (Pollock and Oved 2005, p. 311)

Pollock and Oved then proceed to claim that the truth of this principle can be secured by allowing that “percepts” represent properties of the object of perception (2005, pp. 325-326). Thus, from the assumption that S’s belief that the apple is red can be justified on the basis of the fact that the apple looks red to S, Pollock and Oved infer that perceptions justify beliefs.

None of these authors very explicitly explains how the justificatory practices they appeal to warrant the conclusion that perceptions justify beliefs. Hannah Ginsborg’s explanation in the case of McDowell is that he is confusing two kinds of justification (Ginsborg 2006, p. 302, and “Empiricism and Normative Constraint”, *this volume*, section II). On the one hand, we may justify our beliefs by appeal to *states of affairs*; on the other hand, we may justify our beliefs by reasoning from the content of others of our mental states (paradigmatically, other beliefs). For example, in justification of my belief that it is raining, I might cite the *fact* that the streets are wet, or I might cite the fact that I *believe* that the streets are wet. The justificatory practices that McDowell appeals to concerns

only the first kind, she says, but he takes them to concern the second. But it seems clear enough that these authors think of the justification they are talking about as justification by appeal to something with conceptual content (even if they then appeal to such justificatory practices in defense of their claim that perceptions have conceptual content), and it is not clear to me that they are wrong to find such justifications in our ordinary practices.<sup>5</sup> So I am not convinced we can locate their error in their mistaking Ginsborg’s first kind of justification for a justification of Ginsborg’s second kind.

The basic idea that these authors share could be expressed as a claim about the expressions “looks” or “appears” or as a claim about states of appearing. However, I take it that all of them take as their starting point the observation that arguments of the following form are in some sense good arguments:

*The “looks” argument*

Premise: *a* looks *F*.

Conclusion: *a* is *F*.

(The premise could also be, “*a* looks like an *F*” and the conclusion, “*a* is an *F*”.) The largely tacit argument for the conclusion that perceptions justify beliefs starts with the claim that the premise of the “looks” argument does provide a defeasible justification for the conclusion. The premise of the “looks” argument will provide at most a defeasible justification for the conclusion inasmuch as one can accept the premise and reject the conclusion on other grounds. For short, let us say, the “looks” argument is *good*. Further, it is presumed that the premise of the “looks” argument reports the content of a perception

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<sup>5</sup> Pollock and Oved eschew the term “conceptual” (2005, pp. 312, 326), claiming that they do not know what it means. But they explicitly state that from a perceptual representation both a subject and a predicate can be “extracted” by a purely syntactic transformation (p.326); so by their lights a representation of that which the extractable predicate represents, namely, a property, is already present in the perceptual representation.

and the conclusion reports the content of a belief. So from the assumption that the “looks” argument is good, it is inferred that perceptions justify beliefs. In sum:

*The meta-argument from “looks” talk*

Premise 1: The “looks” argument is good.

Premise 2: The premise of the “looks” argument reports the content of a perception.

Premise 3: The conclusion of the “looks” argument reports the content of a belief.

Conclusion: Perceptions defeasibly justify beliefs.

Strictly speaking, it is utterances, not sentences, that report the contents of mental states; so Premise 2 should read, “The premise of the ‘looks’ argument, whenever it is sincerely uttered, reports the content of a perception”, and likewise for Premise 3, *mutatis mutandis*, but I will let Premises 2 and 3, as formulated above, stand in for these more complex statements. I cannot be entirely sure, based on what they say, that the authors quoted above would endorse this argument, but if not, then it will still be worthwhile to consider whether it is persuasive, so that if it is not, then people can take care to distinguish their own arguments from this one.

The conclusion of the meta-argument from “looks” talk can be at most that perceptions *defeasibly* justify beliefs. Such an argument cannot show that perceptions provide *certainty* to beliefs, because the “looks” argument can be *good* only in the sense that the premise provides a defeasible justification for the conclusion. There might be some who want to say that perceptions provide *demonstrations* of the truth of the corresponding beliefs, but that position cannot be supported on the basis of the observation that a claim that *a looks F* supports the conclusion that *a is F*.

However, a closely related argument for the claim that perceptions justify beliefs might start with the observation we may use “perceives” or “sees” as factive verbs and cite what we perceive or see as a reason to believe. For example, one might justify the claim

that Melvin is in his bedroom by saying, “I saw him there”.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this fact one might try to show that perceptions provide demonstrations of the truth of the corresponding beliefs. In fact, I don’t think this argument would be in any way stronger than the meta-argument from “looks”, and it could be answered in the same way that I will answer the argument from “looks”. But for lack of space I will not be able to address this alternative explicitly.

Basically, my claim will be that Premise 1 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk is false if Premise 2 can be taken for granted. That is, Premise 1 is false, given a certain understanding of the premise of the “looks” argument, one that is necessary in order for Premise 2 to be plainly acceptable. I will begin by elaborating on that understanding of the premise of the “looks” argument.

#### 4. The pertinent sense of “looks”

To make the meta-argument from “looks” talk work, we do not have to suppose that sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*” always report the contents of perception, but we do have to find a *reading* of “*a* looks *F*” such that *whenever* the premise of the “looks” argument is read *in that way* it reports the content of a perception and then read Premise 2 as a claim about “*a* looks *F*” read in that way. For Premise 2 in the meta-argument from “looks” talk, we cannot substitute the following weaker claim: “The premise of the ‘looks’ argument *sometimes* reports the content of a perception.” If all we know is that the sentence “*a* looks *F*” is *sometimes* used to report the content of a perception, then we do not yet know that when it is used to justify the conclusion “*a* is *F*” it is used to report the content of a perception. Nor can we strengthen this weakened premise to: “The premise of the ‘looks’ argument sometimes reports the content of a perception, namely, *when it is*

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, McDowell (2002, p. 98), Roessler (2011, p. 285) and Moretti (2015).

used to justify the conclusion that ‘*a* is *F*.’” If that were our second premise, then it would beg the question that the argument as a whole is supposed to answer, namely, whether perceptions justify beliefs.

There are certainly good uses for sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*” that probably no one would think of as reporting the contents of perceptions. Someone might say, “That house looks like it was built for Mickey Mouse”, though it is very clear that the sentence is not used to report the content of a perception, or at least, the words used do not correspond to the content of the perception on which it is based. Or one might say, “That looks like an ivory-billed woodpecker”, meaning thereby only that there are perceptible similarities between the thing referred to and an ivory-billed woodpecker that might lead one to classify that thing as an ivory-billed woodpecker. Or one might say, “It looks like the river has flooded”, as a way of indicating that the source of one’s belief that the river has flooded is one’s own vision, not the testimony of another. A sentence of the form “*a* looks *F*” or “*a* looks like an *F*” will plausibly be regarded as expressing the content of a perception only in those cases where *F* is plausibly a predicate standing for a property or expressing a concept that is plausibly the content of a perception. So at the very least, in evaluating the meta-argument from “looks” talk, we must confine our attention to such predicates. Even when *F* is so constrained, there are tokens of “*a* looks *F*” that could be elaborated as “*a* has a look similar to the look of *F* things”, and those must be set aside as well.<sup>7</sup>

In seeking a suitable reading of “*a* looks *F*”, we have to steer clear of two potential confounds. There are at least two ways in which a statement about how things look might

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<sup>7</sup> One can find taxonomies of “looks” statements in Chisholm 1957 and Jackson 1977, but it is questionable whether these are definitive from a linguistic point of view. Martin 2010 proposes a unified treatment of comparative and so-called phenomenal uses of “looks *F*” in terms of an ontology of *looks*. Although his account does not vindicate the claim that such uses report the contents of perceptions, it is probably in competition with the account I will propose in section 6 below; but I cannot take the space to examine it.

support a conclusion about how things are without giving us any reason to think that perceptions justify beliefs (even granting that perceptions have reportable contents).

One thing that can happen is that the word “looks” is not doing any work in qualifying the kind of content at issue. Suppose, for example, that you reason as follows:

Premise: That thing on the porch looks like a package.

Conclusion: The books I ordered have arrived.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the fact that the thing on the porch looks like a package might justify your belief that the books you ordered have arrived, given that an adequate amount of time has passed since you placed the order and you were not expecting any other deliveries. But the justification provided for the conclusion may be no different from the justification that would have been provided by the claim that the thing on the porch *is* a package. Even if we assume that the premise reports the content of a perception, we cannot just assume that the justification of the conclusion is carried by the perception rather than the belief, formed as a result of that perception, that the thing on the porch *is* a package. We may find such a liability also in Glüer’s example, quoted above: “It looks red. It’s ripe” (Glüer 2009, p. 316).

To avoid this kind of confound, we ought to confine the “looks” argument to arguments in which the content of the premise, apart from the qualification by “looks”, is no different from the content of the conclusion, for instance:

Premise: That thing on the porch *looks* like a package

Conclusion: That thing on the porch *is* a package.

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<sup>8</sup> Here I adapt to my own purposes an example from Ginsborg (2011, pp. 135–37). What Ginsborg actually says is that it is seeing the package *as* a package, or seeing the package *to be* a package, that justifies the belief that the books have arrived (by, she says, first justifying the belief “that there is a package in front of you”). She does not directly infer from this (in the manner of the “closely related” argument that I mentioned at the end of section 3 above) that perceptions justify beliefs, but it does set her off on a search for a conception of perceptions according to which perceptions can provide a reason for beliefs.

In that case, if we still think that the premise justifies the conclusion, without just asserting the very same thing as the conclusion, then it will be clear that the justificatory load is actually carried by the claim about how things look rather than by a claim that is qualified by the addition of “looks”. If the argument about the books is supposed to illustrate a justification by perception, then the inference from the premise to the conclusion must tacitly pass through the intermediate conclusion, “That thing on the porch is a package”.

The second possible confound has to do with the fact that in using a word like “looks” we may reveal something important about the source of our information. There will be situations in which we place more credence in another’s testimony when we know the speaker’s belief was formed on the basis of direct observation than we would if we thought that it was grounded in someone else’s testimony. Suppose I am wondering whether road construction is still slowing traffic on my usual route home from work. You come in and report, “It looks like the construction on Victory Parkway is finished”. In that case, I may have a better reason to think that the construction on Victory Parkway is finished than I would have had if you had said, “The construction on Victory Parkway, I am told, is finished”. That is because I might have reason to accept what you believe on the basis of your own observations but no good reason to believe what you believe on the basis of someone else’s testimony. So if an instance of the “looks” argument seems persuasive, that may be, not because a perception justifies a belief, but because we are justified in accepting testimony grounded in direct observation. (This confound would be a special liability for variants of the argument from “looks” that begin with observations about our use of factive verbs, such as “sees”.) In evaluating the meta-argument from “looks” talk, we need to stipulate that the value of “looks” in the “looks” argument is not just that it in this way distinguishes the modality by which the relevant information was acquired.

Moreover, there are philosophical *theories* of the meaning of “looks” that cannot be adopted by anyone who wishes to endorse the meta-argument from “looks” talk. According to Glüer, what the word “looks” does in the sentence “*a* looks *F*”, when it is used in what she calls the *phenomenal sense*, is characterize the kind of property that *a* is said to have. There is the property of *being rectangular*, and there is the different property of *looking rectangular*, which, she says, “is a perfectly respectable property of” *a*, though she does not tell us much about it (Glüer 2009, p. 311). Maybe there are such properties, and perhaps sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*” can be used to report that objects have them. But when “*a* looks *F*” appears in the “looks” argument, what it means must not be merely that *a* has the property of looking *F* — notwithstanding Glüer’s own employment of the meta-argument from “looks” talk. If looking *F* is a “perfectly respectable property”, then the proposition that *a* looks *F* should likewise be a perfectly respectable proposition that could serve as the content of a belief that is not a perception. But in that case, we have no special reason to accept Premise 2 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk. The premise of the “looks” argument, contrary to Premise 2 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk, need not express the content of a perception. Rather, the premise of the “looks” argument might just express the content of a belief which is not a perception but that provides persuasive support for the conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

What “looks” in the premise of the “looks” argument does also cannot be just to turn a statement about an object into a statement about the speaker’s visual perception. We do not want to interpret the “looks” argument as amounting to the same thing as the following argument:

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<sup>9</sup> Glüer (2009) explicitly argues that perceptions *are* beliefs; so she would not be disturbed by the finding that “*a* looks *F*” reports the content of a belief. The present point is that what “*a* looks *F*”, as it occurs in the “looks” argument, must not do is report the content of a belief that is *not* a perception.

*The argument from a fact about perception:*

Premise: I am having a visual perception with the content that *a* is *F*.

Conclusion: *a* is *F*.

The premise of the “looks” argument is not supposed to mean just that the speaker is having a visual perception with the content that *a* is *F*. What an utterance of the premise of this argument from a fact about perception expresses is the content of the speaker’s belief that he or she is having a perception with the content that *a* is *F*; whereas, what Premise 2 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk requires is that an utterance of the premise of the “looks” argument expresses the content of a perception. The goodness of the argument from a fact about perception would not give us any reason to believe that perceptions justify beliefs. (And it just takes for granted, and does nothing to show, that perceptions have propositional contents.)

What the word “looks” has to do in the formulation of the premise of the “looks” argument is express a certain modality incorporated into the proposition that would otherwise be the proposition that *a* is *F*. The modality it expresses has to be a modality that can be incorporated in such a way as to produce a truth only if the proposition into which it is incorporated is the content of a perception. I can see no other way of interpreting the premise of the “looks” argument if we are at the same time to accept Premise 2 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk, which tells us that the premise of the “looks” argument reports the content of a perception. In English there are no ordinary language expressions that unambiguously express this modality by virtue of their conventional meaning alone. So I will make up some terminology and stipulate that it is to be understood in the requisite way. Let us stipulate that the expression “visually appears” is an operator that expresses the pertinent perceptual modality. In these terms, the “looks” argument can be reformulated as follows:

*The “looks” argument (revised)*

Premise: *a* visually appears *F*.

Conclusion: *a* is *F*.

With this revision in place, the meta-argument from “looks” talk (for the conclusion that perceptions justify beliefs) can proceed as before.

The operator “visually appears” that I have introduced is to be understood as belonging to a family of operators that includes also “apparently”, “allegedly”, “surprisingly”, and maybe “certainly”, “probably” and “possibly”, and maybe “regrettably” and “hopefully”, depending on how broadly we want to define the family. Some of these can be added to a sentence that might otherwise be used to assert that *p* without thereby undermining the assertion that *p*. “Surprisingly”, “certainly” and “regrettably” are of that kind. Others do undermine the assertion. These include “allegedly”, “possibly” and “hopefully”. “Visually appears” belongs to this latter category. If I say, “That table visually appears rectangular”, I am not to be understood as flat out asserting, *inter alia*, that the table is rectangular. For first of all, the “looks” modifier that it stands in for is certainly not factive in this way. Further, if in saying “*a* visually appears *F*” one were understood to be asserting that *a* is *F*, then the premise of the “looks” argument could not be taken to justify the conclusion (in the ampliative, defeasible manner), because the premise would be equally touched by every doubt we might raise about the conclusion. In order to make the requisite operator syntactically analogous to these others, it might have been better to write “*a* is visual-apparently *F*”, but I will stick with “*a* visually appears *F*”.

What we should say about “visually appears” is that it expresses a modality such that if “*a* visually appears *F*” is true, then the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content of some visual perception. “*a* visually appears *F*” emphatically must not mean “I am having a

visual perception with the content that *a* is *F*”, for, as we have seen, the “looks” argument must not reduce to the argument from a fact about perception. Similarly, it must not mean “*Someone* is having a visual perception with the content that *a* is *F*”. Nonetheless, since the contents of visual perception vary over perceiver, time and place, in our metalinguistic characterization of the proposition expressed, we need to add a parameter *i* that specifies the values of such variables. So on each occasion on which “*a* visually appears *F*” is used to make an assertion, there is some *i* such that the proposition expressed is the proposition that *a* visually appears *F* at *i*, which is true *only* in case the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content of a visual perception at *i*. (Perhaps it is not true in *every* such case. I will not attempt propose a complete analysis.) The pertinent *i* need not be the speaker. For instance, if you assert, “The table visually appears rectangular”, then there will be some *i* such that your utterance expresses the proposition that *the table visually appears rectangular at i*, and I may come to believe that same proposition, that *the table visually appears rectangular at i*, as a result of hearing your assertion, and I may express that proposition by saying, “The table visually appears rectangular”, though I have never seen the table myself.<sup>10</sup> In the case in which an utterance of “*a* visually appears *F*” expresses, for some *i*, the proposition that *a* visually appears *F* at *i*, and that proposition is true, we may, with implicit reference to that utterance situation, speak of the *fact* that *a* visually appears *F*.

In any given context of utterance, the sentence “Someone has a visual perception with the content that *a* is *F*” will be true if and only if someone in the domain of discourse for that context (at the time for that context) has a visual perception with the content that *a*

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<sup>10</sup> Suppose that someone truly asserts, “*a* visually appears *F*” though the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content, not of the speaker’s perception, but of someone else’s. Does that assertion still provide defeasible justification for the speaker’s belief that *a* is *F*? The meta-argument from “looks” talk seems to argue that it does. Perhaps the argument could be modified, taking advantage of the implicit parameter *i*, to avoid this result.

is  $F$ . But in any given context of utterance, the sentence “ $a$  visually appears  $F$ ” is true only if  $a$  visually appears  $F$  at the index associated with that context, which is so only if the proposition that  $a$  is  $F$  is the content of a visual perception at that index.

Consequently, while “ $a$  visually appears  $F$ ” may logically imply “Someone has a visual perception with the content that  $a$  is  $F$ ”, the converse implication does not hold. Speaking in the material mode, the fact that *someone* has a visual perception with the content that  $a$  is  $F$  does not imply that  $a$  visually appears  $F$ .

### 5. Critique of the “looks” argument.

Now I can take up my critique of Premise 1 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk, which says that the “looks” argument is *good*. I will enumerate every way I can think of in which a single premise can support a conclusion and argue that the premise of the “looks” argument, as I have now construed it, does not support the conclusion in any of those ways. Just to give names to the various ways, here is a list: Option #1: Logical implication. Option #2: Fulfillment of a necessary step. Option #3: Inference to the best explanation. Option #4: Probability raising. Option #5: Ruling out alternatives. I will not try to show that Premise 1 somehow leads to absurdity, as White (2006) has tried to do. My point is that Premise 1 may be rejected because its defenders have never had in the first place a clear conception of the goodness that the “looks” argument is supposed to possess.

Option #1 can be ruled out very swiftly. If the premise of the “looks” argument is understood as I have said it must be, with “looks” or “visually appears” expressing a special modality, then the premise obviously does logically imply the conclusion. In light of this reply one might be tempted to switch to the “closely related” argument that I mentioned at the end of section 3, in which the “looks” premise is replaced with a factive

“see” premise. This argument is not really my topic; so about this I will say just that the challenge will be to show that the premise expresses the content of a factive perceptual state while not rendering the argument bad in the manner of being completely question-begging.

What I have in mind under option #2, fulfillment of a necessary step, is this: Someone might think that the process by which we form an empirical belief to the effect that *a* is *F* by means of sensory experience passes through a stage in which our perceptual experiences represent the object *a* as *F*, or, more precisely, that it does so when the belief is formed in the biologically normal way. In that case, if a belief happened to be formed on the basis of sensory experience though the process of formation did not pass through such a step, that belief could be considered malformed. Even if it happened to be true, it did not arise in the right way and so could not count as justified. Insofar as the premise, “*a* visually appears to be *F*”, records the fact that the requisite step through perceptual experience has been executed, it may be considered to provide some justification for the conclusion, “*a* is *F*”.<sup>11</sup>

I think this option does not conform to the presuppositions of most of those who would claim that perceptions justify beliefs. They do not want to say that perceptions having a propositional content are a necessary link in the production of empirical beliefs. Rather, they just want to say that when one is looking for a justification for one’s empirical beliefs, the contents of perceptions may serve the purpose.<sup>12</sup> In any case, I think

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<sup>11</sup> I thank Tom Fery for bringing this option to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance, Pryor 2002, p. 525, p. 533; McDowell 2009a, p. 131. An exception might be Pollock and Oved (2005), for they do think of themselves as describing both a framework for epistemic justification and a psychological mechanism. A problem for their view is that precisely because they aim to describe a “missing link” between sensation and belief, they don’t want the contents of perception to be informed by the processes of higher-level thought, and so they have a hard time identifying the properties that percepts in their sense are supposed to report on (pp. 329–333).

the account of justification represented by option #2 is clearly flawed. The fact that a link in a biologically normal process is missing might mean that the product of that process was accidental in a sense that implied a defect. But even so, the presence of that link can at most contribute to the product’s being biologically well-formed. There is no immediate inference from *biologically well-formed* to *epistemically justified*.

Option #3 is that we might construe the argument from “looks” as good in the manner of a good inference to the best explanation. In general, an inference to the best explanation will start by noting some fact that needs to be explained and then infer that some other fact holds that could explain the first fact. In this case, the claim will be that the fact that *a* is *F* provides some explanation for the fact that *a* visually appears *F*. In evaluating this option, we have to make sure that what the fact that *a* is *F* explains is precisely the fact that *a* visually appears *F* and not only some other, merely related fact.

In particular, we must not confuse the fact that *a* visually appears *F* with the fact that the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content of someone’s visual perception at some time. That is, we must not confuse the argument from “looks” with the argument from a fact about perception that I set out in the previous section. The fact that *a* is *F* might indeed provide some explanation for the fact that the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content of someone’s visual perception at some time. So the argument from a fact about perception might indeed be a good inference to the best explanation (assuming that visual perceptions can have such contents). But that will not show that the argument from “looks” is a good inference to the best explanation, because in order for that to be so, the fact that *a* is *F* has to provide some explanation specifically for the fact that *a* visually appears *F*. Likewise, we must not confuse the fact that *a* visually appears *F* with the fact that *a* has the Glüer-property of *looking F*. Possibly the fact that *a* is *F* would explain the fact that *a* has the Glüer-property of looking *F*, but that too would not show that the argument from “looks”,

in which the premise reports the content of a perception that *a is F*, is a good inference to the best explanation.

Again, the modality expressed by “visually appears” seems to belong in a family together with the modalities expressed by words such as “allegedly”. “Allegedly” in particular is instructive. Compare the “looks” argument to the following “allegedly” argument:

*The “allegedly” argument*

Premise: *a* is allegedly *F*.

Conclusion: *a* is *F*.

Would the truth of the conclusion explain the truth of the premise? I grant that the fact that *a* is *F* might, in the right setting, explain the fact someone has alleged that *a* is *F*. Given that the witness is a reliable observer, observes *a* when it is *F*, has the concept *F*-things, and so on, the fact that *a* is *F* might be taken to explain why she ends up alleging that *a* is *F*. Since the fact that the witness alleges that *a* is *F* implies that *someone* alleges that *a* is *F*, the fact that *a* is *F* might likewise explain why *someone* alleges that *a* is *F*. But the fact that *a* is *allegedly F* does not seem to be the same fact as the fact that *someone* alleges that *a* is *F*, and does not seem to be implied by it.<sup>13</sup> The fact that *a* is *allegedly F* is the fact that *a* is *F* modified by the modality that “allegedly” expresses. I do not see how the fact that *a* is *F* explains this peculiarly modal fact.

Similarly, the fact that *a* is *F* might, under the right circumstances, explain the fact that so-and-so has a visual perception with the content that *a* is *F* — for instance, if so-

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<sup>13</sup> We may say that “*a* is allegedly *F*” is true in a given context of utterance if and only if it is alleged at the index *i* associated with that context that *a* is *F*, while “Someone alleges that *a* is *F*” is true in a context if and only if someone in the domain of discourse associated with that context alleges that *a* is *F*. By this account, the sentence “*a* is allegedly *F*” implies the sentence “Someone alleges that *a* is *F*”, but the converse implication does not hold. So even if “*a* is *F*” explains “Someone alleges that *a* is *F*”, it does not follow that “*a* is *F*” likewise explains “*a* is allegedly *F*”.

and-so is looking at  $a$  while  $a$  is  $F$ , has the concept  $F$ -things, and so on. So likewise, the fact that  $a$  is  $F$  might explain the fact that *someone* has a visual perception with the content that  $a$  is  $F$ . But the fact that someone has a visual perception with the content that  $a$  is  $F$  is not the same fact as the fact that  $a$  visually appears  $F$ , and, as was noted at the end of the previous section, does not even imply it. I do not see in what way the fact that  $a$  is  $F$  might explain the peculiarly modal fact that  $a$  visually appears  $F$ .

Let us turn now to option #4, which attempts to explain the goodness of the “looks” argument in terms of probabilities. In general, we can say that a premise  $p$  justifies, or lends some justification to, a conclusion  $q$  if the probability of  $q$  given  $p$  is higher than the probability of  $q$  alone. In symbols:  $\Pr(q/p) > \Pr(q)$ . That is so, because if at some point in time  $\Pr(q/p) > \Pr(q)$  and then afterward we *learn* that  $p$ , we may assign to  $\Pr(q)$  the value that we previously assigned to  $\Pr(q/p)$  (by the rule of conditionalization), which was higher than the value we assigned to  $\Pr(q)$ . So the claim that the “looks” argument is good in this way has to be the claim that  $\Pr(a \text{ is } F/a \text{ visually appears } F) > \Pr(a \text{ is } F)$ .<sup>14</sup>

Once again, we may be flummoxed by the question, what does “visually appears” really mean? If “ $\Pr(a \text{ is } F/a \text{ visually appears } F)$ ” is supposed to be a well-formed expression, then likewise “ $\Pr(a \text{ visually appears } F)$ ” must be one (because, on the usual assumptions,  $\Pr(q/p) = \Pr(p \ \& \ q)/\Pr(p)$ , so that the condition in the conditional probability has to be susceptible to a probability assignment on its own). Does a sentence of the form “ $a$  visually appears  $F$ ” even express the sort of proposition to which a probability can meaningfully be assigned? Not every declarative sentence expresses a proposition to which a probability can be meaningfully assigned. What would it mean to say that the probability of the proposition that *possibly* there are aardvark-shaped ice sculptures is 0.3?

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Lukas Schwengerer for pressing this line of defense.

There is a large literature debating the question whether ordinary indicative conditionals express propositions of the sort to which a probability can be assigned (starting with Lewis 1976).

If, as I suggested, “visually appears” expresses a modality such that the proposition that  $a$  visually appears  $F$  is true only if the proposition that  $a$  is  $F$  is the content of someone’s visual perception (but not identical to the proposition that someone visually perceives that  $a$  is  $F$ ), then, it would seem, the only probability that could attach to the proposition that  $a$  visually appears  $F$  would be the probability of the proposition that  $a$  is  $F$ . The probability assignment, in other words, just ignores the modality added by “visually appears”. In that case, in any calculation of probability we should be able to substitute the words “ $a$  is  $F$ ” for the words “ $a$  visually appears  $F$ ”, in which case,  $\Pr(a \text{ is } F/a \text{ visually appears } F) = \Pr(a \text{ is } F/a \text{ is } F) = 1$ . But that result proves too much. As we have already seen in connection with Option #1, we do not wish to say that the premise of the “looks” argument renders the truth of the conclusion completely certain.

Finally, option #5 is to say that the “looks” argument is a good argument inasmuch as the truth of the premise rules out alternatives to the truth of the conclusion. The idea is that a doubt about the truth of some sentence takes the form of conceiving an alternative that somehow accommodates as well whatever it is that tempted us to assert that sentence. One might say that doubts are expressed as alternatives that accommodate our *evidence* just as well as the truth of the sentence in question would do, but for present purposes, we do not need to make our formulation of the principle as precise as that and thereby raise difficult questions about what is meant by “evidence”. So according to this option, the “looks” argument is a good argument, because the truth of the premise rules out some doubt that might be raised about the conclusion.

My answer to this option is that I cannot think of any doubt about the conclusion of the “looks” argument that might be answered by appeal to the premise. Suppose I am looking at a table, and the table top visually appears to me rectangular. Initially I am disposed to believe that the surface is rectangular, but then become doubtful, because it occurs to me that the surface might actually be a nonrectangular trapezoid and tilted so that the far edge is higher than the near edge. The fact that the table top visually appears to be rectangular rules out the possibility that it *visually appears* nonrectangular. But that is no support for the conclusion, since its *visually appearing* nonrectangular is not an alternative to its *being* rectangular. Information that would enable me to rule out that the surface is a nonrectangular trapezoid would support the conclusion that it is rectangular. But it is no easier to see how the fact of the table’s visually appearing rectangular rules out its being nonrectangular than it is to understand how its visually appearing rectangular justifies the conclusion that it is rectangular. Since I cannot think of any kind of doubt about the conclusion that might be ruled out by the premise, I have to reject this account of the goodness of the “looks” argument as well.

In sum, I cannot find any account of the way in which a premise might justify a conclusion under which we can subsume the purported goodness of the argument from “looks” when the premise of that argument may be presumed to report the content of a perception. Generalizing, I conclude that Premise 1 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk is false if Premise 2 may be presumed true. Of course, one could maintain that the kind of justification that the premise of that argument from “looks” affords to the conclusion is *sui generis*, a kind that is instantiated only in arguments from perceptions to beliefs. But that would be an *ad hoc* defense that would not stand up to the doubts that can be raised against the claim that perceptions justify beliefs, such as those I reviewed in section 2.

6. *An alternative account of “looks”*

In closing I would like to broach a hypothesis about the meaning of “looks” in sentences of the form “*a* looks *F*”. Unlike those who wish to claim that perceptions justify beliefs, I have no reason to avoid taking “looks” sentences to allude to the act of perception and to instead take it to express only a peculiar modality indicating that the proposition that *a* is *F* is the content of a perception at a given index *i*. So I will drop the conceit of substituting “visually appears” in place of “looks”, the only purpose of which was to emphasize that what was intended was such a modality.

In my view, there is considerable truth in Wilfrid Sellars’s idea that “looks” serves as a kind of hedge. In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Sellars tells the story of John, who works in a necktie shop (1956, §14). John confidently classifies ties according to their color until electrical lighting is introduced into his enterprise. At that point he finds that his judgment regarding a certain tie varies, depending on whether he is viewing it indoors or outdoors. Indoors he judges it green; outdoors he judges it blue. He regards it as not plausible that the color of the tie changes as he passes from one environment to another. Somehow (Sellars does not say how) John learns to suppress his judgments about the color of this tie when he is indoors and to say things like “The tie *looks* green”. The moral of the story, for Sellars, is that

. . . when I say, “X looks green to me now” I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. Involved in the report is the ascription to my experience of the claim ‘x is green’; and the fact that I make this report rather than the simple report “X is green” indicates that certain considerations have operated to raise, so to speak in a higher court, the question ‘to endorse or not to endorse.’ I may have reason to think that x may not after all be green. (Sellars 1956, §16, p. 273)

In asserting, “The tie looks green”, John, as it were, presents the same content that an assertion of “The tie is green” would present, but explicitly withholds assent from that content.

There are basically two elements of this account that I wish to preserve. The first is that in saying that *x looks green*, we explicitly withhold an all-in assertion. If this is correct, then Sellars’s own characterization is a bit misleading in that it might suggest that “*x looks green*”, explicitly asserts that *x*’s being green is questionable, which is not what I want to say. The second element that I wish to preserve is the idea that in saying *x looks green* we indicate that the source of our information is vision. Sellars’s own characterization is misleading here too in that it might suggest that the locution explicitly refers to visual experience, which is not what I want to say, and in that it ascribes a propositional content to that experience, which I also do not want to say.

My own proposal is that the truth conditions of “*x looks F*”, when used to report a perception, may be explicated as follows:

“*a looks F*” is true in context *c* if and only if the agent in *c* would be disposed to assert that *a is F* if the agent’s assertions about *a* at the time of *c* were guided only by immediate visual experience of *a*.<sup>15</sup>

To say that an agent is guided only by immediate visual experience is to say, among other things, that the agent does not check his or her assertions against further requirements (such as that the lighting conditions are normal).

On this account, “*a looks F*” does not explicitly *say* that there is reason to doubt that *a is F*. At most, an utterance of “*a looks F*” will *suggest* that the agent does not

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<sup>15</sup> This is similar to some of the analyses that Jackson criticizes in his 1977, pp. 33-48, but it is not the same as any of those, and I think it escapes his criticisms. Normally the agent in a context will be the speaker, but sometimes, for instance, when the speaker is repeating the testimony of another agent, the agent for the context may not be the speaker.

believe that *a* is *F*, inasmuch as the hearer may presume that if the agent believed that *a* was *F* then the agent would have said so. Of course, if any account along these lines is correct, then it has to be a special case of a more general account of the meaning of epistemic verbs and adverbs like “seems”, “supposedly” and “allegedly”, which I will not attempt to develop here. A fuller exposition would also require an account of what it means to say that an assertion is guided only by immediate visual experience. (For an indication of what is involved in the latter, see my 2011, chapter 7.)

Ironically, on this account of the truth conditions of “*a* looks *F*”, the goodness of the “looks” argument is vindicated. That a speaker of English would say “*a* is *F*” if guided only by immediate visual experience is indeed a reason, albeit highly defeasible, to think that *a* is *F*. For example, if I come out of a shop wearing a horrible orange-colored T-shirt, I may excuse my error in choosing it by saying, “Well, it looked a beautiful red in *there!*”<sup>16</sup> The excuse works by justifying my former belief that the T-shirt was red, which justified my choosing it. The claim, “It looked red in there” explains, in effect, that, since I had nothing to go by other than my immediate visual experience, I was disposed to think it red. However, if the “looks” argument is rendered good in only this way, then Premise 2 of the meta-argument from “looks” talk is false: The premise of the “looks” argument does not report the content of a perception.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I thank Kathrin Glüer for the example.

<sup>17</sup> I thank Hannah Ginsborg, John McDowell, Rasmus Thybo Jensen, and Johan Gersel for comments on an earlier version.

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