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SHOULD WE BE KANTIANS?
A DEFENCE OF EMPIRICISM
(PART TWO)

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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.

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'.¹ More in particular, he claimed that Kant was right in holding that intuitions without concepts are blind: we should conceive of perceptual experience as already having conceptual content.² 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.³

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¹ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1994), p. 3.

² *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.

³ *Mind and World*, pp. 31, 37, 47, 54, 67, 114.

(September 2000), contains a global analysis and assessment of McDowell's position (sections 1 and 2). McDowell's argument for adopting it differs from Kant's argument, and it boils down to the thesis that experience cannot rationally constrain thought unless it occupies a place *within* the space of reasons. If experience would merely constrain thought from the *outside*, that is, causally, it could not be a reason for belief, and empirical knowledge would be impossible. From this premise McDowell concludes that experience must possess conceptual content. In order to be a reason for believing *that things are thus and so*, an experience must itself have the propositional content *that things are thus and so*.

I contended in Part One that McDowell's argument involves a fallacy of ambiguity. The metaphor *within/outside* may have a weak and a strong sense. In the strong sense, experience occupies a place within the space of reasons if it possesses conceptual or even propositional content. In the weak sense, experience occupies a place within the space of reasons if we may discover by experience that a belief about an observable is true or false. In section 4, I argue that we may spell out the weak sense without endorsing the thesis that experience occupies a place within the space of reasons in the strong sense. Accordingly, we need not be a Kantian in order to understand how justified empirical belief is possible.

In section 3, I attempt to show that McDowell's Kantian view is untenable in itself. Either it is empty, a mere play with words, or it is implausible from an empirical point of view. Emptiness is a risk from the very start, because McDowell does not explain precisely what he means by his thesis that experience has 'conceptual content'. Admittedly, he perceives the danger that the issue whether experience has conceptual content might be 'diffused as just a matter of idiosyncratic terminology', as if he would be 'merely affixing the label "conceptual" to the content of experience', while regarding 'the content of experience in the very way that [his] opponents express by saying that it is not conceptual, at least not through and through'.⁴ McDowell vehemently opposes this charge of emptiness, claiming that the capacities that according to him are passively drawn into operation in experience are rightly called 'conceptual capacities' because they are 'the very same capacities that are able to be exercised in judgements'.⁵

⁴ *Mind and World*, p. 46.

⁵ *Mind and World*, pp. 46–47. Cf. p. 62.

Yet it may be objected that McDowell implicitly changes the meaning of the word 'conceptual', for capacities are identified by their manifestations or exercises. On the one hand, he endorses the thesis of linguistic manifestationism which, according to Michael Dummett, defines analytical philosophy: 'philosophical questions about thought are to be approached through language'.⁶ According to this thesis, conceptual capacities typically manifest themselves in linguistic behaviour. On the other hand, McDowell must hold that there is an equally important range of manifestations of conceptual capacities that is overlooked by analytical philosophers: the entire range of human experience. If so, the conceptual capacities about which McDowell is talking must be different from the capacities that the analytical philosopher calls 'conceptual', because the respective sets of manifestations or exercises are importantly different.

It seems to me that there is only one way in which McDowell could give a clear meaning to his Kantian thesis, to wit, by arguing that the very same brain functions that are operative in understanding and using language are also operative in human experience.⁷ As we shall see, however, this thesis is implausible given empirical research on brain functions, and McDowell holds that discussing results of cognitive science is irrelevant to establishing his Kantianism.⁸

3. McDowell's Kantianism: some specific arguments

Let us assume for the moment that conceptual content is identical with semantical content, that is the kind of content which we learn to 'have' by learning our first language, and that McDowell is claiming that an experience has the very same propositional content as the conjunction of the statements that can be discovered to be true or false by a subject whenever the subject has this

⁶ *Mind and World*, pp. 124–126; McDowell stresses another function of language than Dummett, the function that language 'serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (p. 126), but this does not diminish his agreement about manifestationism.

⁷ That is, apart from by saying that the respective sets of manifestations or exercises are coextensive, two mental capacities might be identified with each other only by claiming that the underlying functional structures and processes in the central nervous system are identical.

⁸ *Mind and World*, p. 121: 'I do not mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science'. Cf. Part One of this paper, § 2 *in finem*, for an exegesis of this quote.

experience.⁹ There are various good reasons for rejecting this claim, some of which were used by Gareth Evans in *The Varieties of Reference* and are discussed by McDowell in his third Locke lecture.

First, the perceptual content of an experience characteristically has a determinacy of detail that cannot be captured by the concepts at the subject's disposal.¹⁰ Although this consideration is not decisive – one might claim that *apart* from a rich perceptual content, experiences *also* have a much poorer conceptual content – it makes McDowell's thesis less plausible: if we must distinguish in any case between a rich perceptual content and a poor conceptual content of experience, why assume that the latter is present at all?¹¹ This first reason for rejecting McDowell's Kantian claim was well expressed by the Schoolmen when they said that 'individuum est ineffabile'. Experience is always of particulars, and we are never able to describe particulars with the full richness of detail with which we perceive them. However elaborate our descriptions are, a reader or hearer who does not perceive the scene that we are perceiving and describing will not be able to reconstruct it from our descriptions with the vividness and determinacy of detail with which we are perceiving it. For instance, no combination of colour words at my disposal is able to capture the precise shade of green of *this* chair.

In his discussion of this first point, McDowell admits that we lack words for naming all the shades of colour among which we are able to discriminate. But that does not prove, he argues, that one cannot 'embrace shades of colour within one's conceptual

⁹ There are many problems here that McDowell does not discuss. For instance, if indefinitely many statements may be discovered to be true or false by having one and the same perceptual experience, the propositional content of that experience must be indefinitely complex and it will contain as many contradictions as there are pairs of mutually contradicting propositions (assuming that we might discover by one and the same experience that *p* is true and not-*p* false). Or does the propositional content of the experience vary as a function of the propositions the experiencing subject happens to have in mind? What if the subject does not think of a particular proposition at all?

¹⁰ Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 229; cf. *Mind and World*, p. 56.

¹¹ Traditional theories of perception in modern philosophy, such as Husserl's, identify the perceptual content of a perceptual experience with the sum of sensations and its conceptual content with their interpretation. Cf. for the traditional reasons for assuming conceptual content in perception my 'Transcendental Idealism', in Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). But McDowell rejects the traditional idea that within perceptual content we might distinguish between a conceptual and a sensual component. Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 39 and 63–64.

thinking with the very same determinateness with which they are presented in one's visual experience'. He claims, on the contrary, 'that one's concepts can capture colours no less sharply than one's experience presents them'.¹² How, according to McDowell, do our concepts accomplish this feat? McDowell pretends that, by uttering a phrase like 'that shade' while pointing to a colour sample for which we have no name, we succeed in 'giving linguistic expression to a concept that is exactly as fine-grained as the experience'.¹³

I find it difficult to understand how McDowell can be satisfied by this argument, for clearly in such a case the determinateness is provided by the perceptual content of the experience that is essential for making determinate the determinable concept of 'that shade'. The fact that indexical thought depends on experience for its determinateness does not prove at all that experience itself is conceptually laden. McDowell argues that the capacity to embrace a colour in mind is conceptual itself because it can in principle persist beyond the duration of the perceptual experience of the sample.¹⁴ But here McDowell assumes that visual memory is conceptually laden, an assumption that belongs to the thesis to be established instead of being an independent argument in its favour.

Evans used two other considerations for rejecting the thesis that perceptual experience has a conceptual content. One is that perceptual experience is belief-independent, as is shown by the fact that a familiar visual illusion may continue to present its illusory appearance even though the subject does not believe that things are as they look.¹⁵ Evans rejected the attempt to account for this 'distance' between perceptual experience and belief by conceiving of experience as a disposition to believe, other things being equal. On this issue McDowell concurs with Evans and seems to claim that his Kantian view of experience is able to explain the distance between perceptual experience and belief which is clearly shown by transparent visual illusions. McDowell's account of the relation between experience and belief is not dispositionalist. He holds that conceptual capacities are already *operative* in experience: 'having things appear to one in a certain

¹² *Mind and World*, p. 56.

¹³ *Mind and World*, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Mind and World*, p. 57; cf. pp. 172–174.

¹⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 60; cf. G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, pp. 123–124.

way is already itself a mode of actual operation of conceptual capacities'.¹⁶ Consequently, the difference between experience and belief must be conceived of as a difference between two different modes of operation of the same conceptual capacities: a *passive* mode in experience and an *active* mode in belief.

But unfortunately, the active-passive distinction cannot account for the distinction between experience and belief. One reason is that if visual experience has propositional content, visual imagination must have propositional content as well. We now may ask how our conceptual capacities are operative when we visually imagine something: actively or passively? As we may be imagining something visually without believing what we imagine, McDowell will be compelled to say that the mode of operation of our conceptual capacities in visual imagination is passive. Yet it is possible to imagine something actively, as Sartre described vividly in *L'Imaginaire*. In this respect, active imagination is very different from experience: we may imagine what we want, whereas when we look in a given direction, we are not free to see what we want. It is also different from passive visual imagination, as in dreaming. Should we conclude that in active visual imagination our conceptual capacities are operative both passively and actively? Clearly, the active-passive distinction is insufficient to account for the difference between imagination and belief and, *a fortiori*, for the difference between experience and belief.

Evans appealed to a third consideration for rejecting the view that experience has conceptual content, the consideration that we share perception with animals, whereas animals cannot be said to have conceptual capacities. Before discussing McDowell's reply to this important consideration, I want to mention another argument that Evans did not use, the argument from brain lesions.¹⁷ If there are brain lesions that inhibit our conceptual capacities as manifested in understanding and using language, although they do not inhibit our capacities of experiencing things perceptually and of moving in the world, it is implausible indeed to claim that the very same capacities which are operative in conceptual thought are also operative in experience. In fact, there are lesions of this kind. For example, if a lesion occurs at the bottom rear of the temporal lobe, close to the visual cortex,

¹⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Cf., however, G. Evans, *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 333.

the subject loses the ability to apply his or her colour vocabulary, although he or she can still discriminate colours perceptually.¹⁸ We should conclude that here as elsewhere, our capacity for perceptual discrimination is independent of our capacity for conceptual thought, even though we will often not know what we are perceiving and not pay attention to it unless we are using this latter capacity as well.

The problem of animals deserves a somewhat longer discussion. It arises for McDowell in two ways, corresponding to each of his two Kantian theses. First, if experience has conceptual content, because the very same conceptual capacities that are operative actively in spontaneous thought are drawn into operation passively in experience, animals that cannot engage in active thinking must lack perceptual experience.¹⁹ Second, McDowell argues that without a conceptual content, experience could not be *of* things in the world. Only because in outer experience the subject is passively saddled with conceptual contents that are 'seamlessly integrated' into a conceptual repertoire employed in the continuing activity of adjusting a world-view to the data of experience, a world-view that also includes ascriptions of experiences to the knowing subject, human experience can be an awareness of a reality independent of experience.²⁰ If the conceptual structures acquired by learning a language are 'constitutive of our unproblematic openness to the world', as McDowell claims, animals that lack a language must also lack openness to the world.²¹ Yet it seems to be absurd to claim that animals lack perceptual experience or openness to the world. Should we not admit that humans share perception with other animals? And should this not imply that our perceptual experience must have a content that is not conceptual, even though it might perhaps *also* have a conceptual content?

¹⁸ Cf. Paul Churchland, *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 159. Churchland claims that in such cases 'the victim's command of the relevant *prelinguistic* concepts is not significantly impaired' (p. 160, my italics), but for Churchland 'concepts' are mere partitions across the activation space of cells in the brain; they are not necessarily tied up with language.

¹⁹ *Mind and World*, p. 50.

²⁰ *Mind and World*, p. 31. McDowell writes: 'It is this integration that makes it possible for us to conceive experience as awareness . . . of a reality independent of experience' (my italics). This claim is ambiguous, depending on who is doing the conceiving: the perceiving subject while it is perceiving, or the philosopher who is describing the perceiving subject. I read the text in the first sense, assuming that according to McDowell this conceiving is part and parcel of human experience. Cf. pp. 47, 54, 155.

²¹ *Mind and World*, p. 155.

The assumption that human perceptual experience has two kinds of content, one non-conceptual and the other conceptual, may seem to be a comfortable way out for McDowell, because it reconciles his Kantianism with the objection that there must be a common element in human and animal experience. But it is easy to see that in his view the way out leads to an impasse. The non-conceptual content of experience must be relevant to its conceptual content, relevant not externally or causally but as a reason. And this, McDowell thinks, can be the case only if the alleged non-conceptual content of human experience is conceptual after all. Accordingly, he holds that the content of human experience is conceptual *through and through*.²²

Faced with the dilemma as to whether to give up his Kantianism or to deny that humans and animals share a common element in their perceptual lives, McDowell claims that he can avoid this choice by saying that 'we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form'. He rejects a 'factorising account' of this special form, which would consist in saying that our perceptual lives include a core that we can also recognise in the perceptual life of a mere animal, and an extra conceptual ingredient in addition.²³ McDowell elaborates his non-factorising account of human and animal perception in Lecture VI by borrowing from Hans-Georg Gadamer a description of the difference between animal perception as sensitivity to an environment and human experience as awareness of the outer world.²⁴ Like Gadamer, McDowell claims that mere animals lack awareness of the outer world, even though they are perceptually sensitive to their environment. And like Gadamer, McDowell must hold that the world itself in this special sense of 'world' is a conceptually laden structure. There is no dualism between conceptual scheme and world, for our openness to the world,

²² Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 62–63; cf. 46, where McDowell says that his opponents regard the content of perceptual experience as 'not conceptual, at least not through and through'. *A contrario*, it follows that according to McDowell the content of perceptual experience is conceptual *through and through*.

²³ *Mind and World*, p. 64; cf., however, p. 183: 'It is part of what I want to insist on that we are animals too . . . in some respects, the lives of mature human beings simply match the lives of mere animals'. These quotes suggest the possibility of a factorising account.

²⁴ *Mind and World*, pp. 114–124. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (4th ed., Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975), pp. 415–432. Gadamer's account of this difference was inspired by German philosophical anthropologists such as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen.

and indeed the world itself, is conceptually constituted.²⁵

By endorsing this Gadamerian view, which derives from Heidegger, Scheler, Gehlen, and ultimately from Von Humboldt, Nietzsche, and Kant, McDowell may be able to avoid the dilemma that I just formulated. But Gadamer's view immediately conjures up another dilemma which no Kantian can avoid, a dilemma of transcendental idealism. Unlike Kant, McDowell holds that the conceptual capacities that are operative in human experience are learnt capacities, and that they are acquired by learning a language. As he says, 'human beings . . . are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity'. In his conception of this transformation or *Bildung*, McDowell gives 'pride of place to the learning of language'.²⁶ If acquired conceptual capacities are operative in human experience, *Bildung* must also transform perception and its content. Whereas the pre-linguistic child is merely sensitive to an environment, the adult human being is aware of facts in a world. During the process of growing up, our initial perceptual sensitivity is transformed into perceptual experience, and our environment is transformed into our world.

The dilemma that McDowell has to face at this point is a choice between transcendental idealism and emptiness. Either our pre-linguistic perceptual sensitivity has nothing in common with our adult perceptual experience, and the environment to which the young infant is sensitive has nothing in common with the conceptually constituted world in which the adult lives and locates the things that he or she perceives. *Bildung* is then conceived of as a total transformation of perceptual sensitivity into perceptual experience and, correlatively, as a total transformation of the initial 'environment' into a 'world'. This seems to be the alternative that McDowell prefers most of the time, because he holds that the content of adult experience is wholly conceptual and because he rejects a factorising account of perceptual content. But this first horn of the dilemma is nothing but a variety of transcendental idealism. It is the version called linguistic constitutionalism or linguistic perspectivism, as defended by Nietzsche, Von

²⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 155: 'So languages and traditions can figure not as "*tertium*" that would threaten to make our grip on the world philosophically problematic, but as constitutive of our unproblematic openness to the world'; p. 125: 'Human beings mature into being at home in the space of reasons or, what comes to the same thing, living their lives in the world'.

²⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 125; cf. pp. 184–186.

Humboldt, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir, Gadamer, and by philosophers of science such as Hanson, Toulmin, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Paul Churchland. Its relativistic and radically sceptical implications are well known, and it is completely implausible from the points of view of empirical linguistics and cognitive science.²⁷

Or, and this is the other horn of the dilemma, one should admit that pre-linguistic sensitivity to an environment and perceptual experience of a world have contents in common.²⁸ For instance, when looking at a tree from a specific angle, the pre-linguistic infant and the English-speaking adult are both having the same visual content, that is, they are both seeing one and the same tree from the same perspective, even though the adult has a conceptual capacity that the infant lacks: the adult is able to say and think things like 'there is a tree over there' or 'I see that there is a tree over there', and the adult integrates this knowledge into his or her world-view. If McDowell endorsed this second horn, however, he would reduce his position to emptiness. An empiricist who denies that the content of perception is conceptual through and through would reply to McDowell's Kantianism that he or she calls 'perception' what McDowell is calling 'sensitivity to an environment', so that there is no real difference of opinion. McDowell would merely be using words such as 'sensitivity', 'experience' and 'world' in an idiosyncratic way.²⁹

Because linguistic idealism à la McDowell holds that there is no common core of pre-linguistic sensitivity and adult experience, and that the environment of the animal and the worlds of humans have nothing determinable in common, it cannot explain how developing a language may have been an evolution-

²⁷ Both Paul Churchland (early work) and Quine are linguistic constitutionalists. See for a critique of Churchland's neo-Kantianism my papers 'The Absolute Network Theory of Language and Traditional Epistemology', *Inquiry* 33 (1990): 127–178, and 'The End of Plasticity', *Inquiry* 40 (1997): 291–305. Gadamer tries to avoid transcendental idealism by abolishing the distinction between the linguistically constituted phenomenal world and the world in itself. Following Husserl, he redefines the *Ding an sich* as an ideal limit of the phenomenal world: it is the completed continuum of perceived aspects (*Wahrheit und Methode*, op. cit., p. 424). But this move merely radicalises his linguistic idealism by abolishing Kant's transcendental realism concerning the *Ding an sich*. Cf. for Husserl's transcendental idealism my 'Transcendental Idealism', op. cit.

²⁸ Sometimes, McDowell seems to prefer this second option. E.g. *Mind and World*, p. 183: 'it would be absurd to suppose that *Bildung* effects a transformation, so to speak, of everything that happens in a human life'. If *Bildung* leaves perceptual experience partly as it is, we are back with the factorising account that McDowell rejected on p. 64.

²⁹ McDowell goes into this direction in his Afterword to *Mind and World*, part IV.2 (p. 183).

ary advantage for humans. It cannot explain either how an infant might learn a language, for the object to which the adult teacher points while saying 'cat!' has nothing in common with the object that the infant is sensitive to before having learnt the word 'cat'. Nor can the linguistic idealist understand how human experience may be a motive for developing new linguistic structures. He or she cannot understand, for instance, why Austrians have a larger number of different words for different kinds of snow and ice than the Dutch. In short, linguistic constitutionalism cannot account for the very facts that McDowell's Kantian theory was designed to explain, to wit: how experience can rationally constrain and stimulate thought.

McDowell claims that he is able to 'pre-empt' the objection of idealism by understanding the conceptual contents of experience as Fregean 'senses'. If the Fregean apparatus is rightly understood 'in a picture that leaves the relation of thought to the world of facts unproblematic', the conceptual contents or senses 'already ensure that there is no mystery about how it can be that the relevant thoughts bear on the relevant particulars, inhabitants of the realm of reference . . .'.³⁰ But McDowell does not substantiate this pre-emption by telling us how he is able to understand 'rightly' the Fregean apparatus without impaling himself upon the second horn of the dilemma. Referring to Evans's reading of Frege will not do the job, for Evans rejects McDowell's Kantian thesis that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual through and through.³¹

It may be thought that the notion of *de re* senses will enable McDowell to escape from linguistic idealism.³² Frege held that the thoughts expressed by statements have nothing but senses as constituents; he would have rejected the Russellian notion of a proposition, according to which a proposition may contain objects in the world. Yet Frege also held that which proposition is expressed by a statement may be partly determined by the situation in which the statement is made, even though this situation is not described in the statement. For instance, tokens of the type

³⁰ *Mind and World*, p. 180. Cf. for McDowell's attempts to escape from transcendental idealism also pp. 41–44 and 95–99. McDowell refuses to tell a transcendental story because a 'sideways-on view' of the relation between Mind and World is impossible. But as we have seen, refusing to tell a story about a transcendental constitution of the empirical world does not save McDowell from idealism.

³¹ Cf. *Mind and World*, pp. 106–107.

³² Cf. John McDowell, 'De Re Senses', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1984): 283–294.

sentence 'I am looking up towards you' may express a true or a false proposition depending upon who is the speaker and who is the hearer. It is plausible to say that in such cases of indexicals or egocentric particulars, it is often the perception of the items to which they refer that makes the sense of the proposition expressed by the statement determinate. As a consequence, elements of the sense or conceptual content of the statement are *de re*; no descriptive or predicative content is needed in order to represent the relevant objects. If we assume that the conceptual content of perceptual experiences consists of *de re* senses, linguistic idealism can be avoided, because *ex hypothesi de re* senses are not expressed in language. But clearly, by avoiding linguistic idealism in this manner, McDowell would impale himself upon the second horn of the dilemma, the horn of emptiness. For what does it mean to say that the conceptual content of perceptual experiences consists of *de re* senses? It means only that a perceptual experience of an object or situation may contribute to determining which proposition is expressed by a statement, whereas that object or situation is not described in the statement. In order to have this determining function, the perceptual experience itself needs not have any conceptual content at all. It suffices that, for instance, I am perceiving the tomato that I am pointing to when I say: 'This tomato is green'. Helping to determine a sense is simply not identical with having a sense.

I have argued that McDowell's Kantian theory is untenable and that his argument for endorsing it is inconclusive. The argument is inconclusive because the thesis that experience can rationally constrain thought only if it is 'located within' the logical space of reasons is ambiguous (Part One, section 2). McDowell accepts the strong, Kantian sense of this thesis, according to which experience must have the conceptual content *that things are thus and so* in order to be a good reason for believing *that things are thus and so*. I shall now briefly explore the weaker sense of the thesis that experience and its objects are situated within the logical space of reasons. In this weaker sense, the thesis fits in well with empiricism and with a notion of the Given. It will enable us to escape from the dilemma in which McDowell seems to be imprisoned: the dilemma that either experience cannot be rationally relevant to thought, or Kantianism must be true.

4. Language and the given

McDowell's strong, Kantian interpretation of the thesis that experience must be located within the space of reasons implies a Tractarian view of the relation between thought and reality. McDowell insists that we will not be able to discover by experience whether a proposition *that things are thus and so* is true unless the experience itself has the conceptual content *that things are thus and so*. Because he conceives of experience as openness to the world, he concludes that, if one is not misled, '*that things are thus and so* is . . . an aspect of the layout of reality itself: it is how things are'.³³ Assuming that the empirical proposition *that things are thus and so* is true, 'that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world'.³⁴

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein spelled out the consequences of this view that the thinking Mind is related to the World as propositions are related to facts. The world must be the totality of facts, not of things. Because propositions have logical structure, the world must have logical structure as well, and the logical structure of the world must mirror that of propositions. For the proposition *that things are thus and so* is made true by the fact *that things are thus and so*. However, *that* there is this correspondence between propositions and the world must be ineffable; it cannot itself be a truth about the world. The relation between a true proposition and the fact that verifies it is an internal relation, a necessary link that can only be shown, for the proposition would not be the proposition that it is if it did not depict the fact that it does, and the fact would not be the fact that it is if it were not depicted by the proposition that depicts it. Perhaps this is the reason why McDowell thinks that he can responsibly discuss the relation between Mind and World without touching upon empirical cognitive science.

The picture theory of propositions and facts raises puzzling questions. For instance, we can understand a proposition without knowing whether it is true, and, indeed, we can understand it independently of whether it is true. If what makes a proposition true is a fact, what we understand cannot be a fact, for in that case we would not be able to understand a false proposition. And yet, can we not read off from a proposition which fact will make it true if it obtains? How can a proposition thus anticipate or include

³³ *Mind and World*, p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

reality? How can it be that thought is internally related to the world? And how can the world, which supposedly exists independently of humans, possess logical structure? Is logic a synthetic a priori science of the world? Or is it no science at all, because logical structure can only be shown, not described?

During the 1930s, Wittgenstein came to reject this idea of a metaphysical or necessary harmony between language and reality. He now acknowledged that what seemed to be a metaphysical correspondence between propositions and facts is nothing but a shadow projected upon the world by an intra-grammatical connection. Our language typically allows the grammatical transformation *salva veritate* of sentences of the form 'it is true that p' into sentences of the form 'it is a fact that p' and back. This 'correspondence' is a mere rule of grammar; it is a correspondence within language. But when we project this rule of grammar upon reality, erroneously assuming that it expresses a relation between Mind and World, we will be misled into thinking that the relation is deep and special, and that it cannot be discovered by cognitive science, because it is necessary and metaphysical. We will have to ascribe logical or conceptual structure to the world and to experience, and, in order to explain how it is possible that the world has conceptual structure, we might become Kantians.

It is a mistake, I hold with the later Wittgenstein, to think with the early Wittgenstein and John McDowell that the relation between empirical thought and its empirical constraints can be conceived of as an internal relation between propositions and facts. Because this latter relation is intra-grammatical, it cannot do the epistemological job of showing how reality constrains empirical thought. In other words, because the 'world of facts' is a linguistically constituted 'world', it is not identical with the real world that exists independently of humans. As I argued, the Kantian à la McDowell cannot be an epistemological realist.

In his later works Wittgenstein substituted a very different and more adequate view of grammar for the picture theory of the *Tractatus*. As he now said, grammar is autonomous in relation to reality.³⁵ There is nothing in reality that makes rules of grammar correct or true, because it is nonsensical to say that they are correct or true. Wittgenstein acknowledged a sharp conceptual distinction between rules of language and empirical statements.

³⁵ Cf. for an exegesis G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), essay VI.

On the one hand, rules of language are neither true nor false, neither correct nor incorrect, although a use of language will be correct only if it accords with the rules that govern the words used. On the other hand, empirical statements are true or false, but they never express a rule of language. One of the reasons that this distinction between rules and statements had been overlooked is that traditionally philosophers attempted to grasp it in terms of different kinds of true statements, or even true sentences, namely analytical and synthetic truths. These attempts are as misguided as the traditional Quinean criticisms of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Token sentences of one and the same type, such as 'this bar is one metre long', may be used either to express a rule (if one is pointing to the standard metre) or to make empirical statements (if one pointing to a pole that one has just measured). The distinction between expressing a rule of language and making a statement is not a distinction between *sentences* or between sentence-types, but a distinction between different *uses* of sentences.³⁶

According to Wittgenstein, the idea that there are necessary truths that describe essences in reality is an illusion produced by confusing rules with statements. This illusion is generated whenever 'we predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it'.³⁷ For instance, having discovered that what we call 'water' mostly consists of H₂O, we may redefine 'water' as H₂O. This definition is often presented as a discovery of the 'real essence' of water, and one infers that there are necessary truths about essences that are a posteriori because their truth is an empirical discovery. But this is utterly confused, for it is nonsensical to claim that there are rules of language that exist in nature

³⁶ McDowell confuses making true statements with expressing rules where he writes (*Mind and World*, p. 158): 'We can reject the two factors [i.e. the dualism of scheme and world] without threatening the idea that there are limits to what makes sense: that our mindedness, as Jonathan Lear puts it, has a necessary structure... And analytic truths (...) might be just those that delineate such a necessary structure'. According to McDowell, these analytical truths should not be definitionally guaranteed truisms such as 'A vixen is a female fox' but interesting ones, which delineate a structure 'that must be found in any intelligible conceptual scheme'. This is confused for several reasons. First, conceptual schemes consist of rules for using words, but there are no rules that 'must be found in any intelligible conceptual scheme'. As Wittgenstein stressed, the concept of a language (or of a conceptual scheme) is a family-resemblance concept, and we might imagine different language games that have no rules in common. Secondly, the fact that there are limits to what makes sense does not imply that our mindedness has a necessary structure. We talk nonsense whenever we violate the rules of our language, but these rules themselves are not necessary at all, as Wittgenstein stressed.

³⁷ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* I, § 104.

and are discovered by scientists. Rules can only exist where there is rule-governed behaviour, and only human beings and perhaps other higher animals are able to follow a rule.

For similar reasons, I hold, it is absurd to claim with McDowell that both the reality we perceive and our perceptual experience contain conceptual structures. Conceptual structure can only be inherent in rule-governed linguistic behaviour and its products, texts and strings of speech. Our perceptual behaviour is a kind of behaviour very different from acting in accord with rules, even though we will sometimes follow a rule in looking for something, for instance when we look first right and then left before crossing a street in Oxford. But our seeing a car when we look right is not a rule-governed activity. Although in *Mind and World* McDowell refers to the later Wittgenstein a great many times, arguing that celebrated Wittgensteinian insights such as the Private Language Argument support his views, McDowell's Kantianism is in fact refuted by Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Wittgenstein would reject the view that experience is located within the domain of reasons in the strong sense that experience possesses conceptual and therefore grammatical content, as a piece of nonsense, for only rule-governed items can have conceptual content.

What is more, we might use Wittgenstein's later philosophy in explaining why experience and its objects are located within the logical space of reasons in the weaker sense of 'within'. We have to account for two things: (1) that conceptual evolution is rationally related to experience, and (2) that we may discover by experience that an empirical statement is true or false. Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language implies an account of these two points which satisfies McDowell's requirement that the relation between experience and thought is conceived of as a rational and normative relation instead of as a merely causal one.

We have to distinguish carefully between points (1) and (2); the first point is concerned with the rationality of adopting specific rules of language, whereas the second point is concerned with applications of existing rules of language in making empirical statements. As far as the first point is concerned, Wittgenstein claimed that grammar is arbitrary.³⁸ By this he meant that rules of grammar cannot be justified by reference to reality in the strong sense of showing that they are correct or even necessary. In other words, it is misguided to apply to the justification of adopting

³⁸ *Philosophische Untersuchungen* I, § 372.

rules of grammar the model of justifying a statement by pointing to what verifies it.³⁹ However, he also held, as is clearly true, that rules of grammar may be justified by reference to experience in another sense of 'justified'. Given human nature as it is, and given the world as it is, some linguistic rules may be much more convenient than others. For instance, it is convenient to have general names for the most striking types of entities and properties in the world, but it is less convenient to have a proper name for each tree in our garden, and most cultures do not have proper names for plants or insects. The rationality of adopting rules of language is primarily a pragmatic rationality. Although it is impossible for us to change or 'choose' the entire system of linguistic rules which constitutes our language, because this system is intertwined with our form of life as it evolved historically and because it is constitutive of our capacity to think, we might change rules locally for good reasons of all sorts.⁴⁰ Novel possibilities of observation, new cultural habits and fashions, new technologies and theoretical frameworks, or new human needs will be among the many factors that motivate us to invent new linguistic rules.

The pragmatic rationality of adopting new rules of language and of choosing this rule rather than that is very different from the epistemic rationality of making specific factual claims.⁴¹ When we make factual claims, we apply rules of language in stating that such-and-such is the case. Sometimes we will be able to find out whether our factual claim is true or false directly by having an experience of the object about which we were making a claim. For instance, we say that the cat is on the mat and, lo and behold, there she is, sitting on the mat. How are we to explain that experience and its objects are within the logical space of reasons without lapsing into Kantianism? This second point can also be elucidated on the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with a celebrated critique of a picture of language which he illustrates with

³⁹ Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, § 331.

⁴⁰ At this point Wittgenstein's view differs from Carnap's as expressed in 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology'. Cf. R. Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Second enlarged edition. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1956), Supplement, part A.

⁴¹ This remains true at the level of global scientific theories. Inventing a theory consists of inventing new linguistic rules and making claims about the world. Testing the empirical predictions that follow from a theory is a purely epistemic affair, but accepting or rejecting a theory has pragmatic aspects, such as expectations about the instrumental value of the theory for doing further research.

a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*. The picture is that the meaning of a word is the object for which the word stands, or that each word has a meaning only because it stands for an object. Wittgenstein substitutes a different view for this Augustinian picture: if you want to know what a word means, analyse how it is actually used.⁴² Following Wittgenstein's precept, we will discover how richly varied the uses of words are, and we will stop asking misleading philosophical questions such as: what are the objects denoted by the word 'not' and the numeral '5'? Wittgenstein explored the corrupting influence of the Augustinian picture in the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of mind, and showed that it underlies a great number of vexing philosophical problems in these fields.

Rejecting the Augustinian picture implies, inter alia, rejecting the view that all linguistic competence must be based ultimately on ostensive definitions. Yet ostensive learning has a definite place in Wittgenstein's view of language: indeed, it is partly by misunderstanding ostensive learning of language and by overestimating its importance that the Augustinian picture was generated. For instance, learning the uses of our colour vocabulary involves much more than learning that 'red' is used for *this* and 'yellow' for *that*. Yet the referential uses of general names belong to the core of the cluster of rules that constitutes their 'meaning', and very often ostensive learning of names for perceptible objects and properties is a necessary step for learning their full usage. Now it is an important Wittgensteinian point that rules are normative and cannot be reduced to regularities. We only learn the rules for using names by learning what can be *correctly* called 'red' and 'yellow' or 'dog' and 'cat' and what cannot. This implies that there is a normative relation between words and the items to which we are referring by using these words, and not a causal relation. The entities in the world about which we are making factual claims *are already within the logical space of reasons because of the very fact that we are making factual claims about them*, and their normative epistemic relevance to the claims we are making is established by the rules of our language.

Saying this is not to abolish Wittgenstein's strict distinction between the rules of language and using these rules in making factual statements. For, as he says in *Philosophical Investigations* I, section 242, if language is to be a means of communication there

⁴² *Philosophische Untersuchungen* I, § 1 ff.

must be agreement not only in definitions but also in judgements. It is inconceivable that two persons could use words according to the same rules but then, confronting their description of the world with experience, usually come to very different conclusions regarding the truth of their descriptions. The reason is that the rules governing the use of denoting terms are learnt at least in part with reference to the very same kind of items that are then described truly in these terms. Because we learned that it is *correct* to call a ripe tomato 'red', 'red' being the word for its colour, the statement that this ripe tomato is red is *true* of this tomato if it in fact has that colour. In Wittgensteinian jargon, we might say that the relation between a rule and its applications is internal.

As it is the rule-governed nature of our linguistic practices that explains how items in the world can be normatively relevant to the empirical statements that we make, in the sense that it depends upon these items and their properties and relations whether our statements are true or false, we do not need to assume that the world, or our experience of the world, is conceptually laden in order to account for the trivial fact that we may find out by experience whether factual statements about observables are true or false. What we have to assume is, merely, that in experience these items in the world are themselves given to us. For example, the reason that we may find out by experience that a statement about the Moon is true or false, such as the statement that there are craters on the Moon, is that experience gives us access to the Moon itself, and not to a picture, a mental representation, or a mere man-made replica of the Moon. However, it is this trivial assumption, which we all endorse as long as we do not engage in philosophical reflection, that is rejected by a Kantian view of experience. According to the Kantian view, an experience of the Moon does not give us access to the Moon itself, but to some man-made conceptual content or to a transcendently constructed phenomenon of the Moon. If this were the case, it would be a mystery how human experience could be normatively relevant to establishing the truth or falsity of statements about the Moon itself. Kantianism excludes scientific realism and it turns talk of empirical knowledge of the world into gibberish. If we want to be scientific realists, we have to be empiricists.

Let me conclude by making some brief remarks about the Myth of the Given and about the idiom of 'perceiving that'. It is trivially true to say that in perceptual experience the perceived items in the world are themselves given to us. When we are seeing a tree,

we are neither presented with a picture, mental or physical, of that tree, nor with a conceptual content that somehow includes a conceptualisation of the tree, but we are seeing the tree itself. If experience is openness to the world, as McDowell stresses, it is inherent in the very notion of experience that in experience things in the world are themselves given to us. Perceptual givenness of things themselves is not a myth; it is what perception is about and it is the reason why perceptual experience is the ultimate arbiter of empirical claims and theories.⁴³ Why, then, is the idea of the Given called a Myth, and why do nearly all contemporary philosophers agree that the Myth of the Given has to be rejected?

When we peruse McDowell's *Mind and World*, or Wilfrid Sellars's 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', we find that there are several different definitions of 'The Myth of the Given'. Indeed, there are several myths, which have to be rejected for different reasons. These myths are in fact philosophical theories about what constitutes the Given in perception and the relation between the Given and belief, theories which usually deny that in perceptual experiences the things in the world themselves are given to us. For instance, when McDowell tries to interpret Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument as applying a general rejection of the Given, he is presupposing an idea of the Given according to which the items that are given to us in sense perception are 'private' in Wittgenstein's special sense: 'only one person could be the subject to whom a particular bit of the Given is given'.⁴⁴ This conception of the Given may then be refuted by arguing that 'such a private bare presence cannot supply a justificatory input into a conceptual repertoire', because 'any concept that was constituted by a justificatory relation to a bare presence would have to be a private concept'.⁴⁵

However, outside philosophy nobody would ever dream of thinking that the things we perceive, such as trees and cars and clouds and the blue sky, 'can only be given to one person'. It is trivially true, we think, that you may see the same red motorcar as I am seeing, unless you are blind or the car is beyond your visual field. Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument may be applied to philosophical theories of perception, not in order to discredit

⁴³ I hold that this is true both of perception by the unaided senses and of perception by means of scientific instruments, but I shall not defend that claim here.

⁴⁴ *Mind and World*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 20.

the idea of the Given as such, but in order to reject theories according to which what is given in perception must be private. Rejecting those special theories of the Given does not justify a rejection of all notions of the Given, and no argument in favour of Kantianism can be derived from it. I agree with McDowell that the Myth of the Given has to be repudiated if it claims that 'the Given mediates between the experiencing subject and an independent outer reality, of which the subject is aware through this mediation'.⁴⁶ In this sense, the Myth of the Given is nothing but the representational theory of perception, which conflicts with the commonsensical notion of the Given which I am defending here.

Apart from this narrow definition of the Myth of the Given, McDowell also uses a broader one. Speaking of the supposition that there must be relations of ultimate grounding that reach outside the conceptual realm altogether, he says 'That idea is the Myth of the Given'.⁴⁷ Here, the Myth of the Given is not defined as the representational theory of perception, but rather as the idea that what is given in perception is situated outside the conceptual realm, and these two definitions of the Myth of the Given have nothing in common whatsoever. I have argued that the expression 'outside of the conceptual realm' is ambiguous (Part One, section 2). Accordingly, McDowell's broader definition of the Myth of the Given is ambiguous as well.

In one sense, what is given in perception would be 'outside the conceptual realm altogether' if we were not able to talk or think about it *at all*. One might claim that in this first sense nothing is outside of the conceptual realm, because, assuming that there are things about which we cannot think, we could nevertheless succeed in thinking about them by coining the description 'that about which we cannot think'. In a second sense, what is given in perception is 'outside the conceptual realm altogether' only if it does not possess conceptual content itself. In this second sense, many perceptible objects are outside the conceptual realm, for it would be nonsensical to say that trees and cars and clouds possess conceptual content. I am afraid that McDowell in his argument for Kantianism shifts imperceptibly from the plausible position that no perceptible object is outside the conceptual realm in the first sense of this expression to the untenable Kantian position

⁴⁶ *Mind and World*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ *Mind and World*, p. 25.

that no perceptible object is outside the conceptual realm in the second sense of this expression. In any case, he misleads us whenever he speaks of an 'oscillation between two unpalatable positions', coherentism and the Myth of the Given.⁴⁸ For there are at least three very different philosophical views that sail under the flag of 'the Myth of the Given', so that the first definite article is misleading indeed.

In defending empiricism and the notion of the Given against McDowell's Kantian view, I have been borrowing some central notions of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in particular the notion that rules of language are normative, and the idea that one must pay heed to the way in which words are actually used if one wants to trace their meanings. It might be objected that this latter point in fact supports the Kantian view put forward by McDowell. He claims, as we saw, that experience and its objects have conceptual content. What we perceive is *that things are thus and so*, and, if we are not misled, 'that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world'.⁴⁹ Is this Kantian theory not supported by our actual usage of perceptual verbs such as 'to see', 'to hear', 'to perceive', 'to feel', and 'to smell', because these perceptual verbs may be followed by a noun clause introduced by 'that'?

There are reasons for being careful at this point. From the possibility of combining the verbs of perception with a that-clause one cannot infer that *what* we are perceiving when we perceive that such-and-such is the case is the *fact that* such and such is the case. For although it makes perfect sense to say 'Yesterday at noon I saw that the house was on fire' it is nonsensical to say 'Yesterday at noon I saw the fact that the house was on fire'. We cannot see, hear, smell, or touch facts. This is not because facts are somehow beyond the reach of our perceptual capacities but because *it does not make sense* to say that we hear, smell, touch, or see 'a fact'. Accordingly, it is also nonsense to say that facts are 'perceptible', or that facts are 'aspects of the perceptible world', as McDowell claims. The uses of the word 'fact' are different from the uses of common names, and that-clauses which follow a verb of perception are not definite descriptions of perceived objects. Only if one confuses the that-clause construction with the direct object construction will one think that what we perceive when we

⁴⁸ *Mind and World*, pp. 14, 23, 24, 40, 46, 62–63, 66, 87, 96, 98, 108, 119.

⁴⁹ *Mind and World*, p. 26.

perceive that things are so-and-so is *the fact* that things are so-and-so. As McDowell's Kantianism is committed to saying such a thing, it cannot be formulated without transgressing the bounds of sense.

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