

Perception and Rational Constraint*

McDowell calls ‘minimal empiricism’ the idea that “experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all.”¹ This is unexceptionable if it just means that perceptual experience is the medium through which our thought becomes answerable to how things are. But McDowell’s view is more specific and more contentious. He thinks we need a notion of *conscious experience* that is prejudgmental, but nonetheless through and through *conceptually* contentful. Experience for him is always propositionally contentful: experience *that* things are thus and so. It can serve as *evidence* for the perceptual judgments it prompts, providing the perceiver’s *reason* for them. But McDowell’s arguments seem actually to motivate only something much broader and weaker.

McDowell view is recommended as the only alternative to three ways in which our thinking in this area can go wrong: “*bald naturalism*”, *coherentism*, and *the Myth of the Given*. What makes them all unsatisfactory, he argues, is their failure to satisfy what we could call the “rational constraint constraint” on theories of perception (and so of empirical conceptual content): to make intelligible how perceptual experience embodies the way the world imposes not merely *causal*, but *rational* constraints on thinking.

Meeting that constraint is his criterion of adequacy for giving due weight both to the

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¹ *Mind and World* [Harvard University Press, 1994] p. xii (from the Introduction, added in the paperback edition of 1996). Citations from this work below are page numbers enclosed in square brackets: [nn].

dimension of *receptivity* (in virtue of which thought must be *constrained* from without) and to the dimension of *spontaneity* (in virtue of which the constraint must be *rational*) in empirical thinking. McDowell's constraint can be fleshed out in terms of three ideas.

First, he says:

[Davidson] thinks a merely causal, not rational linkage between thinking and independent reality will do, as an interpretation of the idea that empirical content requires friction against something external to thinking. But it will not do. Thoughts without intuitions would be empty...[I]f we are to avert the threat of emptiness, we need to see intuitions as standing in rational relations to what we *should* think, not just in causal relations to what we *do* think. Otherwise the very idea of what we think goes missing. [68].

In order to underwrite an intelligible notion of empirical conceptual content, the constraint on our thought exercised by the world in perception must be *normative*: it must settle how it would be *correct* to apply the concepts in question.

Second, not just any norms will do. Specifically *conceptual* norms govern our exercises of spontaneity in understanding: “‘Spontaneity’ here can be simply a label for the involvement of conceptual capacities.” [9], “the topography of the conceptual sphere is constituted by rational relations. The space of concepts is at least part of what Wilfrid Sellars calls ‘the space of reasons’” [5].

Third, the *representational* norms that connect the correctness of our thought to the *facts* must be understood as aspects of the *rational* norms that govern this process of active critical reflection on credentials:

“In ‘outer experience’, a subject is passively saddled with conceptual contents, drawing into operation capacities seamlessly integrated into a conceptual repertoire that she employs in the continuing activity of adjusting her world-view, so as to enable it to pass a scrutiny of its rational credentials. It is this integration that makes it possible for us to conceive experience as awareness, or at least seeming awareness, of a reality independent of experience.” [31, see also 32]

None of these ideas is self-evident, they all could be worked out in more than one way, and we are given very little in the way of details. McDowell contents himself with making his *commitments* explicit in passages such as those I have cited, without showing just how he would propose to show himself *entitled* to them. But suppose we grant these three claims: the normativeness of representational relations, the rational or inferential articulation of concepts on which the critical assessment of their credentials depends as essential to the contents of those concepts, and the dependence of the idea of a state’s so much as seeming to be about some objective feature of the world on the liability of that state to critical examination of its rational credentials. I think in fact they are all three both true and important, and that the promissory notes concerning our entitlement to them that McDowell is implicitly offering can be redeemed.²

² I have explained in detail how I think it can be done, in *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* [Harvard University Press, 1994].

Together they give a definite sense to the rational constraint constraint. They entail that to qualify as offering even purported glimpses of how things are, perceptual experiences must have rational credentials that are available for critical scrutiny. If they are insulated from the facts they purport to report, in the sense that how things actually are does not have a *rational* bearing on them, then they cannot qualify as being of or about anything (and so having empirical conceptual content) at all (cf. [52]). But is it really the case that, say, externalisms of the reliabilist and Davidsonian sorts cannot satisfy the rational constraint constraint?

Epistemological reliabilism claims that the role traditionally played by a justification condition on attributions of knowledge can be played by a reliability condition: to count as knowledge, true perceptual beliefs must be the outcome of *reliable* belief-forming processes, that is, processes that are in specified circumstances *likely* to lead to true beliefs. Perceptual beliefs so formed are ones the perceiver should count as *entitled* to, in the sense relevant to assessments of knowledge.³

It seems to me that epistemological reliabilism about perceptual beliefs fully meets McDowell's demand for their rational criticizability. Assessing reliability is one way of assessing a believer's entitlement to beliefs she finds herself with perceptually. This is as normative a matter as can be--a matter of what one *should* think, and not just what one

³ Such a view takes for granted the *contents* of beliefs or judgments that are candidates for empirical knowledge. It should be distinguished from the stronger thesis of *semantic* reliabilism, which claims that the role traditionally played by inferential relations among beliefs, in the articulation of the conceptual contents of beliefs can also be understood entirely in terms of reliability.

does think. And it is evidently not an assessment that somehow takes place outside the space of reasons. Taking someone to be a reliable reporter is just endorsing an *inference* of a characteristic pattern: taking it that the fact that the *reporter* is noninferentially disposed (in the right sort of circumstances) to acquire a belief with a given content provides a good *reason* for acquiring a belief with that content *oneself* (a reason the *attributor* of reliability could cite in *justifying* his own belief, even if the one whose belief it is could not).

Davidsonian semantic externalism would also seem to satisfy McDowell's constraint. The interpreter is responsible for characterizing the perceptible environing facts to which the one interpreted is taken to be responding, and for attributing propositional contents to the sentential responses that make the one interpreted largely correct in her noninferential reports. The interpreter assesses the adequacy of the content of the reports and perceptual beliefs that are noninferentially wrenched from a subject, by comparing it with the facts that responsively elicited those reports, according to the norm that one ought to say of what perceptibly is that it is. Perceptual reports that do not measure up to this standard are criticizable precisely on these grounds. From the point of view of the *interpreter*, in other words, the relation between the facts and the reports or perceptual beliefs is not merely a causal one, but also one rationally assessable in terms of the *truth* of those reports or beliefs, relative to the independent facts.

Why it is, then, that McDowell sees only causal, and not rational constraint as operative in these two cases? I think the answer is that there is a slide in the move from

McDowell's diagnosis to his recommended therapy. What emerges from the diagnosis is that:

The world itself must exert a rational constraint on our thinking. ([43].

See also [34].)

The sort of rational constraint that really matters is constraint by the *facts*, by what is *perceived*. It is rational answerability for their correctness to *these* that is required to fund them as empirically conceptually contentful. And the point of rational criticism is precisely to fund this notion of answerability to how things in any case are.

But in his positive suggestions, McDowell looks to rational constraint, not by the *facts*, but by *experience* of the facts. He offers a way of thinking about perceptual experiences as conceptually articulated, and hence able to stand in rational, and not merely causal relations to perceptual judgments, while still distinguishing them from perceptual judgments themselves. I don't see the arguments he offers *oblige* us to adopt that view.

Its most promising competitor, it seems to me, is a view along the lines laid out by Sellars and Davidson. According to such a story, when we are properly wired up and trained, the perceptible facts wring from us perceptual judgments. In order to *explain* how this is possible--quite a different enterprise from *justifying* the resulting judgments--we postulate the existence of something like sense impressions, whose properties systematically covary with the contents of the judgments they causally elicit from us. But these sense impressions are features of the physiology of perception. They are not

something we are aware of, and they do not themselves have conceptual content. They merely occasion contentful perceptual judgments.

If a suitable story is told about the constitutive inferential engagement of these noninferentially elicited judgments with other judgments, then their status as denizens of the space of reasons and products of spontaneity is secured. Bald naturalism is avoided. If a suitable story is told about how they are rationally criticizable by those who key their correctness to their correspondence to the facts reported, and about their entitlement to the reliability of the noninferential process that elicits them, then rational constraint by how things actually are is secured. Coherentism is avoided. And since sense impressions play only an explanatory, not a justificatory role, the Myth of the Given is avoided. This is precisely an account of how *in* experience (perception) the world exerts a rational (criticizable) influence on our thinking.

But McDowell does not see this possibility.

..in order to escape from the oscillation we *need* to recognize that experiences themselves are states or occurrences that inextricably combine receptivity and spontaneity. We *must* not suppose that spontaneity first figures only in judgments. [24]

These experiences are understood as themselves conceptually structured, and so fit to serve as *justifications* of the perceptual judgments they elicit.⁴ This is *one* way to satisfy the constraint, but we do not *need* to go this way. The move from the need to escape the

⁴ See, e.g. [10], [61]. I've discussed reliabilism further in "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism", forthcoming in the *Monist*.

oscillation to the need for conceptually structured prejudgmental experiences that warrant our perceptual judgments is a *non sequitur*--the ‘need’ and ‘must’ emphasized above are unwarranted.⁵ We are not told what justifies the move from the need for rational constraint by *the world* to rational constraint by *experience*.

Why doesn’t McDowell’s see this possibility? I think it is because he systematically underplays the significance of the *social* dimension of the practice of giving and asking for reasons--justifying, challenging, criticizing, and revising our claims and beliefs--that is the concrete embodiment of the aspect of our activity he talks about abstractly under the rubric of ‘spontaneity’. For, as in the case of Davidsonian and reliabilist externalism, rational criticizability of perceptual judgments may be available only from the point of view of someone who is assessing the extent to which a report is true or the perceiver is reliable. But so what? This keeps it from being “*self-scrutiny*” [52] *only* if we illegitimately treat the fact that the mind of McDowell’s title is grammatically singular as not a mere *facon de parler*, but as a substantive thesis—as bringing with it the individualist commitments of his predecessor C. I. Lewis (author of *Mind and the World Order*). Assessments of truth and reliability are *not* outside the practice of giving and asking for reasons, scrutinizing and criticizing the rational warrant for our commitments, but of its very essence.

McDowell’s own formulation of the rational constraint constraint is that:

⁵ Again, I am not claiming there is something wrong with the view McDowell recommends, only that the considerations he advances do not require us to adopt it.

...when we use our concepts in judgment, our freedom--out spontaneity in the exercise of our understanding--is constrained from outside thought, and constrained in a way that we can appeal to in displaying our judgments as justified. [8]

The question here is about what it means to insist that *we* can appeal to what constrains our judgment in assessing its warrant. Given the conclusions he draws, McDowell uses it as if it meant “each of us”, so that the one whose judgment is justified must be the *same* one who can appeal to the external constraint in justifying it. Only on that individualist assumption is it correct to conclude that “When we trace the ground for an empirical judgment, the last step takes us to experiences,” that is, only if the judger herself is the one who must trace the ground. But why assume that? If we take the *we* seriously in these passages, the one who can see the constraint as justifying the application of the concept may be someone *else*, someone *other* than the one who is applying the concept. Epistemological reliabilism and Davidsonian externalism have this latter structure.

I have made two main claims. First, there is a gap between McDowell’s diagnosis and his therapy--a gap visible in the slide from taking the rational constraint constraint as insisting that *the world* have a rational, and not merely a causal bearing on perceptual judgment to taking it as insisting that *experience* have such a bearing. As a result, McDowell treats the considerations he has advanced in defense of the rational constraint constraint as obliging us to endorse a notion of conceptually articulated but prejudgmental perceptual experiences. But doing so involves overlooking other alternatives, which are not in fact ruled out by the considerations he advances. Second, I

have suggested that this blindness to alternatives results from a residual *individualism*--a systematic underestimation of the significance of the fact that talk of the space of reasons is an abstraction from concrete, essentially *social* practices of giving and asking for reasons.⁶

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⁶ I have explored this suspicion before in regard to some of McDowell's other writings. See "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (4), December '95, pp. 895-908.