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McDowell's Oscillation

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I focus on the basic dilemma—what McDowell styles an “intolerable oscillation”, or “seesaw”—which dominates the first half of *Mind and World*. I will argue that he does insufficient to motivate the “conceptualisation” of human experience which is his recommended response. First, however, some exegesis of his argument for that response and of (one aspect of) the attendant “re-enchantment” of Nature.

The Problem

We are in a bind, McDowell thinks, between a pair of hopeless views about how those of our beliefs most directly concerned with observable reality are justified. The poles of this 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 is deeply conditioned by a spatial metaphor. Think of his “Space of Reasons”—the realm of Spontaneity where everything occurs that involves conceptual activity, intentionality and rationality—as enclosed within a larger sphere: the realm of natural law—a domain of brute nature involving no conceptual activity and wholly apt for description and explanation by natural science in its modern conception. Call this the Enclosure Model (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. Essentially, what distinguishes the former is that they are *based on* experience. But there are no resources—so McDowell contends—to safeguard the necessary 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 relations of justification must be confined *within* the Space of Reasons—they cannot cross the boundary into the wider Realm of Law. So the wider world can play no role in the

justification of our most basic empirical beliefs. Sure, it can play a *causal* role—inducing particular beliefs in particular circumstances. But for these beliefs, on the Enclosure Model, we will have not reasons but only “exculpations”.¹ We cannot be *blamed* for holding beliefs which the world (merely) causes 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”.² Questions of justification pertain to 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.

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 would involve a dualism of Scheme and Content—of Concepts and non-conceptual input—which comprises McDowell’s understanding of the Myth of the Given.³ The idea would be, as he says, that the Space of Reasons can somehow extend beyond the conceptual sphere. But this McDowell flatly rejects: justification, he insists, demands terms which carry content—only such items can entail, probabilify, be a reason for the judgement that P.

So: 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 in experience and thereby constraining thought about them. However the right kind of constraint cannot be merely causal, but must be rational. That requires that the constraining items carry content. But the Given, as conceived, cannot carry content—by hypothesis, what are given in experience are aconceptual items from beyond the Enclosure. So it appears we cannot have empirical thought rationally constrained from outside—which seems intolerable.

¹ P. 8. All references to *Mind and World* unless otherwise stated.

² At p. 310 of Donald Davidson’s, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, edited by Ernest LePore, Oxford: Blackwell 1987, pp. 307–19.

³ Distinguish this Myth from the Mythical Given targeted by Quine. McDowell’s Myth is of non-conceptual input, conceived as presented in sentience anyway, whether brought under concepts or not. Quine’s Myth is the empiricist fiction 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”).

McDowell's Solution

McDowell accordingly proposes 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.⁴

In the end, empirical judgements are justified not by other judgements but by experience. But we should conceive experience, McDowell is proposing, as itself a *passive* exercise of concepts—a having it seem to one that P. 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 propositional form: that so-and-so is the case. “In experience one finds oneself saddled with content.”⁵ 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.

Re-enchanting the World

How, it may be asked, does this solution involve a genuine alternative to the first—coherentist—pole of the Oscillation? McDowell has reconfigured the concept of experience in a way at odds with the Myth of the Given as he characterises it. But how is anything *essentially* at odds with coherentism thereby proposed? (For 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 beliefs, we impose an additional requirement: coherence with *experience*, with the latter conceived as content-bearing after McDowell. But the relation between experience itself and the outer world need still not be conceived as a rational relation. *That* relation can still be a matter of brute causality.

What is really amiss with coherentism in McDowell's view? Early in *Mind and World* the basic worry seems to be the spectre of empirical thought reduced to “frictionlessness spinning in a void”.⁶ A coherentist would naturally protest against such imagery. For coherentism, empirical thought *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, thought of in brutally causal terms, and thereby prompting doxastic inclinations which are then open to refinement in the light of rational holistic constraints. Experience on this view is indeed not a justifier: it is the *source*

⁴ P. 9.

⁵ P. 10.

⁶ P. 11.

but not the *arbiter* of our empirical beliefs. Justification can only have to do with how such beliefs bed down in the system of belief as a whole.

So to repeat: what is supposed to be fundamentally wrong with that idea? 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 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 coherentism.

This worry, if good, would remain even after experiences too 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.⁷ 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—fit with something brutally exterior—ought already to have been discharged by 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".⁸ The real concern, he suggests, is the availability of anything justly regarded as *empirical content* once the impact of experience upon belief is conceived as merely causal.⁹

This point seems crucial to the development of McDowell's argument and it is therefore unsatisfactory that it is not more adequately developed in the book. The basic idea, I take it, is that the content of any judgement has to be 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 coherentism, in McDowell's view, is that it cannot accommodate genuine empirical content.

⁷ In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge".

⁸ P. 17.

⁹ Lecture 1, §6, *passim*.

This suggestion may seem both dogmatic and oversimplified. It is oversimplified, first, because nothing has yet been said about the content of *theoretical* beliefs—par excellence, beliefs concerning unobservables which don't directly feature in experience at all; and second, because it will certainly need qualification to accommodate even a modest degree of externalism about content.¹⁰ It is dogmatic because it simply brushes aside the aspirations of those philosophers who have canvassed some form of “naturalised semantics”.¹¹ 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. The mere causes of an experience will underdetermine its content. If an experience is to amount to a something-that-P, then it must potentially sustain not merely causal but *rational*—internal—relations to items in reality.

So—reasons McDowell—not just experience, as a potential justifier of empirical beliefs, but the *real world* in turn, as that which is to be capable of reflection in experience, 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”,¹² 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.

This is only one aspect of McDowell's re-enchantment. There is a lot more to come. Someone persuaded that this—as it were—sophisticated naive realism is demanded by a satisfactory orchestration of the notions of experience, justification and truth, might still feel queasy when it comes to McDowell's further story: the classification of unreconstructed normativity and intentionality as *fully natural* that he later tries to motivate by the play with “Second Nature” and the generalisation of Aristotelian moral psychology. I suggest—but cannot now argue—that all that is independent of the development just reviewed.

Experience as the Passive Exercise of Conceptual Capacities

A consequence of McDowell's proposal, as he emphasises, is that radical refashioning is required of our thinking about infant- and animal-experience. What experience is available to creatures who lack Spontaneity: lack the conceptual vocabulary and powers involved in critical judgement? If my

¹⁰ Of which McDowell himself has of course been a strong supporter.

¹¹ Which may be exactly what they deserve. For a useful catalogue of the problems, see Barry Loewer's “A Guide to Naturalising Semantics” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, edited by Robert Hale and Crispin Wright, Oxford: Blackwell 1997.

¹² P. 26.

experience of my desk essentially draws—if passively—upon a conceptual repertoire, then it is not a state which a conceptless creature can enter. 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 a conceptualisation 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.”¹³

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 real 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. Ordinary thought allows no dependence of pains on sufferers’ possession of the concept; and it finds nothing for a pain to be if not a state of consciousness.

McDowell is vividly aware of this problem. Courageously, he regards it as something that calls not for unease about his position but for “keeping one’s head”¹⁴ and much of the final lecture is devoted to a line of thought—pretty elusive to this reader—which enlists H. G. Gadamer’s help with it. But should it have arisen at all? How soundly motivated is the McDowell’s conceptualisation of experience? I shall table two, mutually somewhat opposed doubts.

(a) His key assumption is that justification has to involve contentual relations, and so can be sustained only by conceptually structured items. This is ungainsayable when *inferential* justification is at issue—when justification consists in the adduction of supportive, independently attested beliefs. But that is not the correct conception of perceptual justification—of the status of beliefs formed on the basis of direct perception and considered to be justified thereby. McDowell proceeds as though in such cases experience has nevertheless 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. Generalised, 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.

¹³ P. 9.

¹⁴ From p. 300 of his “One Strand in the Private Language Argument” in *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 33/4 (1989), pp. 287–303.

Why hold the quasi-inferential conception? McDowell's idea is that an experience is essentially a having-it-appear-to-one-that-P. And such an item 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 the mere possibility of attaining justified beliefs without inference may precisely be taken to displace the thought that justification always requires a specific, content-sensitive justifier, that it always consists in relations between contentful items. It may be enough, for instance, that a belief is formed in circumstances where one (justifiably) takes the efficient operation of some appropriate faculty—perception, memory, mathematical intuition—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. This idea would involve neither McDowell's nor Davidson's—coherentist—conception of the justification of basic perceptual beliefs. Such beliefs would be justified not by their relations to somehow antecedently accredited content-bearing items—whether experiences or beliefs—but by their presumed cognitive pedigree.¹⁵

There is much more to say, but I cannot pursue the issues here. It is, though, notable that McDowell—whose view of the villain's part played by surreptitious analogy in philosophy is broadly Wittgensteinian—seems to miss the one at work in his own conception of perceptual justification.

(b) It is, though, possible to retain the quasi-inferential conception, and grant that the justificatory potential of an experience depends upon its being received as an appearance that P, and still to balk 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 thinking of experience as a brute Given—blind intuition with nothing to say—and his own preferred conception that it essentially involves a passive exercise of concepts. But there is such space. If we are to avoid the Myth of the Given, then in order to allow experience to justify, we have to think of it as carrying conceptual content; if we are to avoid the difficulty with animal- and infant-experience, we must hold 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 world, while not itself ontologically dependent upon an actual exercise of conceptual capacities, is *intrinsically* such as to present, for a suitably conceptually endowed creature, the appearance that P.

¹⁵ This idea would be likely to reactivate McDowell's undeveloped concerns about the conditions necessary for empirical content.

On this view, the very same event in consciousness that constitutes my seeing the desk in front of me could have taken place even had I none of the concepts which actually articulate it for me. But what would then have taken place is nevertheless intrinsically such as to sustain that particular conceptual articulation. So I, who do have those concepts, have no competent response on having this particular experience but to grant that it may—at least defeasibly—be so shaped. The justificatory role of the experience does indeed depend upon an exercise of concepts, just as McDowell insists; and the experience is essentially such as to allow of being so conceived. Only, its very existence does not depend upon its actually being so conceived.

This simple idea should not, I think, be identified with (anything akin to) Gareth Evans' conception of *non-conceptual* content. The present claim is not that an experience can carry some form of content without being actively conceptualised. I mean to be neutral on that. Rather the role of experience in justification demands only that it has the *intrinsic potential* to command a certain conceptual response from a suitably endowed thinker. I can see nothing in the reasons which prompt McDowell to attempt to conceive of experience as essentially conceptually contentful which demands the problematical extra: that an experience depends for its very existence on the *actual* exercise of concepts.

Indeed, the resources for a more modest view are salient in his 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 wishes¹⁶—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—a version of a dualism of Scheme and Content—but the Mythical component (of non-conceptual justification) is just what it aims to detach.

It is hard to believe that *Mind and World* does not somewhere purport to dispose of this. But since other readers may also miss the refutation, McDowell may care to offer a canonical statement in his present contribution. Otherwise, the dialectical progression of the first half of his book is lamed. The idea that experience essentially draws on the very conceptual resources involved in active, self-critical thought, will be superfluous; we can still the Oscillation without it.

¹⁶ McDowell's rebuttal of the charge occurs at pp. 26–27 and following, and pp. 39–40.