

McDowell and Idealism

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ABSTRACT *John McDowell espouses a certain conception of the thinking subject: as a living, embodied, finite being, with a capacity for experience that can take in the world, and stand in relations of warrant to subjects' beliefs. McDowell presents this conception of the subject as requiring a related conception of the world: as not located outside the conceptual sphere. In this latter conception, idealism and common-sense realism are supposed to coincide. But I suggest that McDowell's conception of the subject scuppers this intended coincidence. The upshot is a dilemma: McDowell can retain his conception of the subject, but lose the coincidence; or he keep the coincidence, but abandon his conception of the subject.*

1.

In his paper "Wittgenstein and Idealism",¹ Bernard Williams tells us that Wittgenstein does not believe in "the existence of a knowing self in the world", but does believe "in the existence of another metaphysical or philosophical self, which is 'the limit of the world, not a part of it'".² Williams then inserts a quotation from the *Tractatus*.

Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are strictly carried through, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.³

I want to focus upon two of the ideas in play here: the coincidence of solipsism and realism, and the role of the metaphysical subject in securing this coincidence. Williams takes these ideas to be present in both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Something close to the first also appears to be endorsed by a contemporary philosopher who claims to write under Wittgenstein's influence: John McDowell.

In *Mind and World*, and recent papers, McDowell seeks to attain a position that he describes as *both* "consistent idealism"⁴ and "common-sense realism".⁵ The parallel with the first of the above ideas is striking. Equally striking is McDowell's apparent rejection of the second. In what is surely an allusion to the idea of a metaphysical (or transcendental) subject, McDowell insists that the self must not "shrink to a locus of pure thought"⁶ as the author of the *Tractatus* seems to suppose, and must instead be "the ordinary self"⁷, a "bodily presence *in the world*" (my emphasis).⁸ It seems as if McDowell wants the first of Wittgenstein's ideas without the second.

McDowell thinks he needs the first idea in order to establish "our entitlement to conceive subjective [states] as possessing objective purport"⁹ – that is to say, as directed, and so answerable, to the one and only world. Establishing this entitlement is (what he takes to be) the central concern of transcendental philosophy. But he thinks this first idea is undermined by a certain account of the relation between mind and world, which he calls a "sideways-on" account, and takes transcendental idealism to exemplify.

In this paper, I want to suggest that there is something in McDowell's own account that undermines Wittgenstein's first idea. This "something" is his rejection of Wittgenstein's second idea: his conception of the subject as "a bodily presence in the world" rather than "a mere point of view". This conception has its roots in McDowell's

so-called “transcendental empiricism”¹⁰, itself an aspect of McDowell’s *naturalism*.

Running with that thought, we might put my suggestion as the slogan: “in McDowell’s hands, *transcendental philosophy and naturalism do not mix*” – even if that naturalism is “liberal”, or “enchanted”.

What follows will try to make good on these abstracted remarks. §2 introduces McDowell’s transcendental empiricism, and explores its relation to his naturalism; §3 presents the version of the realism/idealism coincidence that McDowell develops in *Mind and World*, and considers its significance for his transcendental project; §4 shows how his naturalism generates a problem for this envisaged coincidence; §5 suggests that this problem not only persists in but is also exacerbated by the position McDowell develops in some recent papers;¹¹ and §6 and §7 conclude.

2.

“Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind”.¹²

McDowell elaborates the first part of Kant’s dictum in two stages. First,

Thoughts without content – which would not really be thoughts at all – would be a play of concepts without any connection with intuition, that is, bits of experiential intake. It is their connection with experiential intake that supplies the content ... that thoughts would otherwise lack.¹³

Second, the relevant connection must be a species of rational relationship: the subject's "experiential intake" must be such as to provide her with reasons for thinking as she does. It is worth noting that "experiential intake" is *what* a subject experiences when she takes in how things are; in the visual case, for instance, it is those aspects of the world that the subject *sees*.

This first part is McDowell's transcendental empiricism, so-called because it gives "a transcendental role to sensory consciousness",¹⁴ by making appropriate sensory experience a condition of the possibility of subjective states with "objective purport". It generates a certain conception of the thinking subject: as a subject capable of enjoying experiences whose "intake" is such as to provide her with reasons for thought.

McDowell is well aware that transcendental empiricism can generate anxieties. He writes:

Suppose we are tracing the ground, the justification, for a ... judgement. [When] we have exhausted all the available moves within the space of concepts, all the available moves from one conceptually organised item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience.¹⁵

Here McDowell is describing a temptation to think that, to supply the needed justification, "experiential intake" must lie outside "the space of concepts". The ostensible problem is that "we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except as relations *within* the space of concepts"¹⁶ (my

emphasis). And this is supposed to set the dialectical pendulum swinging: between an attempt to let the space of reasons extend beyond the space of concepts (the so-called Myth of the Given), and a rejection of transcendental empiricism's rational connection between thought and "intake", in favour of a merely causal connection (as in Davidson's coherentism).¹⁷

McDowell's way with this anxiety is by now very familiar: we should conceive "what Kant calls '[sensible] intuition'" – the experience with "intake" that thinking subjects enjoy – as "a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content".¹⁸ As he sometimes puts it, we should think of intuitions as "actualisations of conceptual capacities in sensory consciousness".¹⁹ That is how he elaborates the second part of Kant's dictum.

But I think there is a more serious problem with transcendental empiricism, which stems from its conception of the thinking subject.

McDowell insists that we understand "experiential intake" as consisting in "sensory impressions, impacts of the world on [the] senses"²⁰; or, as he also sometimes puts it, "impact[s] of external reality on one's sensibility".²¹ This is firmly in line with mainstream philosophical thinking about perception.²² And it serves to picture the experiencing subject as capable of being causally affected by (aspects of) this reality.

It is very natural to think that any subject capable of being so affected must be a "bodily presence in the world". The following passage suggests that McDowell endorses a version of this thought.

[The] idea of a series of states or occurrences in which conceptual capacities are implicated in sensibility – or, more generally, the idea of a subjectively continuous series of exercises of conceptual capacities of any kind, that is, the idea of a subjectively continuous series of “representations”, as Kant would say – is just the idea of a singled out tract of a life. The idea of [such a series] could no more stand alone, independent of the idea of a living thing in whose life these events occur, than could the idea of a series of digestive events with its appropriate kind of continuity.²³

The passage is naturally read as saying something about the *nature* of subjects that possess conceptual capacities – namely, that they are “living thing[s]”, and so (surely) finite, bodily presences in the world (or collections of such presences).²⁴ If the idea of the relevant series just *is* the idea of a series of goings-on in the life of such a thing, it is not possible to conceive of a subject of such a series who is not such a thing. And if that is not possible, there surely could not *be* a subject who is not such a thing.

It may seem that another reading is possible. On this reading, McDowell is claiming that in order to grasp the idea of a series of conceptual exercises we need the idea of a series of goings-on in the life of a thing, because we must, in the first instance, understand the former series as a series of the latter sort, even though, once we have this grasp, we are not prevented from detaching the ideas, and proceeding to understand the former series in some other way. But this reading cannot be right. If – as McDowell says – the idea of a conceptual series just *is* the idea of “a singled out tract of a life”, there cannot be two (potentially detachable) ideas here, as the other reading requires, but a

single idea, expressed in two different ways. (We will see in §6 that the conception of the subject that McDowell develops in later papers provides further support for my reading.)

Read in the way I suggest, the passage displays the respect in which McDowell is a naturalist. Of course, McDowell thinks there are important differences between a series of conceptual exercises and a series of digestive events. Registering these differences, and acquiescing in the seemingly irreducible characteristics of the former – acknowledging that there is such a thing as “second nature”, as he sometimes puts it – is what makes McDowell’s naturalism liberal, or “enchanted”.²⁵ But what makes it *naturalism* is its insistence that any subject of the former series *must* be a “living thing”, a “finite, embodied”²⁶ presence in the world of a certain kind.

It is against the background of transcendental empiricism, and its associated naturalistic conception of the subject, that McDowell attempts to secure a coincidence between idealism and realism.

3.

McDowell understands intuitions as actualisations of conceptual capacities – occurrences with thinkable, conceptual content – that reach right out to the world. McDowell has always taken Kant to preserve this understanding; as McDowell puts it, “experience [takes in], through impacts on the senses, elements in a reality that is precisely not outside the sphere of thinkable content.”²⁷ But, in *Mind and World*, McDowell claims that Kant distorted this point by introducing a “transcendental story”, according to which

we are also susceptible to the impact of “a supersensible reality, a reality that is supposed to be independent of our conceptual activity in a stronger sense than any that fits the ordinary empirical world”.²⁸ The sense that fits the latter is elaborated in the following now familiar passage:

[There] is no ontological gap between ... the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. [One can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that very same thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case.] So since the world is everything that is the case ... there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought.²⁹

As McDowell sometimes puts it, the facts that compose the “ordinary empirical world” just *are* thoughts – thinkable contents – that are the case. Here the “ordinary empirical world” is “made up of the sort of thing one can think” – in the “*think that*” mode – and the sense in which it is independent of “our conceptual activity” is fully captured by the idea that one’s thoughts can be false (it may be that what one thinks is not the case). In this light, the stronger sense of independence, which fits the supersensible reality, seems to be captured by the idea that this reality is not “made up of the sort of thing one can think” (in the “think that” mode). And, because this sense is supposed to capture the way in which this reality is independent of *our* conceptual activity, it seems equally true to say that it is not made up of the sort of thing that *we* can think.

McDowell slides freely from talk of the supersensible as lying outside the sphere of *our* conceptual activity, to talk of it as lying outside “*the* space of concepts”, and “outside a boundary that encloses *the* conceptual sphere” (my emphasis).³⁰ The first person plural surreptitiously vanishes; to paraphrase Jonathan Lear, we have a case of the disappearing “our”.³¹ McDowell writes as if there is no difference between what is thinkable by us, and what is thinkable *per se*. Of course, in the context of McDowell’s naturalism, there is no difference between the latter and what is thinkable by thinking subjects naturalistically conceived. So, I suggest that we understand McDowell’s use of the first person plural in the widest sense that his naturalism will allow: “our conceptual powers” simply means the conceptual powers of embodied, living, finite subjects with a capacity for appropriate sensible intuition.

We might wonder why a reality possessed of the stronger independence should merit the title “*supersensible*”, as opposed simply to (something like) “super-the-conceptual-sphere” It is not as if McDowell thinks conceptual powers reach only so far as the objects of sensible intuition; he thinks thought can be “carried to its object, so to speak, by theory”.³² The reason, I think, is that transcendental idealism is a “peculiar version” of a “sideways-on view”, which sees “the space of concepts as circumscribed and something ... outside its outer boundary”.³³ In a less peculiar version of this view, “the ordinary empirical world” is placed outside: it does not break up into thinkable elements, but might nevertheless be “simply received” in experience. In the transcendental idealist version, the reality placed outside not only fails to break up into thinkable items, but also cannot be so received.

This leaves us with a picture in which there are two different kinds of reality. There is an “ordinary empirical world”, which breaks up into facts, some of which “are essentially capable of impressing themselves on perceivers [in intuition]”, and all of which “are essentially capable of being embraced in thought”.³⁴ And there is also a “supersensible reality”, which does not break up into facts that are perceivable or so embraceable. This picture lies at the heart of transcendental idealism, as McDowell understood it in *Mind and World*, and he rejects it on the following familiar ground. Once the supersensible is in the picture, “its radical independence of our thinking tends to present itself as no more than the independence any genuine reality must have”, and “the empirical world’s claim to independence comes to seem fraudulent by comparison”.³⁵ It comes to seem as if the title of the world must be awarded, not to the reality that is essentially thinkable, but to the supersensible reality.

This scuppers McDowell’s intended picture. Actualisations of conceptual capacities are supposed to reach right out to the world itself. When a subject has the fact she sees that *p* as her reason for judging, she is in a state (of seeing) whose content *is* “an aspect of the layout of the world”.³⁶ She need not point beyond the conceptual sphere to display her judgement as subject to a worldly rational constraint; she need only register her being in an experiential state whose “conceptual content” is “how things are”.³⁷ But once transcendental idealism is in the picture, *no* conceptual content can be “an aspect of the layout of the world”, for the world is supersensible. The world cannot bear rationally on thought by figuring in experience.

The dire consequences are easy to see. What McDowell calls “experiential intake” just is the world, as it figures in experience. Once transcendental idealism is in

the picture, there is no such intake for thoughts to bear the appropriate connection. But thoughts without such connection are “thoughts without content – [and so] not really ... thoughts at all”. The combination of transcendental idealism and transcendental empiricism generates a kind of transcendental scepticism. It forces upon us the inexpressible conclusion: there are no thoughts.

McDowell response is predictable: “we must discard the supersensible”, just as “Kant’s successors” insisted, and “be left with a picture in which reality is not located outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual”.³⁸ McDowell insists that “Kant’s successors” took the result to be central to “authentic idealism”. But he also regards it as a picture that does not “slight the independence of reality”, and therefore is “precisely protective” of “commonsense”.³⁹ At least in this respect, authentic idealism and common-sense realism are supposed to coincide.

The upshot is clear: the world is everything that is the case; and anything that is the case is thinkable. Given McDowell’s naturalism, we are entitled to add: thinkable by embodied, living, beings of a certain sort. And *this* is where the trouble begins.

4.

Thomas Nagel describes “a form of idealism” that he thinks “is held by many contemporary philosophers”,⁴⁰ and which is best understood by contrast with a form of realism that claims the following.

[What] there is and what we, in virtue of our nature, can think about are different things, and the latter may be smaller than the former. ... There are some things that we cannot now conceive but may yet come to understand; and there are probably still others that we lack the capacity to conceive not merely because we are at too early a stage of historical development, but because of the kind of beings we are.⁴¹

Nagel is not claiming that some of the things we find positively inconceivable might be possible; square circles, for instance. He is concerned with aspects of reality that are “negatively inconceivable to us in the sense that we have and can have no conception of them”.⁴² His claim seems to be that there may be aspects of reality of which we cannot form any conception – not because of contingent features of our historical development, but because of essential features of who we are.

Put like that, Nagel seems to be caught in paradox: surely when we say there may be aspects of reality of which we can form no conception we thereby express a conception of these aspects?⁴³ But McDowell (inadvertently) shows us a way to put Nagel’s point without paradox: we can make sense of the idea of facts that we cannot think in the ‘think that’ mode. We can think *of* these facts as facts we cannot think, in that mode; we can even think *that* they are facts we cannot think, in that mode; what we cannot do is *think* them, in that mode. We might say: we can *refer* to them by means of the description “facts we cannot think, in the ‘think that’ mode”, but we cannot *express* them. This is not because *they* lack propositional articulation, but because *we* are unable to get our minds around them in that distinctive way.

When Nagel speaks of us, he means: human beings. But his point surely holds for finite beings of any kind. Once again, McDowell provides the resources to make this point.

[The] innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them ... [There] are limits on the courses reflection can intelligibly take, which come out in limits on what can be intelligible in the way of statements that purport to express part of such reflection. [One] source of these limits on intelligibility is first nature.⁴⁴

Human beings have a distinctive nature, which they and only they possess, and which enables, and potentially limits, the second-natural capacities of any possible human being. It ensures that human beings are constitutionally capable of thinking certain facts (in the “think that” mode); but it might also ensure that they are constitutionally incapable of thinking certain others. To insist on a necessary equivalence between what human beings are constitutionally capable of thinking and what is thinkable *per se* would be to insist that, in fact, human nature *cannot* ensure this.

McDowell’s naturalism does not say there is *this* equivalence. But it does seem to say that there is a necessary equivalence between what embodied, living, finite beings (of the relevant sort) are capable of thinking, and what is thinkable *per se*. And it seems to say this because – if the natural reading in §2 is right – it says that thinking subjects are essentially embodied, living, finite beings. But surely embodied, living, finite beings have a distinctive nature, which they and only they possess, and which enables, and

might also limit, the second-natural capacities of any possible such being? Surely it might ensure that such beings are constitutionally incapable of thinking certain facts (in the “think that” mode)?

There are various ways of motivating this apparent possibility. Nagel points to the example of “beings who (*sic*) constitutionally lack the capacity to conceive of some of the things that others know about”, and refers to these beings as having “a permanent mental age of nine”.⁴⁵ He then asks us to imagine a higher being, or “higher beings, related to us [embodied, living, finite beings] as we are related to the nine-year olds, and capable of understanding aspects of the world that are beyond our comprehension”.⁴⁶ What we can truly say of the “nine-year olds” – that there are some facts they are constitutionally unable to express – this being or beings can say truly of us. Surely we cannot rule out the possibility of such truths?

Another way of motivating the possibility is by means of the idea of elusive objects – objects that embodied, living, finite thinkers are constitutionally incapable of singling out individually in thought. We can think of them as elusive objects; but we cannot think of them with any greater degree of specificity, and cannot think certain – perhaps a great number of – facts that concern such objects. This is because the “first nature” of us embodied, living, finite beings is such as to preclude the kind of interaction with these objects that would be required for such beings to think about them in any more specific ways. And McDowell seems to grant that we must bear appropriate causal relations to the objects of which we are capable of forming such thoughts.

[Ascription] of the belief that p [is] constrained by a principle on the following lines: one cannot intelligibly regard a person⁴⁷ as having a belief about a particular concrete object if one cannot see him as having been exposed to the causal influence of that object, in ways suitable for the acquisition of information (or misinformation) about it.⁴⁸

So, the worry is that there *might* be something about the nature of embodied beings that renders them incapable of being “exposed to the causal influence” of certain objects in the relevant necessary ways. Surely this is a possibility that we cannot deny?

If these motivations point to a genuine possibility, the upshot is clear: there may be some thoughts that embodied thinkers are incapable of thinking. Indeed, there may be some facts – some thoughts that are the case – of which such thinkers are similarly incapable.⁴⁹ And McDowell cannot accept this upshot. It is a truism that all thoughts must be thinkable by thinking subjects. Given McDowell’s naturalism, this is just to say that all thoughts must be thinkable by embodied subjects (of a certain kind). But, according to the motivations, this is not so: there may be thoughts that such subjects cannot think. If this is right, then in order to retain his transcendental empiricism – and associated naturalistic conception of the subject – McDowell needs to claim that there cannot be such thoughts.

Of course, if McDowell had provided us with good reason to endorse his naturalistic conception of the subject, the above motivations for Nagel’s possibility would not have been sufficient to cast doubt on the truth of this conception, because we would have had reason to rule out Nagel’s possibility. To cast the doubt, and thereby argue

against McDowell, we would also have had to reject this reason. But we do not *actually* have to do this, because McDowell provides no such reason. Indeed, he makes a virtue out of not doing so.

I take it to be intuitively obvious – if only philosophy did not distort our thinking – that empiricists are right [to think that] if we cannot see how experience could stand in relations of warrant to empirical belief, we put at risk our entitlement to the very idea of ... objective content. ... Reasons are called for if one wants to reject [this view], not if one accepts it.⁵⁰

Here the empiricists' conditional expresses McDowell's transcendental empiricism, of which his naturalism is a concomitant.

The point I am making against McDowell could be put less prosaically. McDowell appears to think there is a necessary equivalence between what can be thought, and what can be thought by embodied subjects of a certain kind. He seems to think the bounds of sense, and thereby the bounds of reality, are fixed by the "first nature" of embodied subjects. That is to deny Nagel's possibility. It is to attempt to cut reality down to the size of our concepts. And no philosophy that tries to do *that* can be counted a form of realism.

McDowell ought to have a response to this charge. And he does.

People sometimes object to positions like the one I have been urging on the ground that they embody an arrogant anthropocentrism, a baseless confidence that the

world is completely within the reach of our powers of thinking. But an accusation of arrogance would not stick against the position I am recommending. ... Ensuring that empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding. It requires patience and something like humility. There is no guarantee that the world is completely in reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development.⁵¹

But the Nagel-inspired charge is that McDowell pictures the world as “completely in reach of a system of concept and conceptions” that embodied subjects are constitutionally capable of possessing, and thereby denies a possibility. Pointing out that he does not limit the relevant system to a particular historical moment does not address this charge.

Perhaps McDowell has another response. He has spoken approvingly of Davidson’s paper “On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” as “justifying a refusal to make sense of a certain supposed idea, the idea of a repertoire that is meaning-involving, and so intelligible, but not intelligible to us”.⁵² Nagel’s possibility might be put as that of an intelligible conceptual repertoire that living, embodied, finite thinkers are constitutionally unable to find intelligible. Assuming “us” means what I have been taking it to mean, it looks as if McDowell thinks Davidson’s paper will ground the claim that we cannot so much as make sense of Nagel’s possibility. And that seems to be exactly what he needs.

This is not the place to consider whether Davidson’s paper succeeds in justifying this refusal.⁵³ I simply note that, although McDowell seems to have identified what needs to be done, he has not done anything to show that the paper succeeds in doing it.

And he needs to do this, not least because the general philosophical consensus is that the paper does not succeed.⁵⁴

The upshot is that McDowell has not responded adequately to the Nagel-inspired charge, and it is not clear how he could do so. At present, the charge stands: there is a problem with counting as a form of realism a philosophical outlook that embraces *both* a naturalistic conception of the thinking subject, *and* a picture of the world as located within the conceptual sphere, because it seems to deny a possibility that must not be ruled out by any realist outlook. It is McDowell's transcendental empiricism, and associated naturalistic conception of the subject that generates this apparent denial, and thereby seems to scupper the prospect of displaying a coincidence between "consistent idealism" and realism.

Put like that, a natural remedy suggests itself: we should abandon this conception of the subject.

This does not mean we must deny that embodied, living beings are capable of thought. Rather, we must insist that nothing in the nature of thinking subjects is such as to place any limitations upon their conceptual powers. Particular thinkers may suffer from contingent limitations, stemming from contingent features such as their embodiment, and their humanity; but none of these limitations can flow from their nature as thinkers.

What, then, can we say about the nature of the thinking subject? McDowell helps to show the way here.

[We] let the judging subject ... shrink to a locus of pure thought, while the fact that judging is a human activity fades into insignificance.⁵⁵

As we might put it: when we characterise the essence of the thinking subject, we let fade into insignificance the fact that judging is an activity of embodied, living, finite beings. The only thing we can say about this essence is: it is the essence of the thinking subject. We thereby reject a naturalistic conception of the subject, and are left with the idea of a metaphysical, or transcendental, self; “the bare thought of a subject that must be presupposed as a condition of thinking”.⁵⁶

Of course, we saw in §2 that transcendental empiricism implies a naturalistic conception of the thinking subject. So, it is, finally, hard to see how McDowell can secure the realism/ idealism coincidence without abandoning his transcendental empiricism.

5.

The bulk of my argument against McDowell is complete. But so as to highlight the seriousness of the problem I have raised, I want to end by considering some of McDowell's recent writings on Kant and Hegel, and suggesting that the problem is not merely present but exacerbated in this later work. What we will see is that McDowell attempts to treat the conditions of human sensibility as the conditions of any sensibility whatsoever, and in so doing pictures the thinking subject as not only essentially living,

embodied, and finite, but also essentially human – and thereby prone to yet further limitations in conceptual power.

In recent writings, McDowell makes it clear that he has changed his mind about transcendental idealism. He still thinks transcendental idealism usurps the prospect of a realism/idealism coincidence, which we need to go the way of “Kant’s successors” to secure. But otherwise his account has undergone a radical shift.

McDowell’s central criticism of his own earlier work is that it failed to take the measure of Kant’s talk of “things as objects of experience, and those same things as things in themselves”.⁵⁷ He now insists that Kant conceives things as they are given to our senses as (nothing less than) things in themselves; with the caveat that to describe such things as “things as they are given to our senses” is to describe them in terms of the relation they bear to our sensibility. He thinks Kant struggled to retain this conception of things in themselves (or things themselves; McDowell sometimes drops the “in”) but, finally, lost it, because of his transcendental idealism.

As is well-known, Kant’s first Critique has a certain distinctive organisation: it begins with the Transcendental Aesthetic, whose concern is our intuition, and its pure sensible forms, and then proceeds to the Transcendental Analytic, whose topic is the understanding in general, and the pure concepts of such in particular. According to McDowell, this way of organising matters makes “it look as if there are two independent sets of conditions [those of our sensibility and those of the understanding], as if the [forms of our sensible intuition] are independent of the synthetic powers of the understanding”.⁵⁸

This generates a threat. Conditions for objects to conform to the understanding are subjective conditions, in the sense that they are requirements of the thinking subject. One such condition is that objects figure in items with a certain kind of unity and shape: namely, in thinkable contents to the effect: that things are thus and so. But it looks as if this condition is something over and above the conditions for objects to be given to our senses. And, given how Kant conceives of objects as they are so given, it looks as if getting objects themselves to figure in thought involves the imposition of this subjective condition onto a reality that does not conform to it. This reality is not supersensible, for it can be given to our senses. But it is outside the space of conceptually organised items. So, the threat is that no thought about reality can adequately reflect reality, for the very conceptual unity that makes thought *thought* ensures that any thought about reality must involve an element of distortion.

According to McDowell,

Kant rewrites the Transcendental Deduction [in the second edition] in a way that seems designed to avert this threat. The essential move is to correct the impression that the Aesthetic offers independent conditions for objects to be able to be given to our senses.⁵⁹

It looks as if McDowell's Kant is aware of the dangers of a sideways-on view that places empirical reality beyond the space of concepts, and to this end seeks to establish that subjective conditions, such as the shape and unity of thought, are conditions for objects to be in conformity to the understanding, *and* conditions for objects to be given to our

senses. As McDowell puts it, Kant aims to establish an “equipoise between subjective and objective [through an] idea of conditions that are subjective and objective together”. Conditions of the understanding are subjective conditions, because they are requirements of the thinking subject; but they are also objective conditions, because they are requirements for objects to be given to our senses, and thereby – given how Kant ostensibly understands these objects – requirements that hold of things in themselves. That is supposed to be very position that McDowell advocated in *Mind and World* (and which I described in §2 & §3 of this paper). Figuring in items with conceptual content is both a condition for objects to conform to the understanding, and a condition for those same objects to be given to our senses.

McDowell’s new Kant is aware of the dangers of a sideways-on viewpoint, and seeks to remove them, through the equipoise. But (according to McDowell) he does not quite succeed in attaining the equipoise, despite his best efforts; and the culprit, once again, is transcendental idealism.

When I spoke of “things as they are given to *our* senses”, I assumed the first personal plural would embrace any possible subject with a capacity for sensible intuition. But McDowell’s Kant does not understand the plural in this way. When he speaks of our sensibility, he means specifically *human* sensibility, which partakes of a specific kind of form. The form is spatial and temporal, and correlated with the “formal intuitions”⁶⁰ space and time. As objects, these formal intuitions conform to the requirements of the understanding. But they are also peculiarly *our* formal intuitions; they are not the formal intuitions correlated with any sensibility whatsoever. As McDowell puts it, “sensibility

as such does not have to be spatially and temporally formed”.⁶¹ There may be differently formed sensibilities, which unite their manifolds into different formal unities.

According to the equipoise, conditions of the understanding just *are* conditions of our sensibility. There is supposed to be but one set of conditions, which can be viewed as both conditions of our sensibility, and conditions of the understanding. But the fact our human sensibility has a spatial and temporal form is not a condition laid down by the understanding; it is simply a condition of our human sensibility. It is not, therefore, a condition for objects to be thinkable *per se*, but merely a condition for objects to be given to (and so thinkable by) us. So, there is at least one condition of our sensibility that is not a condition of the understanding. That idea is part of what McDowell now understands by ‘transcendental idealism’. And it “unbalances” the equipoise. There is something on the side of our sensibility that is not present on the side of the understanding.

McDowell expresses the other part of transcendental idealism as follows.

Kant contrives to represent the combination of manifolds into the formal intuitions, space and time, as a case of the kind of unity that is not intelligible except in the context of the freedom of judgement. But he depicts the fact that it is space and time in particular that are the formal intuitions answering to the form of our sensibility as a mere peculiarity of our sensibility, not an attunement of it to the way things anyway are.⁶²

It is not clear to me whether or not McDowell thinks this depiction merely accompanies, or follows as a consequence of, the idea that “sensibility as such is not spatially and

temporally formed”. But it is clear that the equipoise is incompatible with transcendental idealism (so understood).

To regain the equipoise, McDowell insists that the conditions of our human sensibility must be (nothing less than) the conditions of sensibility as such. McDowell is not denying that the form of human sensibility is spatial and temporal. He is rather claiming that the spatial and temporal form of our human sensibility is the form of sensibility as such – the only form that any sensibility can possess.

Even though *Mind and World* was also committed to the equipoise, it is consistent with everything *it* says that we may fill the content of the idea of the thinking subject with no more than the idea of a sensible, and so embodied, subject (of an appropriate sort). McDowell’s recent writings suggest that we need to fill that content with a more determinate idea: that of a subject with a spatially and temporally formed sensibility. Conditions of the understanding apply to any possible subject; so if having a sensibility with a spatial-temporal form is one such condition, the sensibility of any possible subject must be so formed. Given his conception of reality as embraceable in thought, therefore, it now looks as if reality must be embraceable in the thought of subjects so constituted.

By recommending that we understand the thinking subject in this way, McDowell continues to leave space for the Nagel-inspired charge. Indeed, he seems to leave even more space, for he requires subjects to have a complexity that is sufficient, not simply for sensibility, but for sensibility of a determinate kind. Surely there could be tracts of reality that lie outside the reach of any “system of concepts and conceptions” that *such* beings are capable of possessing? Kant was happy to allow for the possibility of thoughts not graspable by such beings, and only graspable by subjects with differently formed

sensibilities. McDowell has done nothing to rule this apparent possibility out, and if it genuine the problem raised in §4 arises once again: McDowell is trying to cut reality down, so that it fits our concepts.

6.

The problem might be expressed in terms of the equipoise.

The equipoise demands that subjective conditions – such as the shape and unity of thought – “are simultaneously and equally” conditions on reality itself. If there is to be this equipoise between reality and the conceptual powers of thinking subjects, there cannot be anything in thinking subjects that is such as to place even one fact beyond their conceptual reach. But once the thinking subject is conceived as sensible, and embodied, and living, and finite, and possessed of the complexity required for a spatially and temporally formed sensibility, it starts to look as if there *might* be such a thing. It starts to look as if the equipoise has been unbalanced and that, to regain it, we must expel these properties from the essence of the subject.

Another way to put the point is to say that conditions of sensibility cannot be amongst the relevant subjective conditions. Transcendental empiricism insists that they are, and by that route comes to endorse a naturalistic conception of the subject. Once we have given up these conditions, and any other conditions that could unbalance the equipoise, we will have abandoned this conception. This will let us rebut Nagel’s charge. But it will also leave us with a subject that is metaphysical, or transcendental, in nature.

7.

The problem, in its barest form, is this. McDowell's transcendental empiricism seems to demand a naturalistic conception of the subject. But his envisaged coincidence between realism and idealism seems to demand that the subject be conceived as transcendental, or metaphysical. McDowell's ambition is to secure this coincidence within the framework of naturalism – to have the first of Wittgenstein's ideas without the second (see §1). For the moment at least, I am unable to see how this ambition can be fulfilled.

¹ Williams, B. (1974) "Wittgenstein and Idealism" in *Understanding Wittgenstein, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, vol. 7, 1972-3* (London: Macmillan), p. 77.

² Wittgenstein, L. (1961) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 5.632; 5.641.

³ *Tractatus*, 5.64.

⁴ McDowell, J. (1996) *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 44.

⁵ McDowell, J. (2004) "Reality and colours: comments on Stroud", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXVIII, 2, p. 395-400.

⁶ McDowell, J. (1983) "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule", in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 254.

⁷ *Mind and World*, p. 99.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 103.

⁹ McDowell, J. (1998) “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality”, *Journal of Philosophy*, XCV, 9, p. 445.

¹⁰ McDowell, J. (1999) “Sellars’s Transcendental Empiricism”, in Julian Nida-Rümelin (Ed.), *Rationality, Realism, Revision*, Proceedings of the 3rd international congress of the Society for Analytical Philosophy (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York).

¹¹ These papers are McDowell, J. (2003) “Hegel’s Idealism as a Radicalisation of Kant”; published as “L’idealismo di Hegel come radicalizzazione di Kant”, in Luigi Ruggiu and Italo Testa (Eds.) *Hegel Contemporaneo: la ricezione americana di Hegel a confronto con la traduzione europea* (Milan: Guerini), and McDowell, J. (2003) “Hegel and the Myth of the Given”, in Wolfgang Welsch and Klaus Vieweg (Eds.), Herausg, *Das Interesse des Denkens: Hegel aus heutiger Sicht* (Munchnen: Wilhelm Fink Verlag). All references are to manuscript versions of these papers.

¹² Kant, I. (1929) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan), A51/B75.

¹³ *Mind and World*, p. 4. There may well be something eccentric about this particular elaboration. There are passages where Kant is naturally read as acknowledging the possibility of thoughts without content, in the sense of thoughts that are not connected with experiential intake, and concern things in themselves (B146; A771-772/B779-800). But, in this paper, I do not need to affirm (or deny) such a reading of Kant, because my concern is not transcendental philosophy and transcendental idealism as Kant understands

them, but transcendental philosophy and transcendental idealism as McDowell takes Kant to understand them, and as McDowell understands them himself.

¹⁴ “Having the World in View”, p. 491, n. 22.

¹⁵ *Mind and World*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁷ Davidson, D. (1983) ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

¹⁸ *Mind and World*, p. 9.

¹⁹ “Having the World in View”, p. 472.

²⁰ *Mind and World*, p. 139.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 9.

²² The causal theory of perception is the obvious candidate here. But there may be ways of allowing perception to involve causal connections between external reality and something that deserves to count as (or as an aspect of) the subject’s sensibility whilst eschewing commitment to the causal theory; a form of disjunctivism that takes the subject’s sensibility to include whatever sub-personal goings-on enable the subject’s personal-level experience, for example. For more on disjunctivism, see Haddock A. and Macpherson F. (Eds.), *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²³ *Mind and World*, p. 103. McDowell thinks that Kant cannot accept this conception of the thinking subject, for reasons that are not relevant here. See op. cit., Lecture V.

²⁴ This parenthetical remark is intended to make room for the possibility of plural subjects.

See McDowell, J. (2006) “Response to Rovane”, in C. Macdonald and G. Macdonald (Eds.) *McDowell and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 114-120.

²⁵ *Mind and World*, Lecture IV.

²⁶ “Hegel’s Idealism as a Radicalisation of Kant”, MS.

²⁷ *Mind and World*, p. 41.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Op. cit., p. 27.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 41.

³¹ See Lear, J. (1984) “The Disappearing ‘We’”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 58, pp. 219-42.

³² “Having the World in View”, p. 464.

³³ *Mind and World*, p. 34.

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 28.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 42.

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 26.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 44.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nagel, T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 90.

⁴¹ Op. cit., pp. 91-2.

⁴² Op. cit., p. 92.

⁴³ See Priest, G. (1995) *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

for more on paradoxes of this sort.

⁴⁴ McDowell, J. (1994) “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 190.

⁴⁵ *The View from Nowhere*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ For McDowell, a person is a living individual of a certain kind. See McDowell, J. (1997) “Reductionism and the First Person”, in his *Mind, Value and Reality*, pp. 359-82.

⁴⁸ McDowell, J. (1977) “On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name”, in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 197.

⁴⁹ This motivation is a modified version of some remarks in Williamson, T. (2004) “Beyond the Linguistic Turn?” in B. Leiter (Ed.) *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵⁰ McDowell, J. (2002) “Replies”, in N. Smith (Ed.) *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World* (London: Routledge), pp. 284-5.

⁵¹ *Mind and Value*, p. 40. In a footnote, he makes clear that he is responding to Nagel’s charge.

⁵² McDowell, J. (2002) “Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism”, in J. Malpas (ed.) *Gadamer’s Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), p. 175.

⁵³ A bit of relevant autobiography: I have struggled with Davidson’s paper for a number of years, and cannot see how it can succeed in justifying the refusal, if the first person plural is understood in the way I understand it here. This suggests (to me) that his paper must be understood in some other way. It is true that Davidson sometimes writes as if he

is advocating precisely the position that Nagel attacks. But when Davidson says that we cannot understand the possibility of a language that we cannot understand, his target is the idea of incommensurable points of view, and not Nagel's realism. This idea might be explained as follows: there is a point of view from within which thoughts of one sort are graspable ("A" thoughts), and another point of view from within which thoughts of another sort are graspable ("B" thoughts), but there is no overarching point of view from within which the thoughts of *both* sorts are graspable, and from within which the rational relations between them may be plotted. (So, there is no point of view from within which it can be truly claimed that "A" thoughts contradict "B" thoughts, for example.) If this is right, then Davidson's talk of a language that is not translatable into a language we can understand might be better put as talk of a language that is *in principle* untranslatable into any or all of the members of the set of languages that are *in principle* translatable into each other, because the idea of such a language is just a way of making sense of the idea of an incommensurable point of view. If this is the right reading of Davidson's paper, then Davidson is not obviously committed to the idea that we human beings are capable of understanding any language that there might be, and therefore not obviously committed to Nagel's quarry.

⁵⁴ For critical discussion, see, for example, Blackburn, S. (1984) *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Byrne A. (forthcoming) "Soames on Quine and Davidson", *Philosophical Studies*; and Hacker, P.M.S. (1996) "On Davidson's Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 46, 184, pp. 289-307.

⁵⁵ "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule", pp. 254-5. Of course, *McDowell* does not endorse this conception of the judging subject.

⁵⁶ Allison, H. (1983) *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 290.

⁵⁷ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxvii.

⁵⁸ "Hegel's Idealism as a Radicalisation of Kant", MS.

⁵⁹ "Hegel and the Myth of the Given", MS.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.