

## UNBOUNDED NATURALISM

Andrew Taggart

ABSTRACT: This essay places John McDowell's *Mind and World* squarely within the context of German idealism. Like German idealists before him, McDowell is concerned with overcoming subjectivism and with defending a robust conception of experience. Yet in the Anglo-American reception of McDowell's *Mind and World* while much has been made of his relationship to Kant and Hegel, little attention has been paid to the developmental aspect of his 'partially re-enchanted' naturalism and its role in getting us beyond a conception of disenchanted nature. By cluing us into the issues that surround McDowell's account of our normal upbringing (*Bildung*) and of our ability to reflect upon it, 'Unbounded Naturalism' seeks to make clear that McDowell's realism succeeds in bringing the mind back into contact with the world but not without limiting the mind-world relationship considerably. This limitation indicates that one of the problems philosophy faces and that McDowell rightly identifies—namely, that of disenchantment—may require more than the kind of 'therapeutic' or 'stoical' solution that McDowell recommends; it may require cultivating a form of dialectical thought that can better face the deeply social and historical disunity between mind and world. Accordingly, the essay follows up its critique of McDowell's 'conservatism' with a Hegelian-inspired attempt to retain and revise the vital points he makes about experience in particular and about naturalism in general.

KEYWORDS: *Bildung*; Dialectics; Disenchantment; Experience; German idealism; Naturalism; Realism

### INTRODUCTION

John McDowell's explicit aim in his seminal work *Mind and World* is to provide a spirited defense of common sense realism. To go about this, McDowell takes seriously Kant's famous dictum on empirical judgments, 'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind', in hopes of calling our attention to the inseparability of our conceptual deliverances *in* all sensible contents.<sup>1</sup> But Kant's fundamental insight, McDowell thinks, is obscured by his 'transcendental story', the story of Kant's concession to the pressure coming from a disenchanted natural world to split rationality off from the sense impressions we receive.<sup>2</sup> It is the story, in other words, of the 'transcendental'

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, A51/B75. The quote from Kant can be found in John McDowell's *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 3. Hereafter abbreviated MW.

2. McDowell has since regretted not only his use of transcendental in the 'how possible' sense but also his 'saddling Kant with such a story'. 'Précis of *Mind and World*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 58,

Kant's making room for freedom on one side and external constraint on our perceptual episodes on the other while only exacerbating the skeptic's worries concerning how our empirical thinking can have any purchase on external reality when it seeks to reach over the yawning gap now opened up between mind and world. In this context, McDowell's critique of Kant and a few comments he makes throughout the text with regard to the merits of Hegel—a brief statement in the acknowledgement section of the Preface about the work being a 'prolegomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology*' (MW, p. ix) and a footnote to the effect that Hegel 'completes' the Kantian critical project (MW, p. 111)—have raised questions over whether McDowell has an accurate view of Kant's transcendental idealism, Hegel's absolute idealism, and Hegel's relation to Kantian critical philosophy.

Yet the Kant-Hegel debate surrounding the publication of McDowell's *John Locke Lectures* has had the unfortunate consequence of seeming to be carrying on a vigorous discussion of this important work while typically having the effect of 'triangulating' McDowell—for some Hegelians, McDowell becomes an ally; for most Kantians, he becomes a foe.<sup>3</sup> As a result, his work has been made, more often than not, into an *occasion* for a renewal of this exegetical and sometime antiquarian debate rather than being an opportunity for philosophers to tease out or to call into question McDowell's central claims about perceptual experience. One of McDowell's footnoted comments in

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no. 2, June 1998, p. 365. At this point, McDowell construes the transcendental as that philosophical activity that aims at objective purport. Cf. Kant's definition from the first *Critique* at A11/B25: 'I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects in so far as this is possible a priori.'

3. For defenses of Kant's transcendental idealism and for critiques of McDowell's alleged traditional (i.e., two worlds) reading of Kant as well as of his dissolving Kant's critical side, see Henry Allison, 'We Can Act Only Under the Idea of Freedom', *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA*, vol. 71, no. 2, 1997, pp. 39-50; Graham Bird, 'McDowell's Kant: *Mind and World*', *Philosophy*, vol. 71, 1996, pp. 219-43; and Michael Friedman, 'Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 105, no. 5, October 1996, pp. 427-67. For an essay that manages to appropriate McDowell for a certain Hegelian epistemic cause without actually discussing McDowell's work at much length, see Sally Sedgwick's suggestive 'McDowell's Hegelianism', *The European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1997, pp. 21-38. For her more astute defense of McDowell against Kantian attacks, see *Ibid.*, 'Hegel, McDowell, and Recent Defenses of Kant', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 31, no. 3, October 2000, pp. 229-47. In spite of Sedgwick's ringing support for McDowell, Robert Stern and Kirk Pillow maintain that McDowell's Wittgensteinian 'quietism' ends up 'domesticating' Hegel. Stern, 'Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy: On McDowell's Hegelian Critique of Kant', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1999, pp. 247-69; Pillow, 'Comments on Robert Stern's "Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy"', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1999, pp. 270-74.

There are, however, many notable exceptions to this general trend of appropriating McDowell for a Kantian and/or Hegelian antiquarian agenda. See, e.g., Robert Pippin for a critique of McDowell's naturalism and, in turn, a defense of subjectivism in his 'Leaving Nature Behind, Or Two Cheers for Subjectivism: On John McDowell', *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 186-205. A nuanced objection to McDowell's thesis that conceptuality goes all the way out can be found in Crispin Wright, 'Human Nature', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1996, pp. 235-54. J.M. Bernstein offers a wide-ranging and especially cogent critique of McDowell's residual idealism along Adornoian lines in 'Re-enchanting Nature', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 31, no. 3, October 2000, pp. 217-45.

response to Sally Sedgwick's defense of his purported 'Hegelianism' seems to me very telling if taken at face value: 'Let me stress... that my book does not purport to be a work of Kant scholarship, let alone of Hegel scholarship. I acknowledge in the preface that my Kant is Strawson's, and Strawson's Kant is no doubt not the real Kant. Hegel figures in my book only as an inspiring figure, largely off-stage.'<sup>4</sup> Instead, McDowell has in mind 'the best approach of Kant *for us*'.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean, of course, that even if the standard by which McDowell's book should be judged is whether he offers us an accurate view of perceptual experience or not, one may not reasonably consider his book in light of its explication of important figures in the philosophical tradition. Surely not. But it does mean, by my lights, that such considerations, which do not require McDowell's book as their starting point and which use the work only as an instrumental means for a broader end, are of secondary importance and so not philosophically interesting in relation to the book's primary purpose, its attempt to open us up to empirical reality while alleviating our skeptical, residually foundationalist anxieties about whether we can be put in touch with the world. Indeed, given the trenchancy of the Rortian-Davidsonian view that we should 'leave off talking about experience and should talk about language instead' because Rorty assumes that talking about experience commits one, in the final analysis, to some naïve or sophisticated version of foundational representationalism (*adequatio intellectus et res*), McDowell's work represents a welcome plea on behalf of our deepest intuitions.<sup>6</sup> If this is right, then we would do well to regard his readings of Kant, Donald Davidson, Gareth Evans, and others as if they were personas—the first a sometimes friend, the second and third strategic opponents—that aid him in bringing his conception of experience more sharply into view and not, therefore, as if they were philosophical figures which he is more or less concerned with 'getting right'.<sup>7</sup>

To make sense of McDowell's concept of experience, I wish to set out the connection between the latter and his concept of *Bildung*. This strategy has the advantage of keying us into whether the relationship between our empirical judgments and McDowell's claim that we have a 'standing obligation' (MW, p. 126) to reflect on our grip on the world can be sustained once we put pressure on his slim but suggestive version of the intellectual development (*Bildung*) necessary for the acquisition and use of our conceptual capacities.

4. John McDowell, 'Comments', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 31, no. 3, October 2000, p. 342. McDowell is referring to P.F. Strawson's influential but controversial book *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London, Methuen, 1966. In Strawson's view, Kant shows 'two faces': the first, a defensible transcendental investigation into the general structure of experience as well as a critique of dogmatic metaphysics; the second, a questionable subjectivism pressing the claim too far for a 'mind-made Nature' (p. 22).

5. John McDowell, 'Responses', *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, Nicholas Smith (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 271 (my emphasis).

6. Richard Rorty, Foreword, *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, vol. 1, 3 vols., Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000, xii.

7. The distinction I am drawing may strike one as overtly crude, but its apparent crudeness can be dispelled this way: even if McDowell gets Kant (or Hegel, etc.) wrong, he may still get experience right. For this reason, one may wonder, say, about his depiction of Kant without thinking that that issue is of decisive importance.

In what follows, I argue that McDowell's concern to make a direct realism intelligible misses the mark insofar as it privileges conceptual possession and application (the faculty of the understanding) over the conceptual adjustments, extensions, and acquisition of new concepts (the faculty of reason), all of which are important ingredients in a more robust conception of experience. Firstly, I turn to his diagnosis of the problem that both underlies and sets in motion much of modern philosophy—namely, the Weberian thesis that modern science has disenchanting the natural world. Secondly, I lay out the main features of McDowell's view of empirical thinking. Thirdly, I discuss how *Bildung* acculturates us into the particular conceptual framework that we happen to have (what McDowell calls, after Aristotle, 'second nature') and, in so doing, leaves us with little room for critically reflecting on our takes on the world. Finally, I provide a revisionary account of McDowell's *Mind and World* along roughly Hegelian lines; specifically, I seek to establish that the disunity between mind and world bodying forth in modernity makes of philosophy a dialectical enterprise as much by virtue as by necessity.

## DISENCHANTMENT

Frederick Beiser frames the phenomenological predicament of German idealists writing in the Kantian aftermath in dialectical terms.<sup>8</sup> For the subject to get any purchase on reality, there must be a point of contact between subject and object such that they became *identical*. But in order to reject subjectivism, the doctrine that there is nothing beyond the circle of consciousness, idealists needed also to establish a fundamental *disidentity* between subject and object. Thus they asked, 'How is it possible to explain the possibility of knowledge according to idealist principles and yet to account for the reality of the external world?'<sup>9</sup> Beiser notes that Hegel's speculative formula, 'the identity of nonidentity and identity', captures both horns of the dilemma, both sides of the dialectic.<sup>10</sup> In *Mind and World*, John McDowell follows this idealist line of inquiry but with one notable difference. He not only sets as his main objective that of answering this thorny question that idealists most explicitly raised and thought through, but he also seeks to make perspicuous why this synthesis has so infrequently been achieved. Indeed, he goes even one step further, arguing that the 'diagnosis' is a necessary precondition for 'curing' this ailment.

McDowell's gambit is to aver, with the 'experiential' Kant, that while understanding

8. Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002. Beiser turns the field on its head, rejecting the traditional claim of subjectivism made by many analytic and continental philosophers: 'The *critique of subjectivism*, the attempt to establish a satisfactory form of realism, was indeed the driving impulse behind the development of German idealism' (p. 3, my emphasis). My thanks to one of the anonymous readers for pointing me to Beiser's work.

Here it is worth noting the two senses of idealism at play in this essay. I speak, first of all, of a 'good' idealism which aims to provide a satisfactory account of empirical realism. But, second of all, I occasionally speak of a 'bad' idealism which remains silent on the relation between philosophy and empirical reality broadly understood.

9. Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 14.

10. Beiser, *German Idealism*, p.14.

and sensibility are distinct faculties they both work in tandem in empirical judgment: more precisely, our conceptual capacities are passively summoned forth *during* actualizations of receptivity.<sup>11</sup> For McDowell, what makes this view of experience especially appealing is that the space of reasons is coeval with the space of concepts; hence, we have no problem justifying the content of our empirical judgments since these fall within the space of reasons. Yet once the space of reasons is *disjoined* from the space of concepts, we arrive at two unpalatable options—a coherentism which relinquishes any prospect of our empirical thinking bearing on independent reality and a bald empiricism which declares that it has put us in contact with empirical reality but cannot justify the unmediated phenomenon that is given to us. Whereas the former, which holds fast to the idea of spontaneity yet not without sacrificing the possibility of there being external constraint upon our thought, gives us up to ‘spinning in a void’; the latter, which gives us the ‘friction’ we need, can offer only exculpation (the world’s impingement on us exonerates us from wrongdoing in cases of involuntary action) when what we are after is justification. In response to these positions, McDowell does not merely point out that coherentism cannot satisfy our desire for some purchase on empirical phenomena while the Myth of the Given, on view in bald empiricism, cannot defeat the skeptic; nor does he merely suggest that his unbounded naturalism is a logical possibility, a *tertium datur*, that simply has yet to be pursued. Since the difficulty lies in the fact that relaxed naturalism *can never* present itself as an even remote logical possibility to Donald Davidson, a defendant of coherentism, or to Gareth Evans, a representative of a sophisticated version of the Myth of the Given in McDowell’s story, McDowell thinks it necessary to treat the matter therapeutically. In the spirit of diagnosis, McDowell first acknowledges that coherentism and empiricism are ‘capable of gripping us’ (MW, p. xi) but then goes on to identify the root cause of their unthinkable blind spot, a historical cause that will reveal that the same ‘topography of mind and world’ underlies both positions.<sup>12</sup>

The problems associated with dualism can be traced back to their source in the concept of nature that philosophy has imported from modern science. In *Mind and World*, as well as in his slightly more recent essay ‘Two Sorts of Naturalism’, McDowell affirms the Weberian thesis concerning the disenchantment of the world.<sup>13</sup> We can draw out the implications of Weber’s thesis from ‘Science as Vocation’, a talk Weber delivered in 1918

11. Apropos Kant and Hegel, Pippin refers to the inseparability thesis (the inseparability of sensibility and understanding in experience) and the distinguishability thesis (the distinct operations of these two faculties). ‘The Kantian Aftermath: Reaction and Revolution in Modern German Philosophy’, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 52-53. Like the ‘experiential’ Kant and Hegel, McDowell is explicitly making a case that we can hold onto both of these theses without violating the law of contradiction.

12. Even though the spirit of this way of going about things is ostensibly Wittgensteinian, it does bear some resemblance to Hegelianism. For Hegel, all ‘refutations’ must fold moments of opposition into its own position; in determinate negation, the false is the way of the true. See G.W.F. Hegel, Preface, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 22-27.

13. John McDowell, ‘Two Sorts of Naturalism’, *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 149-80.

before a group of aspiring scientists, by shedding light on three of its central claims.<sup>14</sup> Firstly, in modernity there is no longer any meaning in the world: no longer does God or the gods, magicians or prophets, fate or fortune actively intervene on behalf of human beings or transform the world; the divine presence has receded behind the bounds of experience.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the modern world comes to operate solely in accordance either with mechanical causal laws or, more recently, with probability and statistical regularity, and so is delivered up to predictability and control. Since the natural world can be understood entirely in terms of physical law and since no transcendent component enters into the mechanics of the natural world, it follows that there is in principle no exception to law and that the world is in principle fully comprehensible. Even apparent irregularities can be grasped by means of current explanations. Failing this, they still call for further explanation or generate new explanations; anomalies, accordingly, remain intelligible as potentially explicable phenomena within the current paradigms and so call for further research.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, a gulf thereby opens up between facts and values, nature and norms, so that whatever meaning there is in human life must be ‘invented’ and cannot be ‘discovered’.<sup>17</sup> Hence, out of disenchantment emerge a kind of materialism whose central features are non-interventionism, scientism, and dualism.

Given this disenchanted picture of the mind-world relation, we have come to believe that external stimuli impinge upon an enclosed interior space we call ‘mind’. Furthermore, we tend to think that the mind, as something ‘in here’, is that which confers meaning on the manifold, while the world, as something ‘out there’, is that realm of objects which are a priori amenable to such conferral. Now, what makes this picture ‘gripping’ is its ability to accommodate human freedom and modern science; however, what makes it suspect is the variety of skeptical problems associated with dualism: the religious predicament whereby the unhappy consciousness seeks to approach the infinite

14. Max Weber, ‘Science as Vocation’, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 129-56.

15. Cf. David Hume’s critique of miracles in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 169-86. Hume’s aim is to limit justified belief to evidence from the senses.

16. So long, that is, as we are doing ‘normal science’. Cf. Thomas Kuhn’s now classic analysis of anomalies as instigators of paradigm shifts in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

17. For a view that, in my opinion, adheres to the Weberian thesis while making much of the distinction between ‘making’ and ‘discovering’, see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989. For reasons I cannot go into here, I find Rorty’s acceptance of disenchantment, especially evident in the great divide between the business of private self-making and political liberalism, highly problematic.

For more extended discussions of Weber’s influential thesis in connection with the problem of modernity, see Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 2005, especially pp. 49-67; J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970; and Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993.

which it a priori posited over and against itself; the difficulty the epistemologist has with disproving the skeptical hypothesis, often posed in terms of the so-called ‘brain in the vat’; the strained attempts to cordon off negative freedom from the realm of necessity in theories of action; the tensions relating to form and content in matters of perception; and so on. Thanks to this picture of disenchanting nature, much of modern philosophy since Descartes has sought to save human freedom and *sui generis* rationality by *peeling* human beings off of nature so conceived.

Although McDowell discusses what he calls rampant platonism, which maintains the fact/value split by consigning each to different realms, only in the context of his critique of formal subjectivity, it is clear that coherentism and bald empiricism both share the conditions and ramifications of rampant platonism.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, both share the belief that there is only an *efficient causal* link between empirical reality and cognition. They thus try to free us from mechanical causality by accepting it as an ‘input’. However, the cost of freedom in Davidson’s case is that our beliefs are empty (‘thoughts without intuitions are empty’) because devoid of any ascertainable content. And the cost of keeping an external constraint in our picture in Evans’s case is blindness (‘intuitions without concepts are blind’). Evans holds that experience is nonconceptual even as our judgments are conceptual. Yet without the minimal awareness provided by the passive exercise of spontaneity *in* receptivity, there remains, so McDowell thinks, an opacity in the passage from sense experience to the activity of making up one’s mind, an opacity which in the final analysis amounts to our experiences not being subject to rational inquiry. Therefore, so long as we are unable to pinpoint the blind spot in this disenchanting picture (this being both the cleft between humans and nature and the residual causal thread holding them ‘together’), we will remain in the throes of an ‘intolerable oscillation’ (MW, p. 23) between these ‘two unpalatable alternatives’ (MW, p. 66), the second getting its appeal from our recoil from the first, the first responding to the second in kind. It is for this reason that a relaxed or unbounded naturalism of the McDowellian sort, while not logically impossible, has remained unthinkable. It is just the sort of naturalism that would place the human and the natural world within the same life-world by conceiving of the human as a *mode* of the natural.

Of course, this is not the whole story. There is one alternative to coherentism and bald empiricism that regards disenchantment from the start as a pseudo-problem. By ‘holding that *all* conceptual apparatus is suitable for placing phenomena in the realm of

18. On rampant platonism, see MW, pp. 91-95. In his defense of Kant in ‘McDowell’s Kant’, Bird has countered that McDowell is reading Kant according to the traditional ‘two worlds’ view rather than according to the ‘two aspects’ view that Bird and Allison have helped to popularize. Still, as Sedgwick, in ‘Hegel, McDowell, and Recent Defenses of Kant’, and Stern, in ‘Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy’, have both observed, this rebuttal misses McDowell’s larger point which has to do with the fact that rationality is hypostasized in Kantian critical philosophy. The Hegelian critique of the a priori character of the forms of intuition and categories still sticks: for if Kant can contend with good reason that the real is rational, he cannot brook the further claim that the *whole* of the rational is real. The fundamental requirement of experience is that the concept and the object be dependent on, and partially constituted by, each other. See, e.g., G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York, Humanities Press, 1969, pp. 45-48.

natural law', bald naturalism presumes that the natural so conceived is unproblematic at the same time that it denies the *sui generis* character of spontaneity; in consequence, it is a straightforward form of reductivism.<sup>19</sup> Whereas bald naturalism believes that the problem can be identified in our misunderstanding of spontaneity, it neglects the other logical possibility—namely, that there might be another conception of nature. McDowell exploits the latter possibility in his presentation of another sort of nature embodied in *Bildung* and second nature, two concepts which we shall attend to below. For now, suffice it to say that McDowell does not offer us a refutation of bald naturalism just as he did not offer us refutations of coherentism and the Myth of the Given. On McDowell's view which owes much to Wittgensteinian 'quietism', if we are willing to grant this main Kantian premise concerning the full mediation of concepts and intuitions, then we should regard 'blindness', 'emptiness', and 'the identity of freedom with the supersensible' as symptoms of philosophical deadlocks. The key is to retain the salient points of coherentism, the Myth of the Given, and bald naturalism (freedom, an independent reality, and the inseparability of the human from the natural, respectively) while at the same time making these positions seem less gripping when they are juxtaposed with a more attractive alternative. He believes that a relaxed, unbounded naturalism, one that places us squarely in the midst of a 'partially re-enchanted' (MW, p. 85) nature, can put an end to our philosophical headaches.

## EXPERIENCE

The similarities between McDowell's and Kant's stance on perceptual experience go well beyond Kant's fundamental insight into the operations involved in synthetic judgment. Kant's opponents—rationalism with its affirmation of intellectual intuition, empiricism with its affirmation of the passive, unmediated reception of sense impressions, and scientism with its denial of *sui generis* spontaneity in the face of natural law—are not entirely unlike McDowell's. But McDowell wishes to avoid the 'transcendental' Kant's fate spelled out in his affirmation of a purely formal-logical subject, the unity of apperception, which stands behind all of our empirical judgments; his answer to the question of how pure reason, raised above empirical life and bound by an unconditional moral law, can be practical; and his postulate of a noumenal reality whose aim is to provide an external constraint on cognition.<sup>20</sup>

With respect to the last point, there is no such 'really real' in McDowell's account of experience; nor, for that matter, is there a nonconceptual moment which typically serves

19. John McDowell, 'Comments', p. 336.

20. My reference to 'law' and 'life' is a rather veiled allusion to the early Hegel, his critique of Kantian morality, and his foray into Christian mysticism. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate, Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, in particular pp. 205-23. For discussions of Hegel's early ethical vision, see H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight, 1770-1801*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 322-69; J.M. Bernstein, 'Love and Law: Hegel's Critique of Morality', *Social Research*, vol. 70, no. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 393-432; and Alice Ormiston, *Love and Politics: Re-interpreting Hegel*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004, especially pp. 9-27.



as an external constraint. The problem with the nonconceptual, as we have already seen, is that we have trouble making sense of how understanding gets hooked up to sensibility. At some length, McDowell demonstrates that the idea of Givenness makes it unintelligible how sensing that things are thus and so gets mediated by judging that things are thus and so. From McDowell's standpoint, the apologist for nonconceptuality thus gets mired in endless talk of our being disposed to pronounce on appearances or our being inclined to do so.

This 'blindness' can be avoided, McDowell thinks, if we grant that conceptuality goes all the way out. For only in this way does the linkage between sensibility and understanding remain rational. Whence the double character of understanding which is passive in the deliverance of its concepts in the passive synthesis of experience but active in judging, i.e., active in our making up our mind that such and such is the case. Because the transition between experience and judging is *immanent*, McDowell thinks that it is in no way mysterious how experience can be a 'reason for' (MW, p. 62) judging.

What is mysterious, however, is how McDowell can demonstrate the *utter passivity* of the understanding so as to ensure that an independent reality, via sensibility, is providing him with the 'friction' he needs to make good on his promise that empirical thinking bears *on* reality. McDowell's refutation of the charge that his unbounded naturalism amounts to subjectivism rests firstly on his distancing himself from anything remotely resembling a two worlds theory. For McDowell, the appearance of the thing *is* the reality of that thing; it immediately follows that there is only *one* empirical reality. But it would appear that his negation of transcendental idealism, which in the traditional reading has upheld the noumenon/phenomenon distinction, only brings him closer to subjectivism. How, then, is it possible for there to be any 'friction', any check on the projection of the mind's categories, once empirical reality becomes that which is fully open to view?

McDowell's move is to hold that a singular conception of empirical reality need not imply that it must be consigned to only one mode. According to McDowell, it is only an apparent paradox that empirical reality is at once *independent* of thought yet *available* to thought in experience—independent in its existence but available to us in its substance. Consider first the world's availability to thought. If thought already operates in the passive synthesis of conception and intuition, then the way the world is is always already present to thought. So, saying that the world is all that lies open to view means that 'the world is made up of the sort of thing one *can* think' (MW, p. 27-28, my emphasis) is identical to its being the case that empirical thinking takes its cue from the way that the world is, here and now (MW, p. 28). Put differently, the world is just the sort of place where the mind is at home, the mind the kind of activity necessary for the world to take on the shape that it has for us. This view brings McDowell very close to Hegel's 'the real is rational, the rational is real' thesis at least as the latter is understood by a fully philosophical consciousness. Yet, by itself, it cannot remove the doubt that the object is simply the manifestation of the structures of the mind.

Consider now the more difficult claim—namely, our awareness of an empirical reality independent of such awareness. Because conceptuality goes all the way out,

McDowell's relaxed naturalism is susceptible to the charge that it cannot be justified how the exercise of spontaneity in experience is passive and hence how it is merely responsive to the layout of the world apprehended in receptivity. In other words, the difficulty can be seen in McDowell's effort to make it intelligible how empirical reality, in the form of experience, can fall within the space of concepts but can still exert a pressure on our conceptualizations. As counterintuitive as it may seem, sensibility *as such* cannot provide such a restraint. McDowell reasons thusly:

By virtue of the way in which the conceptual capacities that are drawn into operation in an experience are rationally linked into a whole network, the subject of the experience understands what the experience takes in (or at least seems to take in) as part of a wider reality, a reality that is embraceable in thought but not all available to this experience. The object of experience is understood as integrated into a wider reality, in a way that mirrors how the relevant concepts are integrated into the repertoire of spontaneity at large. (MW, p. 32)

To ensure that there is the requisite friction in his picture of empirical thinking, McDowell draws our attention to the rational linkage between experience and judging. According to McDowell, this passage from passive experience to active judging, this 'integration', runs parallel to a bit of empirical reality and its integration into a wider reality. How can this be? The 'integration' involved in adjustments and revisions, we must presume, are adjustments and revisions *to* the conceptualized sensible contents *in* receptivity. As Michael Friedman puts it, 'Relation to an independent objective world is thus not secured by the idea of receptivity, but rather by the spontaneous conceptual activities of the understanding as it rationally evolves an integrated picture of the world.'<sup>21</sup> The double character of the world, at once accessible to thought but independent of thought, 'mirrors' the double character of the understanding, which is passive in experience but active in judging, in that we come to understand the latter as having to *respond* to the former in our emergent world-conception. It is clear that for McDowell there is no other way of explaining *why* we make revisions to our conception of the world; but it is not entirely clear *how* we can *know* that this is the case.

In his critique of McDowell's premise that conceptuality goes all the way out, Friedman maintains that McDowell lacks the resources to distinguish between inner and outer sense. Without such a criterion, McDowell's purported common sense realism backslides into coherentism.<sup>22</sup> In his later lectures, 'Having a World in View: Kant, Sellars and Intentionality', McDowell no doubt has become aware of his privileging the understanding over sensibility in providing for the necessary friction. Whence his playing up object dependency more in order to put more weight on sensibility's role in making

21. 'Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition', pp. 443-44.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 444. In his reply to Friedman, Stern contends that McDowell can differentiate between inner and outer sense by drawing our attention to the content of experience. 'It is precisely because McDowell acknowledges that experience comes with this degree of articulation, that he can appeal to experience to distinguish between inner and outer sense: he does not need receptivity to act as a kind of criterion, in the way that Friedman takes it to be used'. 'Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy', p. 255.

a 'claim' on the passive exercise of our conceptual capacities.<sup>23</sup> In the end, the question concerning whether McDowell has the resources at his disposal to maintain a direct realism is undeniably relevant to any conception of experience of a non-coherentist sort, yet it is not, to my mind, the ultimate test of McDowellian naturalism. In the section on *Bildung* below, I find McDowell's account of experience wanting not because it cannot reasonably justify how we can become aware of a reality independent of our awareness but because it cannot do justice to the role that reflection plays in a subject's conceptual sensitivity to the world.

### BILDUNG

McDowell's naturalism is shaped by his desire to return us to a kind of nature that is other than that governed by physical law. He is keen to take as literally as possible the thought that we are rational animals, animals whose theoretical engagements involve using the conceptual capacities that we happen to have. The idea that we are animals of a rational kind differs appreciably from rampant platonism which is led to conceive of rationality as dirempted from nature thanks to its tacit endorsement of a disenchanted nature. In order to stave off rampant platonism, McDowell points to *Bildung*, a thin account of our normal upbringing. Indeed, McDowell needs some story of human evolution, however short and underdeveloped, in order to illustrate how it is possible for rational beings to inhabit a 'partially re-enchanted' (MW, p. 85) nature.<sup>24</sup> It is a story animated by three fundamental questions. Firstly, how can the kind of animals we are be *rational*? Secondly, how can the rational persons we are be *animalistic*? Thirdly and more broadly, how do we explain the fact of our having *these* conceptual capacities and *not others*?

There is a tension between the first and second questions that is expressed in an antinomy between rampant platonism and bald naturalism. If the former, steadfastly holding to the idea that rationality is *sui generis*, is negated in order to return us to nature, the latter fancies itself the only other option. It is for this reason that McDowell describes his relaxed naturalism as '*partially* re-enchanted'. We have already seen that the source of this antinomy is a disenchanted picture of the natural world; hence the problem can be removed only after we change our conception of the latter. With this new view of nature comes a new image of humans 'as animals whose natural being is permeated with rationality, even though rationality is appropriated conceived in Kantian terms' (MW, p. 85). But it remains to be seen how our nature can be 'permeated with rationality', with a *sui generis* rationality no less, without compelling us to fall back into some version of rampant platonism.

23. See especially 'Lecture III: Intentionality as a Relation', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 95, no. 9, 1998, pp. 471-91.

24. The purpose of this story is to serve mainly as a philosophical reminder. McDowell follows Wittgenstein in believing that the 'work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose'. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, §127. This helps explain the brevity of the story McDowell tells. McDowell refers to this section of *Philosophical Investigations* in MW, p. 95.

It is here that McDowell introduces the concepts of *Bildung* and second nature. *Bildung*, he tells us, is our intellectual and moral development which unfolds as an actualizing of some of the potentialities contained in our first nature and which acclimates us to a particular tradition contained in the language we inherit. McDowell's account of that dimension of *Bildung* which concerns our conceptual capacities is scant (remember his primary purpose is to provide us with a 'philosophical reminder' that will be sufficient for removing our rampant platonist anxieties), but we can still hazard reasonable conjectures concerning the shape of *Bildung* so long as these are in keeping with McDowell's Wittgensteinian leanings. Something like Wittgenstein's argument on rule-following seems fitting here. At the end of *Mind and World*, McDowell avers that language carries a tradition which already contains 'putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons, before she comes on the scene' (MW, p. 125). It is clear, then, that tradition is already present in our conceptual capacities which are exercised and actualized in accordance, let's say, with 'the way we do things'. That is, our acquisition of concepts goes hand-in-hand with our coming to understand *how* we apply them in certain cases and within a certain tradition. The force behind tradition (and the social practices which make up and support tradition) ensures that certain concepts are applied to cases in just the way they are 'supposed' to be, in just the way that we have learned. Of course, such applications will be considerably narrower than the range of possible logical applications, but rarely do other possibilities appear to us. This is because human understanding is formed and exercised in connection with an 'obviousness' about one's very behavior as well as with a tacit, conventionally derived 'must' motivating that behavior. In short, just as the authority behind obeying a rule does not come from the formal character of the rule itself, so the authority behind the application of our concepts does not come from the concepts themselves: both rely on the customary practices of a certain social group which habituate us into a certain form of life.<sup>25</sup>

McDowell sees no problem between this picture of *Bildung* and the claim that we have a 'standing obligation' (MW, p. 126) to reflect. On the relation between tradition, here figured in the image of a boat, and reflection, McDowell writes,

Now it is a key point that for such reflective criticism, the appropriate image is Neurath's [and the wrong image would be the *tabula rasa*], in which a sailor overhauls his ship while it is afloat. This does not mean such reflection cannot be radical. One can find oneself called on to jettison parts of one's inherited ways of thinking; and, though this is harder to place in Neurath's image, weaknesses that reflection discloses in inherited ways of thinking can dictate the formation of new concepts and conceptions. (MW, p. 81)

McDowell's unperturbed insistence on our standing obligation to reflect seems to me to belie a weighty dilemma. For if the truncated account of tradition that I have provided is anything like correct, then there would seem to be considerable friction, indeed a potential contradiction, between traditional authority and the power of reflection. The

25. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §199.

dilemma centers on the genesis of reflection: reflection either arises out of tradition through the work of *Bildung* or it is simply posited. Obviously McDowell cannot brook its being posited. For were this to be the case, its existence would run counter to the reason McDowell gives for trotting out his concept of *Bildung*: the latter has as its end the alleviation of our worries over how we come to have just these conceptual capacities in the first place. Hence, reflection would take on an occult quality, and in the end we would wind up with rampant platonism or with the Myth of the Given.

So McDowell must take the position that reflection emerges from the very tradition we are habituated into. Max Weber's definition of traditional authority as 'domination that rests... upon piety for what actually, allegedly, or presumably has always existed' may be too crude for our purposes but nonetheless provides us with a starting point.<sup>26</sup> What binds us to tradition, what makes tradition authoritative for us, is more than a particular conception of the past; it is a feeling of piety for a particular conception of conception; it is a picture of our self-understanding *in relation* to a body of meaning. To be sure, there is no reason to believe that a certain tradition may not be able to educate its pupils in the use of the understanding at the same time that it entreats those pupils to call into question that very same use. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that a tradition cannot take the idea in stride of its being discontinuous in many important respects. Consequently, tradition need not be blatantly authoritative in order to be effective; indeed, it can be hegemonic (in something like the Gramscian sense), actually allowing for, feeding upon, and folding into itself moments of dissent. What this suggests is that the skepticism outlined in my first case is thereby encompassed by one tradition, a tradition that sees itself as open to a game of bringing into question certain sorts of claims and certain kinds of perceptual experiences (and *that just is* a part of the habituation and practice of understanding), while discontinuity is accommodated by another tradition, one assuming in advance a larger continuity as the backdrop against which it locates specific discontinuities. The 'blind spot' of tradition, however, is to be observed in its inability to account for a fortuitous kind of reflection concerned to raise to consciousness and to negate the ways that we have been habituated into, say, modern skepticism or the ways that we have come to familiarize ourselves with certain kinds of discontinuity. More precisely, reflection comes on the scene in an 'ethical' moment—that is, when it dawns on us that our habitual uses of concepts in a certain manner have done an injustice to this object—and in an 'aesthetic' moment—that is, when we come to recognize that the set of logical possibilities for the application of a concept is larger than the customary set that is normally binding for us. Hence, what tradition cannot allow for as long as it wishes to remain tradition in any recognizable sense of the word is reflection on its conditions of possibility, on its conditions of continuation. It is in this sense that reflection, while drawing from the resources provided it by tradition (for what else can it work with, after all?), nonetheless seeks to effect a radical break with tradition

26. Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, p. 296. For a more substantial version of tradition, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Which Rationality? Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

in order to usher in something wholly new and other than what has been the case.

It might be objected that this line of argument confuses one sort of question, a descriptive, roughly historical one concerned with how it is possible that we have a certain set of conceptual capacities, with another sort of question pertaining to normativity. Indeed, *common sense* realism has little to say about how our cognitive equipment ought to work, only about how it does work. To ask that it consider the latter question is to ask an unintelligible question that McDowell should feel no compulsion to answer. This could be conceded were I interested here in a normative rather than a strictly structural, philosophical problem. In truth, the question concerns what rationality can do, how it can operate, and what limits it has. As long as McDowell insists on an innocuous view of second nature as arising from the normal upbringing he calls *Bildung* and as expressing traditional authority (however this is conceived), he may be able to counter the skeptic wondering about how we can be rational animals; but he can do little to assuage the skeptic who has his sights set on the quality of rationality itself and, by extension, on the quality of experience.

Alternatively, it may be held that I misunderstand McDowell when I accuse him of a certain conservatism. Privy to just such an objection, he writes, ‘Even a thought that transforms a tradition must be rooted in the tradition that it transforms’ (MW, p. 187). Here, McDowell mistakes ‘transformation’ with ‘rootedness’. Consequently, he fails to appreciate the potentially transformative nature of a reflective act: reflection must begin in and arise out of a tradition but, insofar as it is new, it may be unintelligible to that tradition (certainly not *immediately* intelligible to that tradition *as it is*) as it pursues its line of thought. For one thing, if reflection is to have any critical edge, it proceeds by negating that from whence it came. For another, while its content is indeed the same elements given it by tradition, reflection aims to reconfigure the arrangement of those elements in hitherto unimaginable ways. And so, by conflating the source of reflection with its movement (or, rather, by conflating determinacy with intelligibility) and by submitting the novelty of thought to the previous standards provided by tradition, McDowell unwittingly commits himself to a certain conservatism. In this way, his claim that we have a standing obligation to reflect cannot measure up to the essence of reflection which in negating tradition also negates its standards.

The problem which I have exploited between tradition and reason rests upon some questionable assumptions underlying McDowell’s account of experience. In the first place, McDowell presupposes that, all else being equal, mental harmony—to wit, *ataraxia*, or ‘freedom from disturbance and anxiety’—is better than mental disharmony.<sup>27</sup> In the second place, McDowell unjustifiably privileges the familiar aspects of entities over the unfamiliar aspects of those very same entities. Lastly, McDowell sees fit to base his account of perceptual experience on conceptual possession rather than on conceptual adjustment, extension, and acquisition. Together, these assumptions point

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27. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 102. In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, Nussbaum lays out her cognitive theory of emotions based on Stoical philosophy.

in the direction of common sense. Of course, it is not *prima facie* problematic that a deflationary approach whose aim is to ‘exorcise the philosophical tradition’ is in any way objectionable (though I do make clear my reservations about this approach below). This is so because the aim of philosophical relief may be easily separated out from the object under consideration—here, experience. But in McDowell one can observe an elective affinity between the freedom from philosophical anxiety and the freedom of *common sense* realism for in common sense what remains uppermost is the mind’s tranquil engagement with a world that is familiar to it and that is immediately amenable to its conceptions. This orientation towards *ataraxia*, familiarity, and conceptual possession has its source in the identification of a mind-world coupling with an *immediate* mind-world unity: whereas the mind-world coupling bears witness to the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition which rightly argues on behalf of constitutive subjectivity (here understood as the necessity for the self’s minimal awareness of its contributions to an object of experience for it to count as an experience at all), the immediate mind-world unity is flatly contested by Hegel and rightly so.<sup>28</sup> In McDowell’s *Mind and World*, *Bildung* thus comes on the scene to secure this immediate mind-world unity. What Marx wrote of Epicurus therefore also applies to McDowell: ‘He is really interested in soothing the explaining subject.’<sup>29</sup>

#### THE DIALECTICAL CHARACTER OF EXPERIENCE

We can retain McDowell’s crucial insight into the contributions of our conceptual capacities in sense experience without going the way of common sense if we negate those aspects of his version of experience that are unsatisfactory and if we pose counter-theses in their stead. Negating the immediate mind-world unity gives rise to a consideration of the potential disunity between mind and world; negating his penchant for things familiar and for conceptual possession opens us to a certain kind of reflective judgment; negating mental harmony makes us privy to the mind’s inherent fallibility; and negating this set of assumptions illuminates the ineluctably temporal dimension of experience. In doing so, we are able to broaden our investigation into the meaning of unbounded naturalism.

##### 1. *The whole of the real is rational.*

The beauty of McDowell’s naturalism can be observed in his positing the immediacy of the mind-world relation. Just as the world is where the mind is, so the mind is where the world is. This gesture ensures that the abiding philosophical temptation to go in

28. I agree with Robert Pippin that poststructuralism (or what, after Manfred Frank, he prefers to call ‘neostucturalism’) has drawn the faulty inference from a critique of a certain *kind* of (Cartesian) subjectivity that *all* subjectivity is detrimental to sensuous life, sociality, the earth, and so forth. Robert Pippin, ‘On Not Being a Neostucturalist: Remarks on Manfred Frank and Romantic Subjectivity,’ *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 168–85.

29. Quoted in Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, MIT Press, p. 155.

search of totality and the siren song of bad infinity, heard in the ascendancy of the understanding and in the prohibition of reason's longing to ascend to the unconditioned, can be overcome. More broadly, the stirrings of unhappy consciousness, which emerge in discourses on the ineffability of God, on the inexpressibility of the poetic thing, and on the nonconceptual moment in some epistemologies, can be stilled for in McDowell something is always said, is *as* said, and the thing only shows itself, only takes on substance, in some mode of determination.

To be sure, McDowell shares with Hegel a mode of thinking that seeks to do away with all forms of unhappy consciousness. What both dispense with from the very beginning is any illusion that talk of 'remainder', 'excess', or 'trace' can suspend the power of a totalizing rationality. These points or moments of indeterminacy, as if by themselves they designated the marks of a genuine materialism, seek to hold open a 'minimal theology' that remains inaccessible to discursive thought.<sup>30</sup> This is evidenced very clearly in Lyotard's argument on the Kantian sublime about which Lyotard concludes: for consciousness, 'the absolute remains unrepresentable; no given is subsumable under its concept'.<sup>31</sup> In Lyotard's eyes, the utterly undetermined can only be registered in consciousness as a trace and as a sensation that is at once pleasurable and painful. Pleasure-pain spurs thought: in such a delirious, nonconceptual state, thought, 'critical thought included', is drawn 'to its limits' (LAS, p. x). Put in grossly economic terms, Lyotard's 'bargain' is to give up on the absolute because it is inextricably tied, he believes, to autarkic subjectivity in exchange for the majesty of creativity and the harmony of the faculties.

To say that essence can appear but only in 'non-appearance' is just to say that it can 'never' (LAS, p. 152) appear so long as the cover concept obliterates particularity by governing all presentations as such. But instead of calling for a rethinking of cognition, Lyotard unwittingly remains within the parameters originally set by the 'transcendental' Kant and his ban on speculative reason even as he seeks—unsuccessfully in my opinion—to subvert them by threading reflective judgment *through* determinate judgment, by showing, that is, that the Kantian architectonic and the categories of the understanding rise up out of moments of reflective judgment. Even supposing that this is the case (and I have no reason to doubt Lyotard's suggestion that there is an inextirpable genetic dimension to Kant's creation of his system), Lyotard's assumption that reason can only be totalizing, can only ever be oriented by the One, needs to be called into question. For McDowell as for Hegel and *pace* Lyotard, there is nothing in principle ineffable (our tongues might be tied, but we still speak sensibly) or indeterminate (in *Mind and World*, even fine-grained objects are indicated in demonstratives). Alain Badiou argues convincingly that this poststructuralist gesture installs an 'archi-metaphysics' in the

30. See de Vries, *Minimal Theologies*. Badiou has equated inaccessibility with theology: see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 320. I seek to extricate Adorno's conception of nonidentity from this image of theology in 'Adorno and the Question of Metaphysics', *New Essays on the Frankfurt School*, Alfred J. Drake (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming.

31. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 152. Hereafter abbreviated LAS.



place of dogmatic or classical metaphysics.<sup>32</sup> Where the latter averred that the existence but not the substance of the undetermined could be determined, archi-metaphysics, in its critique of dogmatic metaphysics, affirms a higher-order indeterminacy whereby ‘the undetermined remains undetermined, the unknowable unknowable’ (MCM, p. 181). The poststructuralist’s critique of classical metaphysics, which fetishizes a certain image of rationality as essentially totalizing while hypostasizing the absolute by casting it off from discursive thought, can ultimately do no more than hold open the divide between a curtailed finitude and bad infinity in one breath even as it waits for a god to come and close the divide in the next.<sup>33</sup> This is no workable solution to the problems that disenchantment raises. If instead we emphatically insist that the *whole* of the real is rational, then we can come to a deeper appreciation of McDowell’s beautiful Wittgensteinian idea that all lies *open* to view.

2. *There are moments of disunity in the mind-world relation.*

Robert Pippin glosses Hegel’s ‘the real is rational’ thesis not as a claim about ‘the emanation of some divine mind’ but as a claim about intelligibility; in his apt epigram, ‘To be is to be intelligible’.<sup>34</sup> Now endorsing Hegel’s thesis does not commit me to drawing the inference that the mind is immediately unified with the world. Of course, it is true that because the whole of the real is rational, the world is fully determinable in principle. Granted, consciousness is in the first instance intentional consciousness directed at the object; but in its intentional activity, it is governed by norms or standards for ascertaining whether or not we have *done justice* to such an object. In certain cases, then, we may become aware of the fact that the object is inadequately determined and, in turn, we may feel obliged to make amends to the object. The tension that arises between an aspiration towards *right* determination and the inadequate realization of that aspiration makes plain just how an independent reality works on our thinking, just how it exerts itself in the feeling of mental disharmony that can only be explained in such a case by referring to the object’s profound impact upon us. To do justice to the object which we are always in the midst of cognizing in this respect requires giving a certain priority to the object itself.

Though off-stage in McDowell’s *Mind and World*, disunity is precisely what is at stake, I think, in his discussion of the problem of fine-grained objects. Proponents of nonconceptuality argue that the mind is incapable of accounting for the degree of detail as well as the shades and nuances of certain items. For them, our sense perceptions by

32. Alain Badiou, ‘Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics’, *Pli*, vol. 10, 2000, p. 181. Hereafter abbreviated MCM.

33. See Martin Heidegger, ‘Only a God Can Save Us: *Der Spiegel*’s Interview’, *Martin Heidegger: Philosophical and Political Writings*, trans. Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo, Manfred Stassen (ed.), New York, Continuum, 2003, p. 24-48. For a critique of this Heideggerian ‘poem-God’, see Alain Badiou, ‘Prologue: God is Dead’, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Madarasz (ed.), Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006, pp. 21-32.

34. Pippin, ‘The Kantian Aftermath’, p. 49.

themselves make us receptive to just this sensible content, this content-rich manifold. The disconnect between sensibility and understanding leads them to conclude that these faculties are two different ‘moments’ in a process that begins with an intuition of the sensuous manifold and ends when this intuition is brought under unifying concepts. Thus, they have no problem entertaining the thought that the sensuous manifold may remain unconceptualized during those incidents when sense impressions are especially rich and indeterminate. In answer to the nonconceptual camp, McDowell insists that conceptual capacities do come into play even in our experience of fine-grained objects. When we point to ‘*this shade*’, ‘*this texture*’, ‘*this flavor*’ and when we hold this shade of color, texture of fabric, or flavor in mind for some indefinite period of time after having made such an indication, we are drawing forth our conceptual capacities in meaningful ways (MW, p. 57). This act of indication and holding in mind are, he thinks, sufficient reasons for maintaining that even fine-grained sense experiences have a directly conceptual dimension. I agree: this sort of demonstrative clues us into just how determinate reality is for us. However, in his zeal to refute this claim to Givenness, McDowell fails to acknowledge the aspiration contained in his opponents’ position: an unrealized aspiration to do justice to the object; an intimation in these sorts of instances of the inadequacy of our concepts to identify and track the salient properties of the item; and a desire to make good, as it were, on our original promise.

According to Theodor Adorno, ‘To grant priority to the object means to make progressive qualitative distinctions between things which in themselves are indirect’.<sup>35</sup> What is registered for us in ‘*this shade*’ is not only the awareness that the object is fully determinate but also the ‘aesthetico-ethical’ demand that the object places upon us to ‘redress’ a certain wrong. Our feeling of displeasure cannot be dismissed. On my view, the ethical language in Adorno’s writing is not merely rhetorical flourish; rather, it expresses the motivating force that is necessary to ensure that the mind engages in critical reflection—inventorying its set of concepts, considering the failure of those concepts when pressed by this item, gauging the inadequacy of its conceptual framework in light of this object, groping towards an act of nomination, and thereby striving to revise its world conception so as to bring about a *provisional* harmony between mind and world.<sup>36</sup> That is, the ethical force coming on the heels of negativity supports an aesthetic dimension that is tied to the original aspiration of determination to ‘get things right’. Undoubtedly, this aesthetic dimension is at odds with a propensity towards familiarity, at odds, no less, with an indifferent habit of letting ‘*this shade*’ of the object fade. At its best, this act of nomination can transform both the mediated object and our self-relation to this object by providing a new name for our experience and by transforming our relation to the phenomenal world.

35. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 184 (translation modified slightly).

36. Consider one such example of the integral role that ethical vocabulary plays in Adorno’s dialectical writing: ‘While doing violence to the object of its syntheses, our thinking heeds the potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done’. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

3. *What inheres in thinking is its own fallibility.*

The conclusion which follows from the disunity of mind and world is that thinking is fallible. Of course, this is by no means a new idea and so undoubtedly comes as no surprise. Descartes was already alert to the ways that the intellect could be misled when it did not have a clear and distinct perception of an object. But he found himself committed to theodicy in order to demonstrate how a benevolent God could allow us to err when our sense perceptions were vague and indistinct.<sup>37</sup> In line with Descartes and the rationalist tradition, Kant held up apodictic certainty as the criterion for genuine knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Adorno, by contrast, contends that fallibility is not only a pervasive possibility that cannot be closed off in the various ways that Descartes and Kant thought were at once possible and necessary; it is also the sign of a change in our attitude towards and commitment to lived experience. In one of his lectures on metaphysics, he states that ‘all experiences which have to be lived, which are not mere copies or reconstructions of that which is in any case, contain the possibility of error, the possibility that they can completely miss the mark.’<sup>39</sup> Insofar as our concepts are rules which govern the manner in which objects may appear to us, they may be misapplied in our anticipation of likely appearances or, on the contrary, in our slow recognition of unlikely appearances.

*Prima facie*, these types of cases pose no problem for McDowell or for anyone endorsing the ‘suspension’ thesis: the belief that we can suspend our judgment before committing ourselves to the position that ‘things are indeed thus and so’. And, as McDowell insists, we need not resort to the metaphysical distinction of ‘appearing to be so’ and ‘actually being so’ in saying this. But what McDowell’s picture leaves out is just how certain anticipations, delayed recognitions, and particular misapplications may compel us to cast a critical light on the very standards we use in the passive actualization of our conceptual capacities in any perceptual experience. In certain circumstances, this means that we feel obliged to reflect upon the conceptual framework that has become ‘second nature’ to us, about the norms we apply in our determinations, and about the hold that *Bildung* has in the background of cognition and in the formation of our conceptual repertoire. Herein potentially lies the Hegelian ‘way of despair’ where being open to the features of the world (the priority of the object) implies being open to the potentially radical changes in our norms, concepts, and the object itself.<sup>40</sup> Taken to its limits, fallibility gives negativity free reign. In the final analysis, perceptual experience is best understood as the thematization of the ongoing relationship between conceptual possession and conceptual revision, between familiarity and its tragic unraveling or

37. See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 103-05.

38. See, e.g., Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Gary Hatfield (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

39. Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 141.

40. G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 49.

comic redemption.

4. *Determinations have an ineradicable temporal dimension.*

McDowell's relaxed naturalism, finally, suffers from its sheltering philosophy from the real conditions of its existence. The strength of McDowell's concept of *Bildung* is also its weakness: it makes us over into the sorts of social subjects who can make normative claims about reality, but it falls short, for reasons I brought up in the last section, of attesting to the modifications we experience in our reflections on our empirical judgments. Furthermore, in McDowell's writing, disenchantment takes on the aura of being a merely philosophical problem that can be exorcised by means of diagnosis and thought alone.<sup>41</sup> The synthesis of intuition and conception is had, the 'stoical' change in the habits of thought is achieved, only by grossly delimiting what empirical reality can be. As a result, this strategy spirits away the problem of how the mind can be reconciled with the modern natural and social world and so cannot account for how historical problems still reveal themselves in psychology, our social institutions, civil society, and the state.

If reason's aim is reconciliation with the real and if Adorno's analysis of how one species of reason—namely, instrumental reason—works by subsuming items under cover concepts, by treating things chiefly as means for achieving technical ends which thereby become means for greater ends, and by reducing quality to quantity is correct, then it follows that reason's aspiration has not been fully realized in objective spirit.<sup>42</sup> McDowell's therapeutic solution, which sets us on the path to uniting rationality with reality, nonetheless is faced with the contradictions in lived experience spelled out in alienation, reification, feelings of disembodiment, estrangement from ethical life, and the like. For on the one hand, the mind is indeed 'falsely' *united* with the world: insofar as the disenchantment of the world ultimately makes possible the exploitation of labor and resources, it also makes reification, the mind's disengagement from its creative potency, a lived reality. On the other hand, the mind is *disunited* from the world inasmuch as reason has yet to be actualized in social reality, resulting in nihilism, as much a mental

41. J.M. Bernstein makes a similar, Hegelian-inspired objection in 'Re-enchanting Nature', pp. 217-45. On my claim that McDowell's therapy has stoical resonances, cf., e.g., Epictetes, *Handbook of Epictetes*, trans. Nicholas White, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1983, p. 13: "What upsets people is not the things themselves but their judgments about the things."

42. What I am seeking to bring to light here is how the *theoretical* account of dialectical reason I have sketched above 'bumps heads' with instrumental reason. Of course, short of any demonstration that instrumental reason functions in the way that I assert and short of any further demonstration that the reason I defend has not fully realized itself in objective spirit (and clearly I provide no such demonstrations in this paper), this claim can at best be seen as a provocation. For arguments in support of the irrational turn in reason in the context of modernity, see, e.g., Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002; Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; and J.M. Bernstein, 'Disenchantment: The Skepticism of Enlightened Reason', *Adorno*, pp. 75-135.

state as a cultural condition arising from the contradiction between our highest values and lived experience and the subsequent collapse of those values.

Thus, unless disenchantment is seen in the light of our current epoch rather than in the light solely of unhealthy patterns of thought, philosophy will continue to be too 'idealistic' in spirit. The way out of this 'bad' idealism is to emphasize the *relative* autonomy of philosophy—the exogamous moment in philosophy—with respect to modernity. Hegel's famous dictum that 'philosophy is its time comprehended in thought' foregrounds the two-fold character of time: we live in the time of modernity defined in part by the 'disappearance of the medieval cosmos', self-assertion construed chiefly in terms of instrumental reason, the rise of atomism, and so on, a time that is not entirely of our making, and the rhythm of our lives can only be felt in time, that is, can only be felt in the ongoing transformation of ourselves as social subjects in our tragic experiences of the disenchanted natural and social world.<sup>43</sup> Hence, if experience in the sense above is the thematization of the ongoing relation between conceptual possession and conceptual revision, then in a second sense not unrelated to the first it is the consciousness of our difficult entanglement in sociality. To fill out a more robust conception of *Bildung*, we would have to see our intellectual and moral development in terms of the modulations of, the confrontations with, and the contradictions between these two notions of time expressed in experience.

We are now in a position to enumerate the principal philosophical and historical features of unbounded naturalism. Clearly discernible is its commitment to realism (and, by implication, its criticism of subjectivism and unhappy consciousness); its nimble dialectical operations (see theses 1-3) which arise out of the disenchanted picture of nature, which deftly respond to the 'anomalies' in nature and to the qualitative moments in the object, and which strive towards a more satisfying conception of experience; and its sustained reflection on the formation and development of *Bildung* under the conditions set forth by modernity. In order for philosophy to be successful in placing the mind within the natural, it must, I have been urging, bring together narrow phenomenological considerations with broader social and historical inquiries. This paper, itself still too 'idealistic', does no more than point in this direction.

Andrew Taggart  
University of Wisconsin  
USA

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43. G.W.F. Hegel, Preface, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 11. On the self-assertion of reason as a response to the disappearance of the cosmos at the end of the medieval period, see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 145-179.

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