

## SHOULD WE BE KANTIANS? A DEFENCE OF EMPIRICISM' (PART ONE)

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### *Abstract*

In his book *Mind and World* (1994), John McDowell defends the Kantian position that the content of experience is conceptual. Without this Kantian assumption, he argues, it would be impossible to understand how experience may rationally constrain thought. But McDowell's Kantianism is either false or empty, and his view of the relation between mind and world cannot be stated without transcending the bounds of sense. McDowell's arguments supporting the Kantian thesis, which are very different from Kant's arguments, essentially involve a fallacy of ambiguity. In order to understand how thought may be rationally constrained by experience we should become empiricists.

When Wilfrid Sellars delivered his John Locke lectures in Oxford, in Trinity Term, 1966, he observed that Kantian ideas were pervading contemporary philosophy, and he elaborated a version of Kantianism himself.<sup>2</sup> In our time, elements of Kantianism have become popular again, openly or in disguise, and perhaps it is not accidental that quite recently the lectures named after Locke were used once more for defending a Kantian view. In his John Locke lectures of 1991 and in his book *Mind and World* of 1994 which is based on the lectures, John McDowell argued that 'Kant should still have a central place in our discussion of the way thought bears on reality'.<sup>3</sup> More in particular, he claimed that

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to lengthy and fruitful discussions with John McDowell on an earlier draft of this paper that helped me to understand his views better than I did before. Of course any infelicities that remain in my exposition of his thoughts are my responsibility. I would also like to thank Peter Hacker (St. John's College, Oxford), Wybo Houkes (University of Leiden), Menno Lievers (University of Utrecht), and James McAllister (University of Leiden) for their penetrating comments.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics* (1968; Reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), in which he tries 'to exhibit the, to me at least, astonishing extent to which in ethics as well as in epistemology and metaphysics the fundamental themes of Kant's philosophy contain the truth of variations we now hear on every side' (p. x). He also says that 'philosophy had to begin the slow climb "back to Kant" which is still underway' (p. 29).

<sup>3</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1994), p. 3.

Kant was right in holding that intuitions without concepts are blind: we should conceive of perceptual experience as already having conceptual content.<sup>4</sup> His argument is that if experience had no conceptual content, it would not be possible to appeal to experience as a *reason* for holding empirical beliefs, so that, absurdly, empirical thought would not be subjected to empirical constraints. McDowell also endorses the Kantian thesis that without conceptual content experiences cannot be *of* external reality. Allegedly, the idea that in experience we are 'open to the world' is unintelligible without the assumption that the content of experience is conceptual.<sup>5</sup>

It is high time to defend Locke, or at least empiricism, against these Kantian contentions. Discarding various Myths of the Given, we should rehabilitate the idea that things in the world are given to us in experience before we acquire conceptual capacities, that is, before we learn our first language. Having acquired these capacities, we will describe what we perceive in terms of the concepts that we have acquired, and our experience will be coloured by the conceptual habits that we happen to have. Yet, perceptual experience remains epistemically independent of concepts: we may perceive things that we cannot fit into our conceptual scheme, except in some very indeterminate manner, such as 'that uncommon object over there'. I shall argue that the progress and even the very notion of empirical knowledge are unintelligible without the assumption of an independence of experience in relation to concepts.

Kant claimed that experience and the empirical world are partly constituted by conceptual capacities that are operative in experience. The price that he had to pay for this view was excessive: he had to admit that empirical science cannot be concerned with the world as it is in itself, independently of our constitutive activities, and that it is merely concerned with a transcendently constituted phenomenal world. Although Kant was an empirical realist, he also was a transcendental idealist. Modern Kantians such as McDowell are not willing to pay this price. They think that they can be Kantians without being transcendental idealists. I am afraid that this is an illusion. If experience has conceptual content, and if experience is also openness to the world, the

<sup>4</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 12–14, 18, 21, 24, 25, 26, 30, 34, 40–41, 47, 48–49, 61–62, 66–67, 72, 97, 114, 120, 125, 141, etc.

<sup>5</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 31, 37, 47, 54, 67, 114.

world *as* experienced must have something like conceptual content as well. Consequently, McDowell is not entitled to hold that in spite of its concept-ladenness, experience gives access to the world as it is in itself, so that 'experience enables the lay-out of reality itself to exert rational influence on what a subject thinks'.<sup>6</sup> I shall argue that in order to be a wholehearted realist about empirical knowledge, one has to be an empiricist.

Let me begin my attack on Kantianism in section 1 by doing some historical reconstruction. Before answering the question whether we must be Kantians, we should have a firm historical grip on the reasons that Kant himself had for becoming a Kantian at the age of fifty-seven, when he published his first *Critique* in 1781. Why did Kant think that he had to embrace the 'critical philosophy' instead of empiricism? As we shall see, Kant's reasons for rejecting empiricism and endorsing Kantianism cannot be our reasons, for Kant's reasons depended upon a foundationalist theory of science that contemporary philosophy of science repudiates. It does not follow at once that we should not be Kantians: if we reject Kant's theory merely because we reject his premises, we would be committing the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Yet, acknowledging that we cannot endorse Kant's reasons for becoming a Kantian will make us more cautious vis-à-vis the critical philosophy, for Kant's critical theory was tailor-made to suit his reasons for adopting it. If we have arguments for being a Kantian that are different from Kant's own arguments, it is likely that our Kantian position will also be different from Kant's.<sup>7</sup> Neo-Kantians from Fichte to Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit*), Strawson, Sellars, and McDowell did not regret this fact. They consciously amputated parts of Kant's philosophical theory, hoping that their variety of Kantianism would be superior to Kant's own. However, Kant was a great philosopher and this means, *inter alia*, that it is difficult to improve on him.

In sections 2 and 3, I discuss McDowell's reasons for becoming a Kantian, and I try to determine what his Kantian position amounts to. Even though I endorse some of McDowell's reasons, I deny that they warrant his Kantian conclusion. Instead of embracing Kantianism, McDowell might have become an empiricist. McDowell rejects empiricism because he rejects the Myth of

<sup>6</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for other and illuminating historical comments on McDowell's book: Michael Friedman, 'Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*', *The Philosophical Review* 105 (1996): 427-467.

the Given. In section 4, I try to show that one might accept the idea that in experience reality itself is given to us without falling back into philosophical myths that deserve to be rejected. I argue that one need not assume that conceptual capacities are operative in experience in order to see how experience can rationally constrain thought. Sections 3 and 4 will be published as Part Two of this paper.

### 1. A Rational reconstruction of Kant's critical theory

Kant was a baroque philosopher in the sense that he paid ample attention to what he called 'architectonics' or 'the art of systems'. He held that the unity of a science, and the unity of philosophy as a science, has to be organically articulated. I do not claim that one should take seriously all architectural features of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For instance, Kant thought fallaciously, for reasons of architectural symmetry, that if geometry is connected to space, arithmetic should be related to time. Yet there is at least one architectural feature of the first *Critique* that one must take very seriously: the fact that in the body of his book Kant elaborates a *solution to a problem* that he defines in the introduction, the problem of how synthetic a priori judgements are possible.

Kant thought that there must be synthetic a priori propositions in mathematics and physics, that is, general propositions that are both necessarily true, so that they may be known apart from experience (a priori), and informative about reality (synthetic). It is indeed a mystery how there can be such propositions. If experience is our only access to reality, as the empiricist claims, synthetic propositions will never be a priori. By postulating the existence of synthetic a priori propositions in physics, Kant decided the issue of empiricism versus Kantianism already in the introduction to the first *Critique*. In the body of the book, he developed his transcendental theory, which is designed to show how synthetic a priori propositions are possible in mathematics and physics, and to what extent they are possible in metaphysics. But the assumption of Kant's problem, the assumption that these propositions must be possible, because they are actually present in physics and mathematics, had been presented in the introduction to the first *Critique*, and this assumption rules out empiricism from the start.

Kant's arguments in the introduction for the thesis that there are synthetic a priori propositions in physics and mathematics are notoriously weak. He does not really show that mathematical

propositions are synthetic or that the principles of physics are a priori.<sup>8</sup> Yet Kant's rejection of empiricism was not an irrational whim. If he did not bother too much about giving extensive arguments for his claim that physics and mathematics are based upon synthetic a priori principles, this must have been because the thesis seemed obvious to him. At this point, a rational historical reconstruction is most urgent: why did Kant consider the assumption of his problem to be obvious? Why did he rule out empiricism from the start? For reasons of conciseness, I shall limit myself here to the case of physics.

Two ingredients are crucial for answering these questions: first the fact that Kant never questioned a traditional theory of science and of scientific justification that derives, ultimately, from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, and second the history of epistemology and of natural science from the scientific revolution to Kant. Let me briefly dwell upon these two ingredients and show how they provide an answer to the questions that I am posing.<sup>9</sup> In *Analytica Posteriora*, Aristotle conceived of scientific knowledge (*episteme*) as knowledge by proof. We do not really know that *p* unless we are able to deduce *p* from premises that we know to be true. This conception of scientific knowledge threatens to lead either to an infinite regress or to a circle, that is, to scepticism: if all knowledge is knowledge by proof, the chain of proofs must either stretch back indefinitely or be circular, so human knowledge is impossible. In order to avoid scepticism, Aristotle had to assume that scientific knowledge is based ultimately upon a superior kind of knowledge, knowledge of principles for which no proof is required. This foundationalist conception of science gave

<sup>8</sup> KdrV, B 14–18. Kant was correct in thinking that the axioms and theorems of Euclidean geometry and the propositions of arithmetic are not 'analytical' in the sense of being either tautologies expressible within syllogistic logic or reducible to such tautologies by substitution of synonyms for synonyms. But even in Kant's time there was no good reason to assume that syllogistics is a complete system of logic, for valid arguments within arithmetic, such as ' $2 + 2 = 4$  and  $1 + 3 = 4$ ; therefore  $2 + 2 = 1 + 3$ ', cannot be captured by a valid syllogistic form of argument: the form SaM, PaM, therefore SaP is invalid. Kant's logical insight fell also short of seeing that the principle of causality 'Every event has a fully determining cause' might be an empirical generalisation even though it cannot be refuted by empirical counterexamples, because he did not have the concept of double quantification. Yet Hume had argued that the principle is empirical.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. for a more elaborate reconstruction my paper 'Towards a Post-modern Conception of Metaphysics: On the Genealogy and Successor Disciplines of Modern Philosophy', *Metaphilosophy* 25 (1994): 1–44. For my interpretation of Kant I am indebted to, among others, W. Stegmüller, 'Gedanken über eine mögliche rationale Rekonstruktion von Kants Metaphysik der Erfahrung', *Ratio* 9 (1967): 1–30 and 10 (1968): 1–31.

rise to an epistemological problem that was to torment philosophers from Aristotle to Descartes, Kant, and Husserl: how do we know the first principles of the sciences? The problem is a difficult one, because, as Aristotle saw clearly, these principles have to be general (scientific reasoning is of the *modus Barbara*; the theorems of the sciences are general), and if they do not stand in need of proof, they must be necessarily true and self-evident.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle thought that in the case of the natural sciences he could reconcile empiricism with a solution to the epistemological problem of the first principles. The general principles of the natural sciences are obtained by induction on the basis of experience, and induction is an absorption by the mind of the general essences that lie hidden in individual substances.<sup>11</sup> Because all individuals belonging to one kind have the same essence, knowledge of general principles that are necessarily true of a class of individuals can be obtained by experience and induction. However, during the scientific revolution of the 17th century, Aristotle's hylemorphic ontology was replaced by the corpuscular philosophy. By rejecting Aristotelian essences, the philosophers of the scientific revolution destroyed Aristotle's empiricist solution to the problem of the first principles. If there are no essences, the data of experience must be merely particular. Induction now becomes generalisation on the basis of knowledge of particulars, and such a generalisation can never yield knowledge of universal propositions that are necessarily true.

This was the main reason Descartes became a rationalist. If experience cannot yield the general and necessary principles of the sciences, these principles must be innate ideas, which may be identified by their special clarity and distinctness. The principles of the sciences are a priori and not empirical, and experience has only a limited role in the validation of scientific knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This rationalist conception of the first principles raised a difficulty that is a precursor of Kant's transcendental problem. If the principles of physics are a priori because they are innate, so that they can be known without our having recourse to experience, how are we to explain that they are true of physical reality ('synthetic')? Descartes provided a metaphysical solution to this

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* II.1, 993b: 27–30 and IV.3, 1005b: 12ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Analytica Posteriora*, II.19, 100a: 1–15.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Discours de la méthode*, Sixième partie, AT VI, pp. 64–65.

problem of correspondence. In his third Meditation he argued that we can prove God's existence and his veracity. If God has created us with innate principles that we are psychologically unable to reject because of their clarity and distinctness, these principles must be true of physical reality as it is in itself, because God does not deceive us. Whereas he largely eliminated theological considerations from physics, Descartes based the science of nature ultimately upon a theological foundation.

Descartes's rationalist solution to the problem of the first principles eroded quickly during the second half of the seventeenth century, for several reasons. Arnauld observed that the Cartesian justification of the criterion of clarity and distinctness involves a circle, because we have to apply the criterion in proving God's existence before it is justified by that very proof. No criterion of truth can be vindicated without begging the question, as Pyrrho of Elis (ca 365–275 b. C.) had already argued in antiquity. Furthermore, several principles of physics for which Descartes had claimed clarity and distinctness were rejected by later physicists, such as the principle that matter and space are identical, so that there can be no void, or the principle that the propagation of light is instantaneous. When Newton had triumphed over Descartes by replacing Cartesian physics by his mathematical mechanics, most philosophers became empiricists again, because Newton claimed that he had derived the principles of mechanics by induction from experience.

We are now in the position to understand Kant's intellectual predicament. As soon as Kant saw that rationalism à la Descartes or Wolff was untenable, he became a Newtonian and an empiricist: he awoke from his dogmatic slumber. However, the development of empiricism from Locke to Hume had shown that empiricism leads to scepticism concerning natural science, at least if one endorses the foundationalist view of science that derives from Aristotle. Assuming that scientific knowledge is knowledge by deductive proof, empiricism must conclude, as indeed it did, that scientific knowledge is impossible, because inductive generalisation does not amount to proof. Russell maliciously observed that, having been awakened from his dogmatic slumbers by Hume, Kant 'soon invented a soporific which enabled him to sleep again'.<sup>13</sup> This is grossly unfair. Kant had to

<sup>13</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (second ed., London: Allen & Unwin 1969), p. 678.

solve a very real dilemma, because Hume's sceptical conclusion was incompatible with the fact of Newtonian science.<sup>14</sup>

Like most enlightened thinkers at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant believed that Newton had found the final and fundamental physical theory. This fact that scientific knowledge really existed refuted Hume's sceptical conclusion that scientific knowledge is impossible. Because Hume's scepticism followed from the conjunction of empiricism and Aristotelian foundationalism, Kant had to reject either empiricism or foundationalism. I do not think that Kant ever considered the possibility of giving up the foundationalist view of science. Surely this view has a strong intuitive appeal. We cannot be said to know that  $p$  if  $p$  is not true, and we do not possess knowledge unless we have very good reasons for believing that  $p$  is true. Should these good reasons not amount to proof? The fact that Newton formulated his science of mechanics in the Euclidean form of an axiomatic-deductive system may have strengthened Kant's conviction at this point. That Kant endorsed Aristotelian foundationalism is clear from many texts, such as the preface to his *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft* of 1786.<sup>15</sup> As he accepted foundationalism, Kant felt compelled to give up empiricism. He had to assume that Newtonian physics is based on a priori principles that are necessarily true. In other words, he had to assume that the principles of Newtonian physics are synthetic a priori, as he argues unconvincingly in the introduction to the first *Critique*.

This assumption immediately raised the Cartesian problem of correspondence again. If the principles of physics can be known a priori, this must be because these principles express epistemic

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Russell never resolved this dilemma himself. Hume proved, he says in *History of Western Philosophy* (op. cit., p. 647), 'that pure empiricism is not a sufficient basis for science'. One would need an independent logical principle that justifies induction, even though 'this is a serious departure from pure empiricism'. Although Russell admitted that 'without this principle science is impossible', he never provided a satisfactory logical justification of induction.

<sup>15</sup> *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe*, A v-vi: 'Eigentliche Wissenschaft kann nur diejenige genannt werden, deren Gewißeit apodiktisch ist . . . Dasjenige Ganze der Erkenntnis, was systematisch ist, kann schon darum *Wissenschaft* heißen, und, wenn die Verknüpfung der Erkenntnis in diesem System ein Zusammenhang von Gründen und Folgen ist, sogar *rationale* Wissenschaft. Wenn aber diese Gründe oder Prinzipien in ihr, wie z. B. in der Chymie, doch zuletzt bloß empirisch sind, . . . so führen sie kein Bewußtsein ihrer *Notwendigkeit* bei sich (sind nicht apodiktisch-gewiß) und alsdann verdient das Ganze in strengem Sinne nicht den Namen einer Wissenschaft, und Chymie sollte daher eher systematische Kunst, als Wissenschaft heißen. Eine rationale Naturlehre verdient also den Namen einer Naturwissenschaft nur alsdann, wenn die Naturgesetze, die in ihr zum Grunde liegen, a priori erkannt werden, und nicht bloße Erfahrungsgesetze sind' (Kant's italics).



structures that are already present in the knowing subject. But if that is the case, how can these principles be synthetic as well? How can they contain information about the real physical world? Kant at first thought that geometry is about real absolute space and that arithmetic is somehow about real absolute time. Consequently, the same problem of correspondence arose concerning mathematics. If geometry and arithmetic are a priori, space and time must be structures in the knowing subject. But this leaves it to be explained how geometry and arithmetic can contain information about real space and real time.

Because Kant was convinced that no proof of God's existence is possible, he could not endorse the Cartesian solution to the problem of correspondence. The idea of a *harmonia preestabilita* between the epistemic structures in the knowing subject and the physical world itself had to be rejected as a wild metaphysical speculation. He concluded, correctly, that there is only one possible solution left: the solution of the Copernican revolution.<sup>16</sup> It must be the case that the subjective forms of intuition of space and time and the subjective conceptual or categorial structures, which explain that we are able to know a priori the axioms of mathematics and the principles of physics, are operative in experience and are both epistemically and ontologically constitutive of the world that is studied by science. Our a priori knowledge can be true of the world (synthetic), because the very structures in the knowing subject that enable us to have a priori knowledge constitute the world of which our a priori knowledge is true.

This solution directly implies the main epistemological and ontological tenets of Kantianism. (1) Conceptual structures must be operative in experience, even though the experiencing subject is not aware of their operations; (2) the empirical or "phenomenal" world cannot be identical with the world as it exists independently of the knowing subject, because the empirical world is subjectively constituted; (3) yet we have to assume that such an independent world *an sich* exists; otherwise the knowing subject would create the empirical world; (4) in other words, the world *an sich* must also contribute to the constitution of the empirical world. As Kant said, it must yield the impressions that are synthesised in experience by our cognitive structures; (5) because

<sup>16</sup> One might think that a Darwinian solution might do as well, although one will not reproach Kant for not having anticipated Darwin. But Kant's conviction that the principles of the sciences have to be *necessarily* true is not easily compatible with Darwinism.

humans are part of the empirical world and because it would be absurd to assume that a part of the empirical world constitutes the whole, the empirical human subject cannot be identical with the constituting, 'transcendental' subject; (6) both synthetic *a priori* knowledge about the world and empirical knowledge can be concerned with the phenomenal world only; no knowledge of the world *an sich* is possible. In other words, metaphysics as a science can only be 'immanent' metaphysics; 'transcendent' metaphysics can never be scientific.

As is well known, Kant used this transcendental theory in order to solve a number of urgent philosophical problems, such as the problem of freedom and physical determinism (the phenomenal world is governed by causal laws; we must suppose that freedom has a place in the world *an sich*), and the incompatibility of science and religion (science is concerned with the phenomenal world; religion is concerned with the world as it is in itself). This latter view was the main attraction of Kant for theologically minded post-Kantians from Fichte to Heidegger: even if religious thought can never be scientific, it is concerned with a deeper reality than science.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the attraction of Kant for modern scientifically minded philosophers such as McDowell will be a different one. It is equally clear that these philosophers will not be able to endorse Kant's reasons for becoming a Kantian. The scientific revolutions of the beginning of this century discredited the Kantian idea that science is based upon principles that are necessarily true and can be known independently of experience (*a priori*). Philosophers of science such as the logical positivists (Reichenbach) and Karl Popper realised that Aristotelian foundationalism had to be abandoned, and they replaced it by a different model of epistemic justification, that may be called 'Darwinian'. Scientific theories are hypotheses that are provisionally justified as long as they are 'more fit' than their competitors, that is, as long as they perform better in terms of the criteria for theory selection. Empiricism may now be defined as the view that all criteria of theory selection can ultimately be explicated in terms of empirical adequacy, so that experience is the ultimate arbiter between competing scientific theories. This Darwinian model of scientific knowledge

<sup>17</sup> Of course the German Idealists forgot about Kant's scepticism regarding religious knowledge and rejected this part of the Enlightenment's heritage, using the word 'Wissenschaft' for philosophical knowledge of the *An sich*. I shall not dwell on the contradictions within Kant's theory that seemed to justify this move.

dispenses with the problem of first principles that Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant wanted to solve. It dispenses also with the problem of induction and with the need for assuming synthetic a priori principles in natural science. We can have empiricism without traditional foundationalism.

## 2. McDowell's Kantianism: the global picture

As Kant's arguments for endorsing the critical philosophy have lost their cogency, one will have to adduce other reasons for becoming a Kantian. What arguments does McDowell put forward? And what does his Kantian position amount to?

According to McDowell, the Kantian view that conceptual capacities are operative in experience is a solution to a dilemma – or to an 'oscillation', as he calls it – between two positions that he regards as untenable.<sup>18</sup> One of these positions is the coherence view of truth and knowledge, as defended by Davidson for instance, coupled to the assumption that experience can only be causally relevant to a subject's beliefs and judgements. Davidson claims that experience is causally relevant to belief, and not relevant in the sense that experiencing something may be a *reason* for believing something, because he holds, like logical positivists such as Neurath, that 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief'.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, experience must be located outside the space of reasons, and if experience cannot be a reason for believing something, it must be a mere cause. To this Davidsonian view McDowell objects that thought can be *rationaly* constrained by experience only if experience can function as a *reason* for belief. If empirical knowledge is to be possible, experience has to occupy a place *within* the space of reasons. And this, he thinks, requires that experience itself is conceptually laden. As he says, Davidson's coherentism expresses 'the unnerving idea that the spontaneity of conceptual thinking is not subject to rational constraints from outside'.<sup>20</sup>

The other horn of the dilemma is the Myth of the Given. If we acknowledge the necessity of constraining thought by experience, we will reject the coherence theory of truth and take

<sup>18</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 14, 23, 24, 40, 46, 62–63, 66, 87, 96, 98, 108, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by McDowell on p. 14 of *Mind and World*. Cf. Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', reprinted in Ernest LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 310.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Mind and World*, p. 15.

recourse to the idea that thought is constrained by experience from the outside. In experience, we will now think, things must be given to us, and there must be relations of 'ultimate grounding' that reach outside the conceptual realm altogether. It must be possible to justify empirical beliefs by pointing to things that we are perceiving.<sup>21</sup> This would imply that 'the space of reasons is more extensive than the conceptual sphere'. The result, McDowell claims, 'is a picture in which constraint from outside is exerted at the outer boundary of the expanded space of reasons, in what we are committed to depicting as a brute impact from the exterior'.<sup>22</sup> And because such a brute impact allegedly can be conceived only as a causal impact, the idea of the Given offers excusations, or causal explanations, where we want justifications.<sup>23</sup>

Even though he does not say so, it is clear that in fact McDowell rejects both Davidsonian coherentism and the Myth of the Given for one and the same reason. In both cases, the constraint of thought by experience is conceived of as a constraint by something that is *external* to thought, a merely *causal* constraint. However, the framework of causes or of natural law is different from the space of reasons, as McDowell stresses repeatedly, inspired as he is by Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty. His argument for Kantianism boils down to a singularly simple one. In order to allow for the possibility that thought is constrained by experience in a rational way, we have to locate experience *within* the space of reasons, and not *outside* of it, as both coherentism and the Myth of the Given did. And this requires, he claims, that conceptual capacities are already operative in experience.

In drawing this latter conclusion, McDowell implicitly endorses Davidson's premise that 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief'. He presumes that experience can justify the proposition *that things are thus and so* only if experience itself has the propositional content *that things are thus and so*.<sup>24</sup> In McDowell's view, the conceptual content of experience must be a propositional content, and experience justifies belief if the two propositional contents are *identical*. As we shall see in

<sup>21</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 8; cf. pp. 10, 13, 14, 20, 27, 46, 125, 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 26. Cf. p. 143, where McDowell endorses an amended version of Davidson's dictum.

section 4, his doctrine is a Tractatarian view indeed, which we also find in the early Husserl.<sup>25</sup>

We might express the similarity between McDowell's reasons for rejecting coherentism and his reasons for rejecting the Myth of the Given in yet another way. He conceives of the oscillation between these two views as an oscillation that moves within the varieties of naturalism that equate nature with the realm of scientific law. If our human nature belongs to nature, and if experience is part of our nature, the naturalness of experience implies that experience has to be understood in terms of causality or natural law. But this makes it difficult to see how experience can rationally constrain thought, for the logical space of reasons is different from the logical space of scientific law.<sup>26</sup> McDowell rejects the identification of nature with the realm of natural law. In order to make room for the thought that it is 'natural' for humans to move in the logical space of reasons, he wants to conceive of human nature in a more Aristotelian fashion. As he says, learning to move in the space of reasons is acquiring a 'second nature'.<sup>27</sup> McDowell's Aristotelianism does not entail his Kantianism. Yet it is a crucial component of his position. For if the logical space of reasons is not reducible to the logical space of causal and statistical laws, and resists being appropriated in any other way within a naturalism that conceives nature as the realm of law, one will never understand how experience rationally constrains thought unless one rejects this type of naturalism.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, McDowell thinks, somewhat anachronistically, that such a naturalism is the deepest obstacle for endorsing his Kantian views.<sup>29</sup> But again, the rejection of the idea that nature, including human nature, is the realm of law and causality, in no way entails McDowell's Kantian conception of experience.

Let me now delineate the extent of my agreement with McDowell's views. I concur with McDowell that the logical space of reasons cannot be accommodated within a naturalism that identifies nature with the realm of law. We might have learnt this

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* (Halle a. S.: Max Niemeyer, 1900/1901), 1st. Investigation, § 14, and 6th. Investigation, §§ 28 and 39.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 72–76. McDowell distinguishes three kinds of naturalism, of which the first and the third identify nature with the realm of law.

<sup>27</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 84–88, 124–126, 184–187.

<sup>28</sup> According to McDowell, the logical space of reasons cannot be appropriated by naturalism in the manner of Davidson's anomalous monism, for instance. Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 74–76.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Michael Friedman, *op. cit.*, pp. 434–439 and 449–460.

in part from the classical debate on psychologism in the philosophy of logic around the turn of the century.<sup>30</sup> Naturalist pressures in philosophy are perhaps even stronger now than they were at that time. Yet the traditional arguments against psychologistic naturalism in logic are irrefutable.<sup>31</sup> For instance, if the laws of logic were in fact natural laws belonging to the psychology of thinking, one instance of a fallacy would refute the logical rule that it violates, and this is patently absurd. As Wittgenstein stressed in his later works, the rules of language cannot be conceived of as, or reduced to, mere regularities, and the rules of logic are part of the rules of language. Rules have a normative import that cannot be explained away or reduced to natural law.

Acknowledging that the contrast between the space of reasons and the realm of natural law is a genuine and irreducible difference compels us to reject the types of naturalism that identify nature with the realm of natural law, because we want to count humans as natural beings, products of the biological evolution. As McDowell stresses, we have to rethink our conception of nature so as to make room for the spontaneity of conceptual thought.<sup>32</sup> This puts back on the philosophical agenda all the problems that naturalism claimed to have solved, problems concerning the broad question of how it is possible that humans inhabit both the realm for which natural laws hold and the realm of freedom and reason. McDowell's Aristotelian considerations may be a first step towards solving these problems, or towards dissolving them à la Wittgenstein, although his notion of a 'second nature' of humans is merely a suggestive metaphor. Surprisingly, McDowell does not discuss scientific knowledge that might be relevant to (dis)solving these issues.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Husserl refuted psychologistic naturalism in logic convincingly in the first volume of his *Logical Investigations*, published in 1900, and Frege's critique of psychologism has become a classic. Cf. for a critique of Peacocke's attempt to reduce norms to natural laws my review of *A Study of Concepts* in *Inquiry* 37 (1994): 225–252.

<sup>31</sup> I shall not discuss here another type of naturalism in logic that derives from Quine who, because of his holism, claims that the epistemic status of the laws of logic differs only gradually from the epistemic status of laws of physics. For a Wittgensteinian critique of Quine's views on this point, cf. P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 212–216.

<sup>32</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 77. Cf. also my paper 'How to Succeed in Being Simple-Minded' (*Inquiry* 41 (1998), pp. 497–507).

<sup>33</sup> There is an ambiguity in *Mind and World* concerning the conception of philosophy with which McDowell is working. Towards the end of the lectures and in the Afterword, he stresses more and more that he wants to dissolve traditional philosophical problems and 'anxieties' rather than providing answers or solutions. With regard to his notion of a second nature he says for instance (p. 178) that 'if we take ourselves to be addressing that question, my invocation of a second nature . . . will seem at best a promissory note towards

One of the philosophical problems that the rejection of strict naturalism puts back on the philosophical agenda is the issue of how thought can be rationally constrained by experience, and this is the main problem that McDowell wanted to unravel in *Mind and World*. Here I hold that McDowell's solution, the view that the content of experience must be conceptual and even propositional, does not follow from his premises and is untenable in itself. McDowell's argument depends heavily upon his loose use of a spatial metaphor, the dualism between 'internal' and 'external'. He claims that experience can rationally constrain thought only if it is *internal* to the space of reasons, and he concludes that experience must have the very same kind of content that reasons typically have, to wit: conceptual and even propositional content. To put it in his terminology, the very same conceptual capacities that are actively operative in spontaneous thought must be passively drawn into operation in experience.<sup>34</sup> However, it is easy to see that there are at least two very different interpretations of the internal-external metaphor as it is applied to the logical space of reasons, and that in his Kantian conclusion McDowell uses the metaphor in a strong sense, whereas his premise merely requires the weak sense. As a consequence, his argument contains a fallacy of ambiguity.

In the weak sense, experience is 'internal' to the space of reasons if we can discover by experience that thoughts that we have about things in the world are true or false. This requires merely that in experience the items in the world *about which* we were thinking are themselves 'bodily given', as Husserl used to say. It does not at all require that these items, or the experiences in which they are given to us, have propositional content. Of course there must be a normative relation between the experience and the belief. If we are visually perceiving a black cat, we would be mistaken or lying if we claimed that the cat is not black, and our error or lie would stand in need of correction. It is simply false to assert, pointing to a black cat: 'this cat is not black'. But

a proper response. But that would miss my point'. The point is rather, he claims, 'to dislodge the background that makes such questions pressing, the dualism of reason and nature'. McDowell sees himself here in the tradition of the later Wittgenstein and of Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*. But it is difficult to locate McDowell's Kantianism in this tradition. Kantianism is a positive thesis about experience, that is put forward on a priori grounds. In other words, it is a synthetic a priori claim, which needs no corroboration from empirical cognitive science. Both Wittgenstein and Austin would have denied that such claims can be meaningful. I shall do so as well in section 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 12–14, 22, 24, 30, 37, 62, and *passim*.

should we conclude that the cat contains a propositional content, the fact *that* it is black, or that our seeing the black cat has the conceptual content *that* the cat is black, assuming that we can make sense of these claims? Surely this does not follow at all. McDowell's premise that there must be a normative relation between experience and the thoughts that are about the things we experience, does not imply the conclusion that experience must be internal to the space of reasons in the strong sense that it has conceptual or even propositional content itself. It is sufficient that experience is internal to the space of reasons in the weak sense that in experience the objects *about which* we are making cognitive claims are themselves 'bodily given' to us. Experience must be of thinkables; it need not contain thoughts.

A similar ambiguity pervades other expressions that are central to McDowell's argument, expressions such as 'thinkable content'. Discussing the fact that we might show the truth of an empirical claim by pointing to the object about which one is claiming something, McDowell says that 'we fall into the Myth of the Given only if we suppose that this pointing would have to break out through a boundary that encloses the sphere of thinkable content'.<sup>35</sup> The expression 'thinkable content' may have the weak sense of something *about which* we might think, such as a black cat. In this sense, the black cat itself belongs to the sphere of 'thinkable content'. But this does not imply that the cat, or the experience of the cat, must *have* a thinkable content in the strong sense of a propositional content, as McDowell concludes. It is a truism that propositions can be *about* items that are neither propositions nor have propositional content, such as horses or mountains, and that in many cases we may discover that propositions are true or false by perceiving these non-conceptual items. Because McDowell entirely overlooks the possibility of a weak sense of 'thinkable content', the sense in which a thinkable content is the object about which one is thinking and not the propositional content of one's thought, he feels compelled to reject this truism. In short, I endorse the idea that experience must be within the space of reasons and that it must have thinkable content in the weak sense of these expressions, but I reject this idea if interpreted in the strong sense that McDowell prefers. I conclude this section by raising a general problem in McDowell's Kantianism. In Part Two of this paper, I shall develop this problem by addressing more

<sup>35</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 39.



specific issues (section 3) and try to spell out the weaker thesis in section 4.

McDowell does 'not mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science'.<sup>36</sup> This might imply either that McDowell's Kantianism is consistent with the actual empirical discoveries of the sciences of cognition, even though he does not argue for this compatibility, or that it is compatible with all possible empirical theories about human experience which the cognitive sciences might accept, so that it is epistemically empty. I shall argue in section 3 that in its *prima facie* interpretation, McDowell's Kantianism conflicts with empirical facts concerning human cognition, and that, when McDowell tries to minimise these conflicts, he destroys the cognitive content of his Kantian position, reducing it to an empty play with words.

McDowell might retort that this dilemma does not destroy his view, because what he is aiming at is not to supply a solution to but rather to dissolve philosophical problems à la Wittgenstein.<sup>37</sup> I shall come back to this issue in section 4 and argue that even from the vantage point of Wittgenstein's philosophical 'quietism', McDowell's Kantianism must be rejected.

A global examination of McDowell's neo-Kantianism, then, leads us to the following, provisional conclusion. As McDowell is not able to endorse Kant's reasons for the thesis that experience must have conceptual content, he develops an argument of his own (section 1). The argument that McDowell provides, however, involves a fallacy of ambiguity, because he fails to distinguish between two senses of the thesis that experience is located 'within' the space of reasons. The thesis is acceptable in the weak sense that we can discover by experience that thoughts about things in the world are true or false. I shall spell out this weak sense in section 4 of this paper. But in the strong sense, according to which experience itself must possess conceptual content if it is to constrain thought rationally, and not merely causally, the thesis should be rejected, as I shall argue in section 3.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 27–28, 86, 92–95, 142, 147, 158–159, 175–178, and 183–184.

<sup>38</sup> These sections will be published as Part Two of the paper, in the March 2001 issue of *Ratio*.