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Experience and the World's
Own Language

A Critique of John McDowell's Empiricism

RICHARD GASKIN

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CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2006

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 0-19-928725-2 978-0-19-928725-3

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Preface

John McDowell has had a significant impact on contemporary philosophy. His writings span a broad spectrum of systematic and historical topics, including the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, the theory of knowledge, moral philosophy and aesthetics, and the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein. The considerable impact which his thought has had is hardly surprising. McDowell's writings have an inspirational quality which cannot be overlooked and is indeed, in a sense which is hard to make precise, uncanny. And the inspirational qualities of his pronouncements are by no means restricted to the written word: as a former undergraduate and graduate student of McDowell's, I can attest, as I am sure many others can,¹ to the almost mesmerizing quality of his lectures and tutorials. Quite apart from these stylistic features, anyone with even a modest degree of philosophical erudition will, on reading virtually any part of his output, appreciate that something philosophically profound is being investigated with an extraordinary application of intellect. It quickly becomes clear to the student of McDowell's thinking that, for all its diversity, that thinking is fed and unified by a powerful philosophical vision.

How that vision is to be characterized is not as straightforward a matter as I for one formerly imagined it to be, but there is no doubt that as one reads through McDowell's *oeuvre* one feels the gravitational pull of a strong intellectual mass; or one might say (to change the metaphor) that one detects the presence of a reservoir of energy which irrigates the outlying fields of labour. Twenty years ago I should have said unhesitatingly that that centre of gravity or reservoir of energy was, simply, realism—or, as McDowell himself might say, a sane realism: realism about the objects of experience,

¹ Cf. Lockwood 1989, p. 148.

including secondary qualities, about moral and aesthetic value, and about rule-following and meaning. But that characterization would probably be too positive, for over the years it has become increasingly apparent that McDowell sees himself as pursuing a more quietist agenda, and he himself has recently indicated that he regards his writings as springing from an opposition to anti-realism (taken as a positive thesis), and so as pursuing an anti-anti-realistic programme, rather than as aiming to argue directly for realism.²

The following study focuses on a cluster of central aspects of McDowell's thinking, namely his treatment of the nature of experience, of the relationship between mind and world, and his handling, in the philosophy of language, of the distinction between sense and reference. Much of my source material derives, inevitably, from the seminal *Mind and World*. But it follows from what has been said that we must expect to encounter matters relevant to the topics I have singled out for examination in all parts of McDowell's output, and I have not hesitated to cite evidence from texts and contexts whose ostensible subject matter was remote from the point at issue in cases where it seemed to me that there was a relevant connection to be made. But with a few exceptions, largely confined to footnotes, I have resisted the temptation to follow the many interesting paths that diverged from my chosen route. In adopting the policy of scouring McDowell's texts, quite generally, for material relevant to the investigation of my selected topics, I have perforce relied on and exploited that sense of an intellectual centre of gravity of which I spoke above, to the extent of treating McDowell's writings, which have of course been published over a period of more than thirty years, as though they issued instantaneously from a single point of view, except where we encounter an express indication of a change of mind, or where, in the absence of any such indication, charity would nevertheless demand that we register such a change. McDowell himself remarked in 1998 that he felt he had been 'single-minded' over the

² 1998*b*, p. viii; 1998*c*, p. 356; 2000*a*, pp. 112–14.

years,³ and in fact the occasions on which we need to take note of an express or implicit change of mind are rare. Any residual historical inaccuracy incurred by my policy of treating McDowell's *oeuvre* in this unified way is, I believe, amply compensated for by the philosophical rewards of so proceeding.

My main aim in this study is not descriptive, but polemical.⁴ I aim to show that McDowell's attempt to revive the doctrine of empiricism in what he calls a minimal form is crucially undermined by an error he commits in the philosophy of language. Following ancient tradition rather than Frege's radical departure from that tradition, McDowell locates concepts at the level of sense rather than at the level of reference. But this, I argue, is a mistake. Correcting it requires us to follow Frege in his location of concepts at the level of reference, but also to go beyond Frege and locate not only concepts but also propositions at that level; and doing so requires us, I suggest, to take seriously an idea which McDowell mentions only to reject, that of objects as speaking to us 'in the world's own language'. I shall further contend in the course of my discussion that, even given the correction I recommend, if empiricism is to have any chance of success it must be still more minimal in its pretensions than McDowell allows: in particular, it must abandon the individualistic and intellectualistic construction which McDowell places on what he calls the 'order of justification'—the way experiences justify empirical judgements—and it must grant conceptually structured experience not merely to mature human beings but also to infants and non-human animals. I am not, however, opposed to the very idea of a minimal empiricism, so long as it is set up in the right way—provided it is, as I put it in the course of my study, not *minimal* in McDowell's sense, but *minimalist* in a sense I will make clear—and so long as it is embedded in the context of a correct semantics for sentences and

³ 1998*b*, p. vii.

⁴ Readers looking for a more descriptive and synoptic treatment of McDowell's philosophy may be directed to recent studies by Tim Thornton (2004) and Maximilian de Gaynesford (2004).

their parts; to that extent my critique of McDowell's attempt to establish a minimal empiricism seems to me at any rate, despite the many points on which I criticize his manner of executing the project, to be co-operative and constructive in overall tenor rather than merely destructive or hostile.

In preparing this study I have tried to take account not only of the whole gamut of McDowell's writings but also of as much of the ever-growing secondary literature as I could locate. I am grateful to McDowell himself for letting me see two unpublished typescripts: 'Transcendental Empiricism', and 'Sellars and the Space of Reasons'. But in view of their unpublished status I have not cited them or taken account of them in my characterization of McDowell's position.⁵ I am much indebted to the two anonymous readers for the Press, who made some cogent criticisms of the manuscript and offered some useful suggestions for improvement. My colleague at Liverpool Logi Gunnarsson also read through a draft of the entire book and gave me detailed written comments from which I benefited considerably. In 2004 I offered some graduate classes on *Mind and World* at Liverpool and I learned much from the contributions of the participants, especially Obie Hickmott. I began writing the book during a period of leave jointly sponsored by the University of Liverpool and the Arts and Humanities Research Board; I am grateful to both institutions for the opportunity to get well into the project before having to resume normal duties. My colleague Michael McGhee has been of considerable assistance to me at all stages of the project, and Peter Momtchiloff of the Press has been a splendidly sympathetic editor throughout. Finally, my main debt of gratitude is to my family—to my parents, to my wife Cathrin, and to my sons Thomas and Markus—who, as ever, have given me constant support and encouragement.

⁵ Actually, the first of these typescripts has been published in a Greek translation (McDowell 2003). I am grateful to my colleague Yiota Vassilopoulou for helping me obtain a copy of this translation. But because of the relative inaccessibility of this publication, I decided not to count it as a source for McDowell's views. (In fact that did not impose a handicap, given the wealth of other material substantially overlapping with this essay.)

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*Der Mensch spricht nicht allein—auch das Universum spricht—
alles spricht—unendliche Sprachen.*

Human kind is not alone in speaking—the universe speaks
too—everything speaks—languages without end.

Novalis

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I

Minimal empiricism and the ‘order of justification’

I.1. MINIMAL EMPIRICISM: INTRODUCTORY

Empiricism is the doctrine that our capacity to know about the world is derived, mediately or immediately, from sense-experience. In its extreme manifestation the doctrine takes the form of asserting that there is, as the familiar scholastic tag has it, nothing in the mind which has not reached it through the senses.¹ But few philosophers who would count themselves empiricists have defended the doctrine in such a pure form: for example, the logical positivists, empiricism’s most prominent twentieth-century disciples, admitted, alongside the class of synthetic truths known *a posteriori* through the medium of sense-experience, a class of analytic truths known *a priori* without any involvement of the senses, the analyticity of these truths, and the concomitant possibility of *a priori* knowledge of them, being grounded in their establishment by linguistic convention. (The positivists’ dichotomy was a descendant of Hume’s distinction between ‘matters of fact’ and ‘relations of ideas’.)² To capture an

¹ The tag circulates in a number of more or less equivalent versions. Aquinas has: *nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu* (*De Veritate* q. 2 a. 3, §19). The principle is derived from Aristotle: *De Anima* 432a7–8. See Stern 1999, p. 252 on Hegel’s attitude to the principle.

² *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, IV.1.20 (1975, p. 25). Cf. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III.1.1 (1978, p. 458).

empiricism of the positivists' (and of Hume's) stamp, one would need (at least) to amend the traditional tag so as to make it read something like 'nothing *enters the mind from the world* which has not reached it (exclusively) through the senses', a formulation which is meant to close off the possibility that the mind might acquire *a priori* knowledge of worldly matters of fact (whether necessary or contingent such facts), but which leaves it open that the mind may contain more than the *a posteriori* knowledge it has acquired by dint of sense-experience.

With the decline of logical positivism after its zenith in the inter-war period the doctrine of empiricism has fallen on hard times, but recently there has been an attempt by John McDowell to win respectability for a version of empiricism which he calls 'minimal' or 'transcendental' empiricism,³ according to which

the very idea of thought's directedness at the empirical world is intelligible only in terms of answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world impressing itself on perceiving subjects. (1996a, p. xvi)⁴

In so characterizing his minimal empiricism, as aiming to render intelligible the relation between thought and reality, McDowell is consciously offering us a persuasive definition. Traditionally empiricism has been understood in the way in which I explicated it in my opening paragraph, that is to say as a doctrine intended to account specifically for the possibility of *knowledge*; McDowell corrects and expands this conception, so that in his hands empiricism becomes a doctrine about the possibility of *content*. The narrower epistemological focus of the tradition is, on this approach, an inchoate expression of something deeper, namely a worry not merely about the sources and credentials of our claims to knowledge, but about how our minds can be in touch with an objective reality—and in

³ The former terminology is prominent in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Mind and World* (1996a, pp. xi–xxiv), the latter in his Münster lecture (2000a, pp. 3–18). Both terminologies are employed at 2002a, p. 287.

⁴ Cf. 1995a, pp. 231–2, 289; 1999a, pp. 95–7; 2000a, p. 4.

particular, as the quoted passage makes clear, how they can be in touch with the empirical world—at all.⁵

I.2. MINIMAL EMPIRICISM: SOME INITIAL DIFFICULTIES

McDowell does not (so far as I am aware) anywhere define what he means by the ‘empirical world’. One might presume that he means the experienced world, that is, the world of which we can and do have sense-experience. But the empirical world cannot simply be identified with what *we* experience by means of *our* (five) senses: for McDowell is (rightly) ready to allow that there might be secondary qualities detectable by Martians but not by us,⁶ hence keyed to a kind of sense-experience other than any with which we are familiar, and there can be no doubt that, for McDowell and in actual fact, any such qualities would belong to the empirical world. So the empirical world must be so defined that *any* genuine kind of sense-experience can yield access to it. But what counts as a genuine kind of sense-experience? In trying to answer this question we clearly face a threat of circularity, for there may be no independent conceptual entry-point to the relation of mutual dependence between the notions of ‘empirical world’ and ‘experience’. The empirical world consists of what is or can be experienced, but it seems that no limits can be set in advance on what is to qualify as experience: the only requirement we can specify is the—in the context, trivial—one that objects of experience must belong to the empirical world. The difficulty which arises here, of providing some non-trivial way of characterizing the empirical world, or alternatively of supplying a non-trivial account of what is to qualify as (genuine) experience, so as to provide a way into the circle connecting these two notions, is indeed a

⁵ 1994, pp. 146–7; 1995*a*, p. 232; 1996*a*, pp. xiii–xiv; 1998*e*, p. 121; 2000*a*, pp. 3–4. Cf. de Gaynesford 2004, pp. 9–10.

⁶ 1994, p. 123 n. 11; 2000*a*, p. 95.

fundamental one. Of course this is a problem which confronts everyone, not just McDowell; but given the centrality to McDowell's thinking of the relationship between thought and the empirical world one might have expected him to provide more illumination than he does on the question what the empirical world is, and how its presumably constitutive connection with experience is to be conceived. A related difficulty is the following.

In the statement of his minimal empiricism which I quoted above McDowell speaks quite generally of *thought's* directedness at the empirical world, and an obvious problem in understanding this characterization lies in establishing the parameters of the 'thought' whose directedness at the empirical world is to be rendered intelligible. In other formulations of the doctrine of minimal empiricism, McDowell speaks of the way that doctrine can help us to understand how *empirical* thought can be directed at the empirical world, and I take it that we are licensed to read this restriction into formulations, such as the one I have quoted, which do not mention it explicitly.⁷ But we must ask how much the restriction conveys. Is it intended to leave open the possibility that there are or could be *non-empirical* ways in which thought is directed at the world? Are there non-empirical ways in which things reach the mind from the world, to put it in the terms of the amended tag (§1)? McDowell is unclear on this point. In one passage he seems to leave open the possibility that 'answerability to how things are includes more than answerability to the empirical world';⁸ but elsewhere we find him tentatively suggesting that to rephrase the question how thought is directed at the world so as to make it the question how empirical thought is directed at the empirical world 'would not be to add anything',⁹ a remark which implies that answerability to the world just is answerability to the empirical world.

At all events, whether or not McDowell is prepared to allow a sense in which thinking is answerable to a non-empirical world, it

⁷ See the characterizations of minimal empiricism given at 1996*a*, pp. xii, xv, and xvii.

⁸ 1996*a*, p. xii. ⁹ 1999*a*, p. 88.

seems clear that, for him, any such relation between thought and a non-empirical world would have to be essentially secondary and parasitic, dependent on a primary directedness of specifically empirical thinking towards the empirical world (whatever that is). As he puts it at one point,

thought can intelligibly be of the objective at all . . . only because we can see how there can be conceptual occurrences in which objects are manifestly there for thinkers, immediately present to their conceptually shaped *sensory* consciousness. (1998*d*, p. 465, emphasis added)

This passage does not rule out the possibility that some thinking about, and some answerability to, the objective world might be non-empirical in nature—that some world-directed thoughts might be grounded in the availability of a non-sensory route between world and mind—but it does imply that thinkers can be entitled to entertain such thoughts only if their sensory access (however this is to be defined) to the empirical world is already and anyway firmly in place. As Robert Brandom puts it, McDowell ‘insists that anything that does not have perceptual experience does not have concepts either’.¹⁰ So whatever we are to say about the objective credentials of non-empirical thinking—thinking engaged in, for instance, pure set theory—at any rate we can say that the existence of a subject conceived as an empirically uncontaminated locus of such thought is, for McDowell, not a conceptual possibility. This point is crucial both to the position which he calls ‘naturalized platonism’, according to which our human responsiveness to reasons is essentially dependent on our status as living, embodied beings, and to a transcendental argument which McDowell offers connecting conceptual capacities and sensory intake, and according to which each of these is required if we are to make sense of the other, and if we are to make sense of the objective bearing of thought quite generally. I shall examine naturalized platonism in Chapter II, and the transcendental argument in Chapter III: in these discussions the two issues I have

¹⁰ 2002, p. 93.

raised so far in this section—the absence in McDowell’s writings of a non-trivial characterization of the empirical world, and the question whether he takes thought to be answerable to more than the empirical world, however that is to be defined—will be in the background of my discussion.¹¹

Looking at the characterization we have of minimal empiricism, according to which the very idea of empirical thought’s directedness at the empirical world is intelligible only in terms of its answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world’s impressing itself on perceiving subjects, there is a further respect, distinct from the one I have already mentioned, in which one might wonder whether it escapes triviality. I have noted that the expression ‘empirical world’ is to be construed as meaning the world which is or can be accessed in sense-experience (however exactly that is to be delimited). But given that construal, one might ask: how could empirical thought’s directedness at the empirical world be intelligible *other* than in terms of ‘answerability to the tribunal of experience’? In fact I think this worry can be allayed: I can see three moves we might make, on McDowell’s behalf, in response to any charge of triviality that might be lodged on the score of this worry. First, we might say, it is by no means trivial to claim that answerability to the experienced world must be understood in terms of answerability to *experience itself*; secondly, the appeal to answerability serves to insist on the obtaining of a *normative* connection between experience and empirical thought, and that surely travels some epistemic distance beyond the mere idea of world-directedness; and thirdly, the suggestion that the ‘tribunal of experience’ must be conceived in terms of the world’s

¹¹ As far as empirical beliefs of a theoretical nature are concerned, McDowell’s idea, following Sellars in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1956, §38; 1997, p. 78), is that not only do they depend for their warrant, and intelligibility, on observations, but it is also the case that observations are in turn constitutively dependent on a ‘conceptual repertoire employed in articulating a world view’: 1998a, pp. 427–8; cf. 1998d, pp. 434–6, 462–6; 2000a, pp. 13–14; 2002a, pp. 287–8. It is important to McDowell, *qua* empiricist, to insist that there is a good distinction to be drawn between (unmediated) observational beliefs and (mediated) theoretical beliefs: 1995a, pp. 291–2. But, apart from a brief reappearance in Ch. III (§8), this point will not concern me in what follows.

impressing itself on perceiving subjects serves to insist on the obtaining of a *causal* connection between the world and perceiving subjects, and that again, it is at least plausible to suppose, tells us something non-trivial about the way McDowell is thinking of experience. But advertent to these three aspects of McDowell's minimal empiricism, in order to deal with the worry I have mentioned, so far from closing the investigation, raises a host of new, and pressing, questions. Let us start by asking: how are these three features of minimal empiricism supposed to fit together?

I.3. MCDOWELL'S EMPIRICISM: OVERVIEW AND PROSPECTIVE

Fundamental to McDowell's minimal empiricism is the claim that the world-directedness of empirical thought involves both rational or normative connections between world and thought on the one hand, and causal connections on the other. Putting it in general and abstract terms for the moment, we can say that the rational connections ensure that empirical thought can be *correct or incorrect*,¹² while the causal connections guarantee that empirical thought is genuinely *about* the empirical world:¹³ taken together, these connections ensure that empirical thought is not empty—that it is not, as McDowell likes to put it, mere 'frictionless spinning in a void'.¹⁴ This way of expressing McDowell's position is crude because it leaves the precise relation of the rational and causal relations unspecified. One

¹² See e.g. 1994, p. 26 (cited below in the text, §4); 1996a, pp. xi–xii; 2000a, p. 16.

¹³ See e.g. 1994, p. 150; Afterword, Part 1; 1996a, pp. xvii–xviii; 2002b, p. 178. Thornton denies (2004, p. 204) that causation plays a role in McDowell's thinking about experience, but that seems to me clearly a misinterpretation. I shall be exploring causation's role in McDowell's picture of experience in Ch. II.

¹⁴ See 1994, pp. 11, 18, 66, 68. A similar structure of constraints is proposed by Brandom (1994, p. 235), who criticizes McDowell's use of the image of 'friction' on the basis that it is a *causal* image clumsily employed to illustrate a point about the *rational* constraints on thought: see 1995a, p. 244 with n. 5. But on my reading of his strategy, the image is intended by McDowell to emphasize the need for *both* a rational *and* a causal connection between mind and world.