

Review Article

Human Nature?

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***Mind and World.* By John McDowell. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, x + 191 pp.
ISBN 0-674-57609-8 hb £19.95/\$27.50**

McDowell's book consists of versions of the six John Locke lectures he delivered in Oxford in 1991, together with a four-part 'Afterword' elaborating on and defending various of their themes. It displays a level of philosophical ambition that, in both scale and general direction, is nothing short of Hegelian – indeed the author remarks¹ that he would like to view his text as a prolegomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. McDowell's agenda, like Hegel's, is shaped through and through by the challenge of overcoming the Kantian legacy of minds' alienation from an unknowable noumenal reality. But this is an essentially modern work. The approach is fashioned by a deeply respectful, if profoundly unsympathetic reaction to certain fundamental epistemological themes in the writings of Donald Davidson and Gareth Evans. The Sellarsian and Strawsonian influences on McDowell's thinking are also very evident, and acknowledged. Quine and Rorty are extensively criticized. Wittgenstein and Gadamer are important allies.

In the broadest terms, the project of the book is as follows. McDowell believes that there is no hope of a satisfying vision of our place as rational, enquiring beings within the natural world if the latter is conceived in the currently dominant fashion. That conception elevates the sort of description of the world offered by modern physical science into a metaphysics of what the natural world essentially is: a 'Realm of Law' – a domain of causal-nomological connection from which purpose and meaning are absent and whose complete description has no need of any of the vocabulary distinctive of minds and their activity. The modern 'naturalism' in philosophy which attends this conception of Nature thus finds itself with a problem – that of finding space for the categories whereby we express our *Spontaneity*² – categories of meaning, intentionality and normativity – in a world whose fundamentals are thought to be amenable to fully adequate description by modern natural science. One, eliminativist response is simply to repudiate the claim of those categories to represent anything real. A more conservative response – that of what McDowell styles *Bald Naturalism* – is to undertake a reductive or quasi-reductive³ programme of the categories of Spontaneity: to disclose how the subject matter of Spontaneity re-occurs in

another guise within, or somehow demands nothing beyond the Realm of Law. Set against both these tendencies would be a view which allows the adequacy of the modern conception of Nature but rejects the idea that Nature is all there is: an irreductive super-naturalism, as it were – McDowell coins the term, *Rampant Platonism* – about our Spontaneity and the norms to which it responds. But it is the modern conception of Nature which sets up this unattractive, Homeric choice – between elimination or (quasi-)reduction of meaning, intentionality and normativity, on the one hand or an obscurantist metaphysical hypostatization of them on the other – and it is this conception which McDowell aims to show us how to supersede. We should aim not to solve the difficulties of locating rational thought and intentional activity within the modern naturalist view, but to finesse them by accomplishing an improved – ‘relaxed’ – conception of what should rank as *natural* – one which allows us to ‘take in stride’, without any sense of eeriness or mystification, an acceptance that Spontaneity is *sui generis*, by emphasizing the thought that its distinctive concepts capture patterns in our natural way of living.⁴ It is by this accomplishment that we can transcend the most fundamental of modern philosophy’s characteristic dualisms: the dualism of mind on one side and a brutally external world on the other, and thereby go one better than Kant.

There are not many contemporary philosophers within the broader analytical tradition who would feel they had any clear idea how such a goal might be accomplished, let alone the confidence to try. The line of thought whereby McDowell hopes to succeed is unexpected and independently interesting. It begins with an epistemological dilemma: a problem about the relation between experience and our most basic empirical beliefs. The problem, to be reviewed in more detail below, is to attain a conception of the nature of experience which lets its relation to our empirical beliefs be a *rational* one and at the same time allows experience to emerge as a *real worldly constraint* on our thought. McDowell argues that when experience is conceived as by modern naturalism, there is an irreconcilable tension between these desiderata; and that only a radical refashioning of the concept of experience can provide for their simultaneous satisfaction – a refashioning whose availability has typically been quite overlooked by philosophers. It is in order for us to understand how the necessary refashioning is intelligible, and satisfactory, that a revised conception of what should count as natural is called for. What we need to make space for is precisely a conception of experience which opens the world up to us and thereby allows it to give us *reasons for* our beliefs.⁵ But the world of modern science can exert only *causal* constraints; and experience, for modern naturalism, can only be an *effect* of our interaction with it. Modern science treats of Nature in a disenchanted form, as it were. So, according to McDowell, experience, as a natural process, is likewise disenchanted – divested of content – and thus disabled from playing the reason-giving role we need it to play. What it takes to put this right is the central preoccupation of his book.

The Seesaw

The basic dilemma – what McDowell styles an ‘intolerable oscillation’, or ‘seesaw’ – has us in a bind between a pair of putatively hopeless views of the interaction between thought and the empirical world and of the justification of those of our beliefs most directly concerned with observable reality. The poles of the oscillation are a version of the Myth of the Given, on the one hand, and something along the lines of Davidsonian Coherentism on the other.

McDowell’s thinking here is deeply conditioned by a spatial metaphor. Assume that the ‘Space of Reasons’ – the realm of Spontaneity in which everything takes place that involves conceptual activity, intentionality and rationality – is enclosed within a larger sphere: the realm of natural law which is the domain of brute Nature, involves no conceptual activity and is apt for description and explanation by natural science in its modern conception. Call this the Enclosure Model (this is not McDowell’s term). Now there is, of course, a distinction between empirical beliefs which are rationally held and empirical beliefs held, for whatever cause – prejudice, wishful thinking, hypnotic suggestion, etc. – without reasons. In essentials what will be distinctive of the former is that they are *based on* experience. But there are no resources – this is McDowell’s most fundamental contention – to recover a satisfactory conception of the needed idea of *basis* within the framework of the Enclosure Model.

The problem is generated by the principle that justification is essentially a rational relation. That seems to require that it can obtain only between *conceptually structured* items – things that carry or are somehow indexed by propositional content. But in that case the domain of justification must be restricted *within* the Space of Reasons – it cannot cross the boundary into the wider Realm of Law. So the wider world is left out in the cold, with no part to play in the justification of our most basic beliefs about it. Sure, it can play a *causal* role – it can impinge upon us in such a way as to induce particular beliefs. But for these beliefs, on the Enclosure Model, we will have, in McDowell’s terminology, not reasons but only ‘exculpations’.⁶ We cannot be *blamed* for holding beliefs which the world sub-rationally prompts us to hold. But we cannot claim to hold such beliefs *for reasons* either.

That is one pole of the oscillation: the Coherentist pole, of which McDowell holds Davidson up as a representative. For the coherentist, the relation of justification does indeed call for conceptually structured terms and just for that reason ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’.⁷ Questions of justification have thus to be addressed by scrutiny of internal features of our system of belief; the nature of the relation between (items in) that system and anything brutally external to it cannot be a normative one.

I’ll enquire a little further shortly into McDowell’s grounds for thinking that this conception is intolerable. The alternative – so long as we stick to the Enclosure Model – must be to try to hold that a genuinely normative relation of justification *can* somehow cross the boundary between the inner realm of

Concepts and outer Nature. This is the dualism of Scheme and Content – of Concepts and non-conceptual input – which comprises McDowell's version of the Myth of the Given.⁸ The idea would be, as he says, that the Space of Reasons can somehow extend beyond the conceptual sphere. But this McDowell flatly rejects: the relation of justification, he insists, demands terms which carry content – only such an item can entail, probabilify, be a reason for the judgement that P.

In sum: empirical thinking needs to be constrained by experience if it is to count as genuinely empirical. That encourages the Myth of the Given – the myth of items simply presented to us in experience and thereby constraining our thought about them. But the right kind of constraint cannot be merely causal, but must be rational. That requires that the items doing the constraining carry content. But the Given, as conceived, cannot carry content – by hypothesis, what is given in experience are items from beyond the Enclosure. So it appears we cannot have empirical thought rationally constrained from outside. Which seems intolerable.

So up and down goes the seesaw. We want empirical thought to be subject to rational justification. We first try to live with the hopeless idea that contentless items can be justifiers. Then, failing with that, we try to live with the equally hopeless idea that there is no rational constraint from outside on our empirical beliefs but only causal influence. But neither position is stable.

The Bald Naturalist Solution

Assuming that each pole in the Oscillation really is intolerable, what kind of solution might be possible? McDowell allows in the Lecture IV that Bald Naturalism would – if sustainable – provide a way out in principle, and concedes it a certain attraction.⁹ Now Bald Naturalism, in its clearest form prefigured earlier, will be a species of reductionism: the view that all states of affairs described using the vocabulary of Spontaneity are natural in the sense of allowing of re-descriptions that place them in the Realm of Law – (so there will be at least *a posteriori* correct representations of such states of affairs in the language of natural science). In that case, I suppose the idea is, relations of justification – between experiences and basic empirical beliefs, say – may be re-describable in natural scientific language, so that the sharp boundary between the Space of Reasons and the Realm of Law erected by the Enclosure Model is broken down: there will be no deep difference in kind, according to Bald Naturalism, between the two domains – it is merely that we need and have yet to achieve a scientific understanding of the identity – the natural face, as it were – of the denizens of the Space of Reasons.

McDowell rejects this solution, I suppose, because he doubts that Bald Naturalism is a feasible programme. Once one is clear, though, *what* he doubts to be feasible – what the Bald Naturalist is committed to – it may well seem quite

obscure why Bald Naturalism may be supposed even to *promise* a solution to the problem as McDowell conceives it. Grant that only content-bearing items can be justifiers and justified. Suppose a certain occurrent experience justifies a certain belief. In such a case, what Bald Naturalism might conceivably supply is a naturalistic re-presentation of both ingredient terms and of the relation between them. But the effect of such a re-presentation would surely have to be to *mask*, rather than explain, the normative relation between the two, since neither item will be re-presented as a something-that-P. Justifiers and justified may perhaps be identified with certain naturally occurring items within the Realm of Law, and brought under physical-scientific concepts accordingly. But that will not be to make sense – in a way that should alleviate any sense of strain between such talk and the assumptions of modern naturalism – of the discourse that deals with their normative relationship.

To illustrate the lacuna by a different example: it would, seemingly, be one thing to make a case that the beliefs and desires which rationalize a particular performance of an agent may be identified with certain neural items which are involved in the aetiology of the associated behaviour; quite another to maintain that the *rational* explanation they provide is thereby reduced to the associated *causal* explanation. Or again: it would be one thing somehow to find a natural property to serve as the referent of some evaluative concept; quite another to maintain that one thereby made sense of the associated evaluation. If the Bald Naturalist project is reductively to safeguard the place of the *categories* of Spontaneity within its austere world view, then it will not suffice merely to execute a programme of a posteriori identifications of reference; one needs in addition somehow to recover, within the naturalistic idiom, something of the characteristic *purposes and function* of those categories. (Indeed, unless that is accomplished, it is quite unclear with what right one could claim to have *identified* anything in the first place.)

Now, this is in effect an objection that McDowell himself brings against Davidson's anomalous monism about the mental.¹⁰ Since he distinguishes Davidson's view from that of the Bald Naturalist – precisely because Davidson recognizes that

the intellectual role of those spontaneity-related concepts cannot be duplicated in terms of concepts whose fundamental point is to place things in the realm of law¹¹

– we have to conclude that on McDowell's understanding, the Bald Naturalist is one who explicitly recognizes this obligation to attempt *more* than reference-identifying. So the general thesis is one of the replicability of the 'intellectual' role of the concepts of ethics, logic, intentional psychology, etc., by concepts of natural science. It should already be clear independently of McDowell's strictures, that the thesis is as desperately implausible as it is hazy.

McDowell's Solution

McDowell's solution is to reject the contentlessness of experience. And this rejection takes a *prima facie* startling form: he writes

We should understand [experience] not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge.¹²

In the end, empirical judgements are justified not by other judgements but by experience. But an experience, as such a justifier, has to be thought of, McDowell is proposing, as itself a *passive* exercise of concepts – the very concepts which feature in the active judgement the subject may take it *prima facie* to justify. Note that this amounts not to a rejection of the Given as such, but a recasting of it. What is given in experience is essentially of the form: that P – that so-and-so is the case. 'In experience one finds oneself saddled with content.'¹³ In rejecting the Myth of the Given, McDowell intends to reject a mythology about *what* is Given, and how, but not the very idea that anything is. In this respect McDowell remains a foundationalist.

Re-enchanting the World

Taken just to this point, it might seem unclear how McDowell's solution involves a genuine alternative to the first pole of the Oscillation. Certainly he has reconfigured the concept of experience in a way at odds with the Myth of the Given as he characterizes it. But a reader might well wonder how anything essentially at odds with Coherentism has been proposed – since all that may seem to have been effected is an enlargement of the terms of the coherence relation. Before, we thought of coherence as essentially a relation on beliefs. Now, for basic empirical belief, we impose an additional requirement: coherence with *experience*, with the latter conceived as content-bearing after McDowell. But, for all that has been said, the relation between experience itself and the outer world need still not be conceived as a rational relation. It can still be a matter of brute causality, just as in the case – according to pure doxastic Coherentism – of basic empirical beliefs.

What is really amiss with Coherentism in McDowell's view? Early in *Mind and World* it might seem that the basic objection is the spectre of 'frictionlessness' – the threat of what passes for rational empirical thought being unconstrained by experience and hence by the reality experienced ('frictionless spinning in a void'). This image is not entirely happy, since a coherentist will want to reply

that empirical thought, as he conceives it, is subject to tight rational constraints of intra-systematic coherence, with the basic input into the system no more optional, or 'frictionless', than causality permits. The coherentist picture is that of a world impinging on us in experience, now thought of in brutally causal terms, and thereby sub-rationally inducing propensities in the experiencer to believe certain things which are then open to refinement in the light of rational coherentist constraints. Experience on this view is precisely not a justifier: it is the *source* but not the *arbiter* of our empirical beliefs. Justification, finally, can only have to do with how such beliefs bed down on the system of belief as a whole.

What is fundamentally wrong with that idea, in McDowell's view? One familiar worry concerns scepticism. Why should beliefs which are initially simply caused in us, and then go on to satisfy certain criteria of relationship to other beliefs which we are disposed to hold, enjoy any intrinsic likelihood of correct representation of the world which causes them? Once the initial causes of belief bear no rational relation to the beliefs caused, any merely intra-systematic constraints surely come too late – the causes of belief, consistently with the coherence of the overall system, could literally be anything at all. Yet justification, properly conceived, cannot bear a merely *extrinsic* relation to truth. We are wide open to radical scepticism otherwise. So we must find some other conception of justification than that afforded by Coherentism.

This worry, if it were good, would remain even after experiences as well as beliefs are incorporated within the field of the coherence relation. Davidson, of course, is famous for an attempt to meet it head on, arguing directly that the spectre of massive error which it floats can be exorcised a priori by consideration of the constraints on content exerted by the mere fact of our interpretability.¹⁴ But actually I doubt that a coherentist should take the worry seriously in the first place, since the robust correspondence conception of truth which it exploits – truth as fit with something brutally exterior – is or ought to be a casualty of Coherentism itself. In any case, this is not McDowell's worry. He charges, rather, that Davidson's argument – of which he makes no internal criticism – 'starts too late'.¹⁵ The real and prior concern, he suggests, is the availability of anything which could justly be regarded as *empirical content* once the impact of experience upon belief is conceived as merely causal.¹⁶

This point is crucial to the development of McDowell's argument, if I understand it at all, and it is therefore unsatisfactory that it is not more fully and adequately developed in the book. To be sure, the basic idea is not implausible. The thought will be, I take it, that the content of any judgement has to be fully determined in the rational – *internal* – relations it bears to other judgements and content-bearers at large. But causation is an *external* relation. That a belief is – merely – caused by certain experiences, or by the will of the Cartesian demon, or by the Vat-controlling mad scientist, or whatever else, is nothing to determine its content. If there is to be such a thing as empirical content, then it requires an internal relation between judgement and experience; there is nothing in the mere fact that certain beliefs are characteristically *caused* in a certain way to

determine their content at all. The root failing of the Davidsonian conception, in McDowell's view, is that it can find no room for genuine empirical content.

This suggestion, that empirical content requires more than causal connections between experience and beliefs, may seem both dogmatic and oversimplified. It is oversimplified, first, because nothing has yet been said about the content of our *theoretical* beliefs – par excellence, beliefs concerning unobservables whose states and processes do not directly impinge upon experience at all; and second, because it will certainly need qualification to accommodate even a modest degree of externalism about content (of which McDowell has of course been a strong supporter). It is dogmatic because it simply brushes aside the aspirations of those philosophers who have worked towards some form of 'naturalized semantics'.¹⁷ But it had better be basically right if what seems to be the needed next step in McDowell's progression is to be well-motivated. That step will be the thought that *the same point must hold for experience*, conceived as a content-bearer. What content an experience has will be essentially underdetermined by how it is externally induced. If an experience is to count as an experience that P, then it must sustain not merely causal but *rational* – internal – relations to potential items in reality.

So – if McDowell is right – not just experience, as a potential justifier of empirical beliefs, but the *real world* in turn, as that which is to be capable of impinging upon us in a way which induces experiences of determinate content, must be thought of as *conceptual*. We arrive at a conception of experience not merely as something which is intrinsically content-bearing, a passive exercise of concepts, but as also essentially an 'openness to the layout of reality',¹⁸ where this openness is a matter of conceptual fit between the experience and the situation experienced. The world, as we must conceive of it, is indeed the Tractarian world: a totality of *facts*, where facts are essentially facts that P. Conceptual content, in McDowell's metaphysics, belongs to the very fabric of the world.

There is more to come. Someone could agree that this – as we might style it – sophisticated naive realism is demanded by a satisfactory orchestration of the notions of experience, justification and truth and still worry about keeping company with McDowell when it comes to the full 're-enchantment' of the world that he attempts in the later lectures in the play with 'Second Nature' and the generalization of Aristotelian moral psychology. It is a good question whether those later moves are not simply independent of the development just reviewed. But before coming to that, I will canvass some doubts about the initial basic move: the 'conceptualization' of experience.

Experience as the Passive Exercise of Conceptual Capacities

It is a consequence of McDowell's proposal that, as he himself emphasizes, some radical refashioning is required of the way we think about the experience of infant humans and animals – in general, of the sensory lives of creatures who

lack Spontaneity – lack the conceptual vocabulary and powers involved in the critical formation of judgements. If my experience of the desk in front of me essentially draws – albeit passively – upon my conceptual repertoire, then that state is not one which can be entered into by a conceptless creature. Such a creature cannot have sense-experience, so conceived, nor can it occupy a state approximating a genuine experience in all respects save the exercise of concepts; for that would be another form of the Myth of the Given – such a state would be *raw material* for the conceptualization the creature cannot supply. As McDowell says, in his Kantian jargon: to the ‘co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity’ involved in empirical judgement, the former is not to make an ‘even notionally separable contribution’.¹⁹

So: it cannot be within a creature’s consciousness in all respects as if it was seeing a tree except that it lacks concepts – though such a creature may of course show itself sensitive to its surroundings. And – here comes the rub – it also cannot be within a creature’s consciousness in all respects as if it were experiencing pain – save that it lacks the concept pain. This does great violence. For our ordinary thinking finds no dependence of the capacity to experience pain on the possession of the concept; and it finds nothing for a pain to be if its essence is not to be found within consciousness.

McDowell, of course, has long been exceedingly well aware of this problem for his view. He regards it as something that calls, not for concern about the correctness of his position but for ‘keeping one’s head’²⁰ and much of the final lecture is devoted to a fresh attempt – wholly unpersuasive to this reader at least – to enlist Gadamer’s help in an attempt to mitigate it. But ought it to have arisen at all? I shall consider two, mutually somewhat opposed doubts.

The immediate question is how soundly motivated is McDowell’s conceptualization of experience. The key premise is that justificatory relations have to be contentual, and so can be sustained only by conceptually structured items. This is of course utterly ungainsayable when *inferential* justification is at issue – when justification consists in the adduction of supportive, independently attested claims whose acceptance is supposed to license the claim justified. But that is not the correct conception of perceptual justification – of the status of those of our beliefs which we form on the basis of what we take to be direct perception and consider to be justified thereby. McDowell proceeds as though in such a case experience has to take over something *akin* to the role played by belief in inferential cases: that non-inferential justification differs from inferential only in that the justifier is not a belief but some other content-bearing state. Call this the *quasi-inferential* conception of empirical justification. Generalized, the quasi-inferential conception would have it that each of our justified beliefs is justified by its relation to an antecedent *something-that-P*. What marks off the inferential cases, strictly so regarded, is that their justifiers are themselves beliefs. But what enforces the quasi-inferential conception? Might it be that in insisting, contrary to Davidson, that justifiers need not be beliefs, McDowell has unwittingly cut the ground from under the key premise that justifiers have to bear contentual relations to what is justified?

It might seem that, absent the quasi-inferential conception, we have nothing to stand in the way of the awkward, dubiously coherent thought that actually *nothing* justifies some of our justified – empirical – beliefs. But that is not so. McDowell's idea is that in experience, one has it appear to one that P. And this fact, the appearance that P, is then available to discharge something akin to the role that a prior belief plays in a case of inferential justification. But while it may not be clear what exactly to put in opposition to it, it is by no means obvious that this is the right picture in general of non-inferentially justified belief. Rather, if we take ourselves to have the capacity to arrive at knowledge, or justified belief of certain kinds without inference, that may undercut the thought that justification always requires a specific, content-sensitive justifier. It may be enough, for instance, that a belief is formed in circumstances when one (justifiably) takes the efficient operation of some appropriate faculty – perception, memory, mathematical intuition maybe – to be responsible for it. There would then be no need for the intermediary something-that-P – no need, indeed, for a justificatory Given at all, whether conceptual or not. Experiences would not be rightly conceived as the justifiers of perceptual beliefs. But nor would the justification of perceptual beliefs be a matter of their coherence within a larger system of belief. There is much more to say about this, but I cannot pursue it here. It is, though, surprising that McDowell – who is usually good at noticing unthinking analogies at work in our philosophizing – passes over the analogy he presupposes in the quasi-inferential conception.²¹

The second doubt about McDowell's conceptualization of experience contrasts with the foregoing by retaining the quasi-inferential conception, and granting McDowell that the justificatory potential of experience depends upon its being received as a carrier of content. However it balks at the idea that sets up the difficulty with infants and animals – the idea that in order for experience to have this potential, the *very having of it* demands the exercise of conceptual capacities. McDowell sees no space between the ideas that experience is a brute Given – blind intuition with nothing to say – and his own preferred conception that it essentially draws on the passive exercise of conceptual capacities. But there is, of course, intermediate space. In order to avoid a non-justificatory Given, it is required that experience justifies by dint of conceptual content; in order to avoid the difficulty with animal and infant experience it is required that the mere occurrence of an experience does not require the exercise of conceptual capacities. These are not incompatible requirements. Both can be met quite simply if it is allowed that an experience of the outer world, while not itself ontologically dependent upon an actual exercise of conceptual capacities, is intrinsically such as to carry the information, for a suitably conceptually endowed creature, that P.

On this view, the very same event in my consciousness that constitutes experiencing the desk in front of me could take place even had I lacked any of the concepts by which I now give it shape. But what would then have taken place is nevertheless intrinsically such as to permit that particular conceptual shaping. So I, who do have those concepts, have no rational option, on receiving

this particular experience, but to allow that it may – at least defeasibly – be so shaped. The justificatory use to which I put the experience thus does indeed depend upon the passive exercise of concepts, just as McDowell insists; and the experience is essentially such as to allow of that particular shaping. But its very existence does not depend upon its actually being so shaped.

This simple idea should not, I think, be identified with (anything akin to) Gareth Evans' conception of *non-conceptual* content (whatever the justice in McDowell's claim that Evans' idea is a version of the Myth of the Given). The claim, that is, is not that an experience can carry some form of content without being actively conceptualized – what I am suggesting is neutral on that – but rather that its role in justification demands only that it has the intrinsic potential to command a certain conceptual response from a suitably endowed thinker – not that such a response is constitutive of its very being. I can see nothing in the reasons which prompt McDowell to attempt to conceive of experience as essentially conceptually contentful which demands that it depend for its very existence on the *actual* exercise of concepts. Indeed, the resources for a more modest view are present in McDowell's own account. For *facts* too – the truth-makers to which, in experience, we are, as he holds, receptive – are likewise, on McDowell's view, essentially conceptually structured. But *their* conceptuality does not require that they exist only as *actually* conceived. McDowell is quite clear, as he had better be if the accusation of Idealism is to be as undeserved as he wishes,²² that facts are conceptual only in so far as essentially conceivable. So a fact is essentially such as, for an appropriate subject, to be conceived as the fact that P; but its existence – what makes for the truth of the proposition that P – need not depend upon anyone's actually exercising any of the concepts constituent in that proposition. What, then, is the obstacle to an absolutely parallel conception of experience? Of course it would be a version of the Given – but the Mythical component (of non-conceptual justification) is just what it aims to avoid.

This commonsensical suggestion is so salient that I find it hard to believe that McDowell does not somewhere intend to speak directly to it. But I have been unable to be sure where. Unless it is open to decisive objection, much of the dialectical progression of the first half of *Mind and World* is undercut. McDowell's proposal, that we should regard it as intrinsic to experience that it draws on the very conceptual resources involved in active, self-critical thought, will be supererogatory; we will be able to dismount from the seesaw without it, or the problem it gives with infant and animal experience.

Rampant Platonism, Second Nature and Bildung

Still, the Oscillation, and its solution, was only to be a route into a more general insight. McDowell's diagnosis of why philosophers – even philosophers as skilled and perceptive as Evans and Davidson – altogether overlook the very

possibility of his preferred conception of experience, is independent of the obligatoriness of that conception.

The diagnosis runs like this. We share perceptual sensitivity with infants and non-conceptual animals. But such creatures are purely natural beings, and their sentience is an aspect of their animal, natural lives. So sentience should be an aspect of *our* natural, animal life too – but ‘it can seem impossible to reconcile the fact that sentience belongs to nature with the thought that spontaneity might permeate our perceptual experience itself’.²³ So the block, according to the diagnosis, is the combination of these three thoughts: (a) human sentience, like animal sentience, ought to be a purely natural phenomenon; (b) human sentience – on McDowell’s conception – involves the exercise of concepts; (c) concept-exercise is *not* in the relevant sense, a natural phenomenon – the Space of Reasons is not the Realm of Law.

The conception of nature that poses the problem – that nature is co-extensive with the province of the kind of intelligibility which is sought by natural science – can seem, McDowell concedes, ‘sheer common sense’. The medieval mind did not clearly distinguish this kind of intelligibility from that which belongs to the Space of Reasons. But we – rightly – separate them sharply, and that is the source of our difficulty: it is, in McDowell’s diagnosis, the root assumption that causes us to overlook the possibility of regarding experience as conceptual. For if our sensibility, our interaction with the world via experience, is through-and-through natural in this modern sense – if what goes on in experience has to be capable of being made complete sense of in terms of the categories of natural science – then it may seem that it cannot be anything *intrinsically* reason-giving or conceptual. So it looks as though McDowell’s conception of experience must either involve a reversion to a pre-scientific superstition – ‘a crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world’²⁴ – or like a stubborn *supernaturalism*: either a nostalgic rejection of the modern conception of nature, a reversion to a cast of mind that looks for *meaning* in the ‘movement of the planets, or the fall of a sparrow’,²⁵ or an insistence that we place our participation in the Space of Reasons as a phenomenon which has nothing at all to do with what is (merely) natural.

If that’s the diagnosis, how is the problem to be resolved? Suppose we accept, with McDowell, that, against Bald Naturalism, ‘the idea of knowing one’s way about in the Space of Reasons, the idea of responsiveness to rational relationships, cannot be reconstructed out of materials which are naturalistic in the sense we are trying to supersede’,²⁶ i.e. materials which belong to the Realm of Law. How in that case are we to avoid thinking of the Space of Reasons as an autonomous structure, independent of anything specifically human (since humans are *natural* beings, a species of animal) – a structure which, or so it may seem we have to think, we are somehow able to latch on to by dint of some special, *supernatural*, capacity?

That’s the key thought of Rampant Platonism. Yet McDowell does not think that we need have anything to do with that either. He is above all anxious to persuade us that it is possible to accept the autonomy of the Space of Reasons –

that ordinary intentional psychology, ethics, logic and mathematics do not need to be reconstructed or somehow made sense of in terms of the framework of modern naturalism – without succumbing to the mythology which credits them with supernatural subject matters, to which only special, non-natural capacities enable us to respond.

This is potentially the most deep-reaching and important idea in the book. McDowell writes

To reassure ourselves that our responsiveness to reasons is not supernatural, we should dwell on the thought that it is our lives that are shaped by spontaneity, patterned in ways that come into view only with an enquiry framed by what Davidson calls 'the constitutive ideal of rationality'. Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is a way of actualising ourselves as animals. So we can rephrase the thought by saying: exercises of spontaneity belong to our way of actualising ourselves as animals. This removes any need to try to see ourselves as peculiarly bifurcated, with a foothold in the animal kingdom and a mysterious separate involvement in an extra-natural world of rational connections.²⁷

But I wonder how well it is possible to understand this suggestion. The key issue, evidently, is the precise contrast intended between Rampant Platonism, which involves supernaturalist mythology, and the 'humanized' or 'naturalized' platonism which McDowell believes we can take in stride, without reductive hankerings, once we have worked our way into a better conception of the natural. To help us achieve that conception McDowell advises that a prototype may be elicited from Aristotle's conception of ethical thought: a form of thought which is intrinsically human but which is nevertheless responsive to autonomous demands. He summarizes the Aristotelian conception like this:

The ethical is a domain of rational requirements which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are open to the very existence of this tract of the Space of Reasons. Thereafter our appreciation of its detailed layout is indefinitely subject to refinement, in reflective scrutiny of our ethical thinking.²⁸

So we should ask: why exactly is Aristotle's view, so characterized, not a form of Rampant (ethical) Platonism? Here is McDowell's answer:

The rational demands of ethics are not alien to the contingencies of our life as human beings . . . [An] ordinary upbringing can shape the actions and thoughts of human beings in a way that brings these demands into view . . . The rational demands of ethics are autonomous

– they don't need validation or interpretation from outside specifically ethical thinking –

but this autonomy does not distance the demands from anything specifically human . . . they are essentially within reach of human beings [who have been] . . . initiated into the structure of the space of reasons by ethical upbringing . . . the resulting habits of thought and action are *second-nature*.²⁹

The key features of Aristotle's conception which, as McDowell would seem to intend, serve to distinguish it from anything 'rampant', thus appear to be these:

- (i) that the correctness of ethical judgement is constrained by 'contingencies of our life';
- (ii) that it needs only an ordinary, unmysterious ethical education to initiate people into 'the rational demands of ethics';
- (iii) that correct ethical judgement is 'essentially within reach' of our ethical thinking.

But how exactly do these considerations sustain the crucial distinction that McDowell is trying to draw? The first, the idea that correct ethical judgement is sensitive to contingencies of human life, may seem like a mere banality. It is merely banal for instance that, had we possessed different needs and concerns, then our assessment of the ethical value of specific practices and institutions might well have been different; and there is no reason why any ethical platonist, of however extreme or 'rampant' a stripe, need deny it. Compare: had our beliefs been different, then we would have regarded our logical commitments as different – hardly the same thing as saying that logic is constitutively sensitive to contingencies in human belief. To be sure, that suggests a less banal interpretation: perhaps McDowell intends that, had certain contingencies of human life been different, then different *principles of ethical evaluation* which are not at present cogent would have become so – that *general moral norms* are hostage to contingencies of human nature. That idea would indeed be at odds with the notion that ethical truth is constituted in some supernatural sphere. But it wants argument, in detail. And if that were the suggestion McDowell intends to be making, it would anyway seem to have no defensible analogue for logic – or any domain of necessary truth. Yet logic, no less than ethics, is a sphere for which McDowell wishes to commend the humanized platonism of Second Nature which reflection on Aristotelian ethics is supposed to help us understand.

The import of the second and third considerations seems to be equally ambiguous and undeveloped. Why should a Rampant Platonist find any difficulty in the idea that it takes only an ordinary training to trigger the exercise of the special non-natural epistemic capacities in which he believes? What exactly is the problem in that combination? And what does it mean to say that ethical truth is 'essentially within reach' of human beings who have had the

appropriate upbringing? Presumably the point is not meant to be hostage to the occurrence of otherwise rational but morally ineducable psychopaths. Is it the suggestion that moral truths are necessarily recognizable by ordinary moral thought? That may seem attractive. But the analogous thesis for logic and mathematics is of course contestable, and highly contested. And besides, if a philosopher thought that ordinary moral thinking involved the exercise of non-natural capacities, why would it cause a problem for her view to allow – if it is so – that moral truths are essentially decidable in principle? There is no evident tension.

McDowell thinks we can attain the distinction between Rampant Platonism and his recommended 'naturalized' platonism by a judicious invocation of the notion of Second Nature and by taking on something of the concept that features in German philosophy as *Bildung*.³⁰ I am sceptical whether it would be possible for even the most willing and open-minded reader to glean any sufficiently clear understanding of the matter from the account in Lecture IV. The root idea seems merely to be that we can free ourselves of the temptations both of (bald) naturalistic reconstruction of the subject matters and epistemology of normative discourses and of a contrasting platonistic mythologizing of them if only we remind ourselves often enough, with the appropriate Aristotelian and German texts open, that these express forms of thought into which it comes naturally to us to be educable. But it is simply not explained how that is supposed to help. It is perplexing to find so vital a distinction for its author's purposes confined to so unfinished and merely suggestive a formulation. We need more.

The discussion in Lecture IV is not, indeed, McDowell's last word on the matter. The contrast is invoked again in §3 of Lecture V to underpin a proposal about the interpretation of Wittgenstein on rule-following and is further emphasized in various passages of summary in the final lecture.³¹ But matters do not get significantly clearer. Thus apropos of his preferred reading of Wittgenstein, McDowell writes

The idea is that the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them . . . [by] . . . a proper upbringing.

And there is no obligation on us to try to understand how they can be objects for

an enlightened awareness, except from within the way of thinking such an upbringing initiates one into.

This is, McDowell asserts,

quite distinct from rampant platonism . . . [in which] . . . the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human so that [our capacity] to resonate [sic] to it looks occult or magical.

For naturalized platonism,

. . . the structure of the space of reasons has a sort of autonomy; it is not derivative from, or reflective of, truths about human beings that are capturable independently of having that structure in view. [But] . . . the structure of the space of reasons is not constituted in splendid isolation from anything merely human. The demands of reason are essentially such that a human upbringing can open a human being's eyes to them.³²

This offers nothing new. It is of course open to McDowell to *define* a Rampant Platonist view as one according to which the 'demands of reason' are *not* essentially such as to be accessible to a normal human upbringing. (I pass over the fact that, naturally read, McDowell's words bear interpretation as implying a problematical insistence that logical truth must be decidable.) But it becomes no clearer in these passages than it was made in Lecture IV why it might be supposed to follow – if indeed it does follow – from our natural educability into responsiveness to the 'demands of reason' that both the epistemology and the ontology of discourses which feature the categories of Spontaneity can with clear conscience be regarded as fully 'natural' – i.e. that no non-natural capacities are involved in responsiveness to the 'demands of reason', and that there should be no temptation towards naturalistic reductive construal of normative discourses like ethics and intentional psychology. Someone so tempted will doubtless be in the grip of a certain restrictive conception of what there is: probably precisely the idea that reality is exhausted by the Realm of Law. McDowell's aim is to show how it need not be a kind of supernaturalism to repudiate that restriction. But if someone is puzzled about how in the natural world, as she conceives it, there can be such things as 'demands of reason' – how there can be a real subject matter for various forms of normative discourse – some massive unstated assumption would seem to be at work in McDowell's suggestion that we can teach her otherwise simply by a reminder, however eloquently elaborated in terms of the concepts of *Bildung* and the acquisition of a Second Nature, that our initiation into such discourses is a matter of the perfectly ordinary human upbringing which our nature equips us to receive.

Now, one can see what kind of assumption *would* serve the purpose. What McDowell needs is a way of channelling the philosophical pressure that modern naturalism generates away from a direct obsession with the subject matter of normative discourses and on to their learning and practice instead. I believe an illuminating prototype of the needed readjustment is provided by the Fregean treatment of certain kinds of abstract object which I and others have elaborated and recommended.³³ The goal, in the most general terms, is to achieve a perspective from which the good-standing of a discourse is somehow provided for first, without attempting any prior direct engagement – on questionably motivated assumptions – with the metaphysics and epistemology of its proper objects and concepts. Thus we do not ask directly what sort of things numbers,

say, could be and how one might know about them. Instead, we ask how arithmetic, and the ordinary statements whereby it is applied, get their meaning and how that meaning might be grasped. Once those questions have been given the right kind of answer, the mere integrity of the language-game carries the ontological and epistemological issues in its wake and there is no space for a residual concern about the place of the subject matter of arithmetic in the natural world or the knowability of its objects by human beings. I take this general form of inversion – ‘language-games first; ontology second’ – to be a way of assimilating one of the deeper readjustments of the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein made in his later work. Although Wittgenstein is not the most explicitly prominent of the cast of characters in *Mind and World*, I believe McDowell would freely acknowledge Wittgenstein’s influence on his discussion in this general respect. However the crux is, of course, how one sets about motivating the inversion, and what kind of work is conceived as going into the disclosure of ‘good-standing’ for a discourse which, for whatever reason, causes concern. Disclosing such good-standing must involve showing that the statements of the discourse in question may quite legitimately be regarded as true or false – and that the distinctive objects and properties with which they deal may consequently be viewed as genuine – without further reductive obligation – in the light of nothing beyond the standards which we actually normally apply within the discourse. One approach in this connection which I myself have followed is via the development of *minimalist* conceptions of truth and truth-aptness.³⁴ A different though not incompatible line is taken by Huw Price’s functionalist treatment of the concepts of truth and fact.³⁵ But McDowell seems to recognize no definite theoretical obligation in this direction. (Naturally not: philosophers aren’t supposed to *construct* anything.) This makes his treatment, to this reader at least, almost wholly unsatisfying. It is not of course *irrelevant* that a competence in normative discourses is one product of a normal human education. But the point, however fancy the packaging, hardly measures up to the fixation of the entrenched dilemma between Rampant Platonism and reductionism, and it is, disappointingly, unclear what more to the purpose *Mind and World* ultimately has to offer. I fear that not many of those who have so far failed to see the point of this kind of inversion, or to get a sense of its liberating power, will be moved to a different view by McDowell’s treatment here.

* * *

I do not think, then, for the reasons I have explained, that either of the main contentions of *Mind and World* – that experience must be conceived as conceptual, and that one should look to a conception of Second Nature for a reconciliation of the normative with the natural – is developed with convincing clarity; but they are original suggestions on profound, central problems, and either may yet prove to be a lasting contribution. In any case it would be quite

unjust to close without emphasizing that this is, on any reasonable count, a very impressive book. There is no doubting the importance to contemporary philosophy of the direction of its main endeavour, and the philosophical power and charisma of its author leap out from almost every page. It contains discussions in detail of many issues – privacy, non-conceptual content, action and bodily movement, the Cartesian self, epistemological scepticism and, in the Afterword, additional detailed consideration of ideas of Davidson, Quine, Rorty and Wittgenstein – that I have not touched upon in this notice and which will get and repay careful study. In a certain sense, it is also a work of Kantian exegesis, and will be read with profit by interpreters of that philosopher. Throughout, the text is extremely carefully crafted and displays such a flowing, confident, forcefully idiosyncratic style that philosophically impressionable readers are likely to be overwhelmed by the example which it presents.

That is the main trouble. If analytical philosophy demands self-consciousness about unexplained or only partially explained terms of art, formality and explicitness in the setting out of argument, and the clearest possible sign-posting and formulation of assumptions, targets, and goals, etc., then this is not a work of analytical philosophy. Any professional who sets themselves to work through it will rapidly conclude that, before one can assess, let alone appropriate its achievement, there will be a need for *constructive exegesis* – for a reworking of the characteristic idiom of the book and the exploration of interpretative hypotheses – to a degree which one normally associates only with the study of writers from the past, before the academic professionalization of the subject. At its worst, indeed, McDowell's prose puts barriers of jargon, convolution and metaphor before the reader hardly less formidable than those characteristically erected by his German luminaries. Why is this? Is it that he views the kind of deconstruction of existing research programmes in analytical philosophy to which his work is directed as something which cannot be accomplished save by writing of quite a different – rhetorical or 'therapeutic' – genre?³⁶

I don't know the answers to that question but the stylistic extravagance of McDowell's book – more extreme than in any of his other writings to date – will unquestionably colour the influence it will exert. If that influence is largely towards renewed efforts on the agenda – to new work on the hard epistemological questions about the interface between thought and experience, and to a re-examination of the assumptions that generate the dualism of norm and nature that we have anyway somehow to overcome; if so, then, to that extent, its influence will be all to the good. But the fear must be that the book will encourage too many of the susceptible to swim out of their depth in seas of rhetorical metaphysics. Wittgenstein complained that, 'The seed I am most likely to sow is a certain jargon.' One feels that, if so, he had only himself to blame. McDowell is a strong swimmer, but his stroke is not to be imitated.

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NOTES

¹ Preface, p. ix. All page references are to *Mind and World* unless otherwise stated.

² McDowell's writing is scaffolded by a characteristic jargon of Kantian (and Sellarsian) contrasts: Spontaneity vs. Receptivity; Sensibility vs. Understanding; Concepts vs. Intuitions; the Space of Reasons vs. the Realm of (Natural) Law, and so on.

³ McDowell allows – p. 73 – that Bald Naturalism need not involve actual reductive identifications of denizens of the Space of Reasons with items recognized in the Realm of Law: 'What matters is just that ideas whose primary home is the space of reasons are depicted as, after all, serving to place things in Nature in the relevant sense.' It is not terribly clear what sort of latitude he means to leave but – one possibility – a number of philosophers have supposed, for instance, that the mere *supervenience* of ethical discourse on descriptions of natural fact is somehow already sufficient to show that ethics makes no distinctive ontological demands. However the matter is certainly not straightforward. Since McDowell advises that we should 'set our faces' against Bald Naturalism, it would have been better if he had been more explicit about the options he considers open to it besides the strictly reductive – which is indeed widely regarded as Quixotic.

⁴ p. 78.

⁵ p. 42.

⁶ p. 8.

⁷ At p. 310 of Davidson (1987).

⁸ This version of the Myth wants distinguishing from a 'Myth' which Quine and Sellars are famous for rejecting. McDowell's Mythical Given is non-conceptual input, conceived as presented in sentience anyway, whether brought under concepts or not. By contrast, the Myth rejected by Quine is the (two-way independent) empiricist Myth of a base class of empirical judgements whose acceptability is settled just by the occurrence of episodes of sentience, independently of whatever collateral beliefs a subject may hold – a Myth of one-one mandating relations, as it were, between experience and a basic range of *synthetic* statements (in the sense of 'Two Dogmas').

⁹ p. 76.

¹⁰ pp. 74–6.

¹¹ p. 74.

¹² p. 9.

¹³ p. 10.

¹⁴ In Davidson (1987).

¹⁵ p. 17.

¹⁶ Lecture I, §6, *passim*.

¹⁷ Which may be exactly what they deserve. For a useful catalogue of the problems, see Loewer (1997).

¹⁸ p. 26.

¹⁹ p. 9.

²⁰ From McDowell (1989), p. 300.

²¹ We may expect that he would express disquiet about the foregoing proposal along similar lines to his fundamental concern about Coherentism: that to reject the quasi-inferential conception is to have no story to tell about the determination of empirical content.

²² McDowell's rebuttal of the charge occurs at pp. 26–7 and following, and pp. 39–40.

²³ p. 70.

²⁴ p. 72.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ p. 77.

²⁷ p. 78.

²⁸ p. 82.

²⁹ Selected from pp. 83–4.

³⁰ p. 84.

³¹ For example, at pp. 109–10, and at 123.

³² pp. 91–2.

³³ See, e.g. Hale (1987) and Wright (1983).

³⁴ See Wright (1992).

³⁵ Price (1988).

³⁶ He does write at one point – pp. 94–5 – as if we ought to welcome a supersession of ‘ordinary modern philosophy’, but he does not seem in that passage to have in mind more than the supersession of the kind of project to constructive rehabilitation which modern naturalism encourages.

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