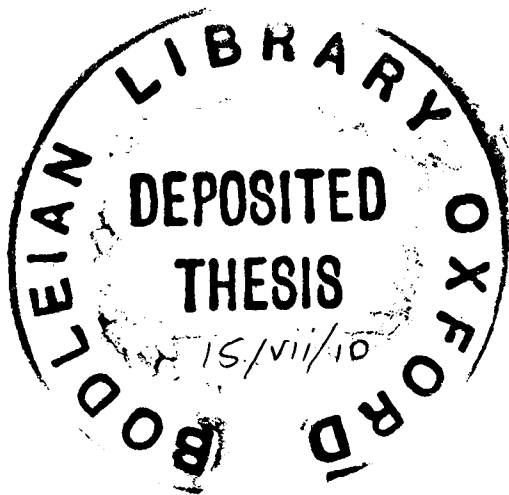


McDowell's Oscillation, Objectivity and Rationality



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*Abstract*¹

Mind and World is written in a Wittgensteinian spirit. It is a work whose aim is to address a specific philosophical discomfort. John McDowell diagnoses a tension between the urge for what he describes as ‘minimal empiricism’ and its apparent impossibility. Minimal empiricism is defined as the idea that constraint is exercised on our thought by the world through experience. In his view, minimal empiricism stands in tension with the fact that conceptually unstructured impressions can have no rational bearing on our beliefs and judgements. This tension forces an oscillation between two equally unattractive positions: the Myth of the Given and coherentism. McDowell’s aim is to dissolve this apparent tension which he sees as resting on the more basic assumption of a dualism between reason and nature. Through his invocation of ‘second nature’ he aims to present a naturalised Platonism in which man’s occupation of the space of reasons can be seen as an aspect of his animal nature, not as something essentially alien to us.

The thesis starts by outlining McDowell’s attempt to escape the oscillation he detects between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. In Chapter One, the content of *Mind and World* is briefly laid out. The underlying dualism of reason and nature on which the oscillation is said to rest is considered and the resources he employs in his attempt to escape it discussed. These resources include his metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding.

¹ I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding during the course of producing this thesis and my supervisor Prof. David Charles for all his assistance.

The second chapter reinforces the first by isolating and defining a number of key concepts in McDowell's picture. The material discussed here is largely drawn from works other than *Mind and World*. Three key assumptions are isolated: the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, the *de re* nature of singular thought and the fully conceptual nature of experience. These assumptions are shown to play a pivotal role in his philosophy by considering his work on Aristotle and Descartes. McDowell aims to provide a 'therapeutic dissolution' of the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. In order to be successful it must meet (at least) three criteria which emerge from his writings. These criteria are discussed alongside attempts by other philosophers to escape the oscillation that McDowell detects.

The third chapter develops, in broad outline, the argument of the thesis. Two lines of thought are traced from the three central elements of McDowell's view identified in the second chapter. The first stems from his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, whilst the second arises from the object-dependence of singular thought. The picture in *Mind and World* incorporates what Julian Dodd has termed a 'modest identity theory of truth'. Put simply, an identity theory states that facts are true propositions, and the theory is modest if facts are taken to be composed of senses. McDowell himself explicitly accepts that his picture is committed to a modest identity theory, though its exact nature is unclear from his writings.

McDowell's semantic externalism appears to provide an account in which singular senses are object-dependent. Thoughts are composed of these senses, and so are dependent on objects in the world for their content. One would expect that facts

too (which are true possible thoughts) would be object-dependent. After all they are composed of object-dependent entities, namely senses. Such a position encourages the idea that objects are explanatorily independent of facts. In Kit Fine's terminology, propositions about objects 'ground' propositions about senses. However, this idea stands in tension with McDowell's rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. He claims that the world is composed of facts and that reality does not exist beyond the conceptual realm. Such a position suggests that objects exist only derivatively from their role in facts: "objects figure in the *world* by figuring in facts, which are true thinkables".² In other words, that propositions about facts 'ground' propositions about objects. Since 'grounding' is an asymmetric notion, there is a tension in McDowell's picture which needs to be resolved.

Chapter Four examines McDowell's Kantian account of objects. Objects are derived from facts. McDowell is not committed to a substantial semantic externalism in which, when we investigate whether our terms have a reference, we look at the world to see whether there is an object corresponding to our sense of the term. Instead, McDowell's semantic externalism is truistic: once a sense appears in a fact, no further questions can be asked about the reference of the term. The sense's figuring in a true possible thought ensures that there is a reference. There can be no sense without reference because objects are derived from facts (which are true possible thoughts).

The conception of objects that McDowell offers, however, fails to sustain important common-sense realist intuitions. Looked at as an account of empirical objects (rather than formal objects, such as mathematical ones), there are deficiencies

² McDowell (1999a) p94. My italics.

which can be brought out. His account can be challenged on the grounds that it is unable to allow that sapient and sentient environments have a common ontology. The discussion is framed as a dialogue between a common-sense realist and a McDowellian thinker. This provides for responses to the reasoning to be considered at every appropriate point. These responses are, in the end, not sufficient to allow his account to meet the realist intuitions. He has therefore failed to provide an account based on mere reminders of common-sense truisms. His account of objects is revisionary and must be either replaced or defended by positive arguments. The quietist's claim that only negative arguments are needed to defend his position is undermined once the position abandons common-sense realism.

In Chapter Five the focus shifts back to the overall argument laid out in Chapter Three. It might be thought that McDowell's particular conception of objects is a peripheral error. If this were the case, since his basic account has not been shown to abandon common-sense realism, his revisionary conception of objects could simply be dropped. This line of thought is countered. I present the arguments of two commentators to show the strength of my objection. Mark Sainsbury argues that McDowell should not maintain a substantial form of semantic externalism if he stands firm to his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. Ruth Millikan argues that McDowell's commitment to a substantial form of semantic externalism stands in tension with his account of sense, which is a central element in his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. The tension which concerns these commentators needs to be addressed. The conception of objects considered in Chapter Four is required. It provides McDowell's explanation of how his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is consistent with his semantic externalism.

The final chapter concludes the argument of the thesis. It is shown that McDowell's theory (as it stands) fails to meet his therapeutic aspirations. In particular he has failed to meet two of the three therapeutic requirements attributed to him in Chapter Two. His conception of objects is revisionary and his picture does not avoid the appearance of an insurmountable problem in world-directed thoughts. Its failure to provide for common-sense realism means that he can no longer avail himself of the quietist strategy which disavows the need to provide positive arguments for its conclusions. Therapeutic dissatisfaction with his picture is the result.

The argument of this thesis is then located within a broader philosophical landscape. Since my argument unsettles the quietist position it provides a platform from which to launch other criticisms. McDowell has frequently rejected the arguments of other philosophers on the basis that they suggest he needs to positively argue for his picture. Once his right to maintain this line of response is undermined, their objections can then be applied successfully. In particular, if my argument is successful then the objections launched against the 'moderate Platonist' by William Child can now be effectively deployed against McDowell's picture. The objections of two other commentators, Robert Brandom and Crispin Wright, will also be considered. Considering his responses to their objections reveals that he has no obvious resources to maintain his view, once his right to the quietist insistence that common-sense is the 'default' position has been undermined by my argument.

Chapter One

The Substance of Mind and World

McDowell's project is to present an alternative to two widely accepted theories which seek to explain how thought can be world-directed. McDowell claims that both pictures are problematic as each generates sceptical concerns about how thought can be world-directed. As a result, we are left caught in an oscillation between two equally unsatisfactory philosophical positions. The underlying cause of this oscillation, McDowell contends, is a shared assumption to which both theories adhere. This assumption is faulty and prevents us from being able to endorse either of them. His alternative picture aims to dispel scepticism by avoiding this assumption and seeks to provide a philosophically satisfying account of the world-directed nature of our thoughts. McDowell terms his alternative a 'therapeutic dissolution' of the philosophical problem. His strategy is inspired by Wittgenstein's teachings and is designed to provide us with the intellectual right to 'shrug our shoulders' at scepticism. He does not aim to show how scepticism can be undermined.

In this chapter, the main aim is to get clear on the general outline of McDowell's picture, primarily as it is presented in *Mind and World*.¹ In this chapter I shall focus on his own conception of his project and so shall adopt his terminology where appropriate. His work falls within the quietist tradition and as a result he offers

¹ McDowell's philosophical writings span forty years. Despite this, the overall consistency of his picture is striking. My main interest in this thesis is the picture that he proposes in his (1994). However, it is necessary to draw on both earlier and later works clarification of his views. I will note, for example in Chapters Four and Five, where his commitments appear to have changed. These changes are interesting from a biographical point of view, but my critique is based on the central elements of his (1994) and his subsequent exposition of that picture. My critique does not rely on assuming that all his publications form a cohesive whole.

intuitive characterisations of what he takes to be common-sense platitudes. Detailed definition and explicit formulation of the conceptual connections holding between his terms are absent. At this stage I shall follow his lead, as I aim to provide a précis of a number of strands of his thinking, not all of which will be explored further in this thesis. Subsequent chapters will draw on the background provided in this chapter, and any further elucidation of his key terms that is needed for my critique will be provided.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. Firstly the oscillation with which McDowell concerns himself will be presented. Next, the underlying assumption (the dualism between reason and nature) that he thinks prompts the oscillation will be introduced. The central section of this chapter is concerned with the resources he deploys to show that we can give up the dualism of reason and nature and adopt his therapeutic dissolution to the problem. We will begin by looking at McDowell's characterisation of reason and nature in his attempt to overcome the traditional dualism between them. After this, we will consider his claims about direct perception. This feature of his account is important for later chapters and is central to his strategy.

In the final section I shall undertake some additional investigation of another important aspect of McDowell's polemic: his rejection of 'sideways-on views of understanding'. This is an idea which he introduces during his discussion of the reason side of the reason/nature dualism. It will be relevant in later chapters of the thesis. The rejection of such views is introduced as a rejection of metaphysical pictures which locate reality outside the conceptual domain. As I have already noted, McDowell is a quietist and none of his claims are meant to serve as substantial

metaphysical theses. His aim is only to utilise common-sense platitudes. However, whilst his initial characterisation of the idea appears innocuous, it later serves to justify several (more controversial) theoretical commitments.

The Oscillation

In *Mind and World* McDowell highlights a philosophical tension between two epistemological theories of perception: the Myth of the Given and coherentism. Both relate the mind to the world and seek to explain the possibility of world-directed thought. He claims that they are equally unsatisfactory and sketches a remedy which is meant to show why both theories have sufficient plausibility to generate an oscillation between them. The task he sets himself falls firmly within the Wittgensteinian tradition. The aim of his work is therapeutic: “the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.”²

The Myth of the Given

McDowell claims that the traditional account of the Given arises from an adherence to what he describes as ‘minimal empiricism’. He characterises such a philosophical commitment as one that establishes a normative connection between the mind and the world of the following kind:

“thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world – to how things are - for whether or not it is correctly executed.”³

² Wittgenstein (1953) §133

³ McDowell (1994) pxii

McDowell fleshes out this notion by maintaining that a commitment to minimal empiricism requires that an external constraint be imposed on the mind's freedom – Kantian spontaneity - by that which is given passively in sensibility. In one traditional account, the Given ensures the objectivity of perceptual judgments. That which is Given is unconceptualised, for the theory requires that nothing obstruct its immediacy or limits its availability to those with certain conceptual capacities. The Given is an immediate perception of the world which, it is claimed, provides an objective foundation for judgements and circumvents scepticism. Though it will need to be conceptualised by rational beings, this traditional account maintains that the Given provides a basis for empirical knowledge which meets the normative restraint required by minimal empiricism.

In recent years, however, several philosophers have contended that a conceptually unstructured Given must fail to ground judgments: there can be no normative relations holding between judgments and unconceptualised perceptual experience. McDowell recapitulates Wilfred Sellars's argument against the Myth of the Given.⁴ Sellars's problem with the Myth is presented as being of more limited than McDowell's. The former is concerned with how the world can serve as a constraint on knowledge, the latter with how any thought can be world-directed.⁵

Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given starts with a critique of sense-datum theories of perception. The basic characterisation of any form of the Myth, however,

⁴ McDowell also reads an argument against the Myth into Wittgenstein's controversial Private Language Argument. He suggests that the argument against an essentially private name turns on the claim that "a bare presence cannot be a ground for anything." [McDowell (1994) p19]

⁵ McDowell writes: "though Sellars... speaks of knowledge in particular, that is just to stress one application of the thought that a normative context is necessary for the idea of being in touch with the world at all, whether knowledgeable or not." [McDowell (1994) p19]

is the claim that there exists something that is both immediately available – requires no prior conceptual apparatus and hence is objective – and can constitute a justification or reason for a judgment and so can warrant a knowledge claim; such things would be “the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge”.⁶ Sellars claims that these two features are incompatible, because nothing which is conceptually unstructured can stand in a normative connection with something that is conceptually structured.

In Sellars's account the problematic claim is immediacy.⁷ Sellars maintains that the process of reasoning is social and concludes that nothing within the domain of reasons could be available to the subject immediately. An insurmountable boundary exists between the logical space of reasons and the opposing logical space of law. The *sui generis* nature of these two spaces entails that the Given cannot provide the “tribunal of experience”⁸ in front of which judgements stand. Its conceptually unstructured character, the very attribute that was supposed to ensure its objectivity, prevents it from being a reason for holding a judgment. McDowell follows Sellars' argument and concurs:

“[W]e cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgment is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities.”⁹

⁶ Sellars (1956) p77

⁷ Sellars (1956) p63

⁸ Quine (1951) p41

⁹ McDowell (1994) p7

Donald Davidson has also argued against the Myth of the Given but believes its rejection motivates coherentism. If one appreciates the validity of the claim that the Given can only provide 'exculpations' rather than reasons it seems that the world's external constraint on the mind can be at best causal, not rational. The perceiver will be justified in accepting only those judgments which cohere with their other judgments. Once argument has shown that reasons must be conceptually structured, Davidson concludes that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."¹⁰

An obvious tension has emerged: it is plausible that minimal empiricism is a necessary condition for world-directed thought, but coherentism denies its very possibility. McDowell claims that an oscillation is set up as a result: the Myth of the Given is philosophically insupportable, but the coherentists' position makes it inexplicable how any of our thoughts can be world-directed. In particular, he suggests that:

"so long as the attractions of empiricism are not explained away, that fact [*viz.* the apparent impossibility of a rational constraint] is only a source of continuing philosophical discomfort, not a basis for being content with abandoning empiricism."¹¹

This complaint reveals the importance of the characterisation of McDowell's task as therapeutic, which we will consider in the next chapter. We cannot be satisfied with coherentism because the underlying assumption which prompts the recoil back

¹⁰ Davidson (1983) p141

¹¹ McDowell (1994) pxvii

to the Myth of the Given is still at work. Moreover, this background assumption has to be removed in a way that is sensitive to the attraction of the Myth (namely, its adherence to minimal empiricism). These considerations justify McDowell's strategy: the successful alternative does not need to engage with the sceptic and provide an argument for the possibility of world-directed thought. Instead, it needs to provide a picture in which world-directed thought appears unproblematic. In so doing, it puts the sceptic on the defensive.

McDowell's methodology justifies his dismissal of a further alternative to the Myth of the Given which "opts out" of the philosophical problem by failing to explain the persuasiveness of the intuitions that generate the tension. Bald naturalism sidesteps the consequences of the dualism of reason and nature which McDowell sees underlying the oscillation, but does so without appreciating the attractions of minimal empiricism and so cannot escape from scepticism, as we shall see in the next section.

The Dualism of Reason and Nature

The layers of the philosophical tension which McDowell is trying to exorcise run deep. On the one hand the Myth of the Given is untenable, but on the other coherentism does not do justice to the attractions of minimal empiricism. As a result (according to McDowell's diagnosis) one cannot feel intellectually satisfied in adopting coherentism. The absence of minimal empiricism in the coherentist picture prompts the recoil to the Myth but the failure of the Myth's attempt to incorporate minimal empiricism leads one back to coherentism. And so the oscillation continues. McDowell suggests that the reason that minimal empiricism cannot feature

successfully in either account is an assumption shared by both theories: the dualism of reason and nature. This assumption precipitates sceptical worries because it precludes the possibility of successfully adopting minimal empiricism.

In his therapy McDowell aims to undermine this background assumption. The natural side of the dualism has been taken over by our scientific conception of the world: meaning and reason are not to be found in this domain; regularities are subsumed under laws which chart them but offer no further explanation. By contrast, the reason side of the dualism incorporates the normative. The concepts applicable here include reason-giving descriptions and the dictates of rationality. McDowell writes of the two spaces:

“I think the best way to understand this contrast of logical spaces is in terms of a distinction between two ways of finding things intelligible: on the one hand, placing things in a context of rational considerations for or against them... and on the other hand, finding things intelligible in the ways in which the natural sciences do, for instance by subsuming them under lawlike generalisations.”¹²

Before we turn to look at the nature side of the dualism, and McDowell’s own re-characterisation which incorporates second nature, it is important to note how the dualism itself undermines minimal empiricism. There is nothing wrong, according to McDowell, with maintaining a strict adherence to the *sui generis* spaces of natural science and the space of reasons. The problems emerge only when all of nature is confined to the realm of natural science. It is this aspect of the dualism that prevents perceptual episodes being events in nature which are already conceptually structured, and it is this possibility that is vital to incorporating minimal empiricism. It is only if perception is both natural and reason-giving that a normative link can exist between

¹² McDowell (1999a) p6

our beliefs and judgements and the world. The Myth fails because the Given is not conceptually structured and hence cannot be reason-giving; coherentism fails because it accepts this logic and so ignores the need for external constraint. McDowell suggests that what goes wrong in Davidson's picture is the failure to fully comply with his own explicit rejection of the scheme/content dualism.

This dualism is slightly different from the reason/nature dualism. The conceptual scheme of a subject is taken to be distinct from the worldly subject matter (the content) it concerns. Davidson rejects this dualism and maintains that a subject's conceptual scheme has to be seen as connected with its content. His manner of incorporating this involves the content of a subject's utterances being imposed from the perspective of a radical interpreter, who is governed by the principle of charity. Scheme and content are not to be dualistically held apart because the subject cannot have only false beliefs. The scheme must have worldly content if it is to be conceived as a system of concepts at all.

McDowell contends that a thorough rejection of the dualism between the scheme and content overcomes the dualism of reason and nature because the world has to be seen as conceptually structured so that it does not stand over against the conceptual scheme. He therefore takes issue with what he sees as a less than full rejection of the scheme/content dualism in Davidson's work. To the extent that Davidson follows through on his rejection of the scheme/content dualism, though, there is an overlap between his and McDowell's account. This is particularly noticeable with respect to Davidson's talk of the 'constitutive ideal of rationality'.

Nature and Second Nature

McDowell's therapy acknowledges that there are two distinct logical spaces, but claims that not all that is natural falls within the space of law. "Operations of nature can include circumstances whose descriptions place them in the logical space of reasons, *sui generis* though that logical space is."¹³ Re-enchanting nature requires that our rationality not be excluded from our animal nature, in particular our second nature; nature is thus able to inhabit both the logical space of reason and that of natural science. This way of thinking McDowell terms a form of Platonism. Rampant Platonism would be the view that the space of reasons is autonomous in such a strong way that it is wholly independent of human beings and is supernatural. His alternative, 'naturalised platonism', concedes a certain autonomy to the space of reasons. However, in denying that all of nature can be subsumed under the space of law, he rejects the idea that the space of reasons is remote from our animality.

McDowell, elsewhere, draws a distinction between two forms of naturalism. On the one hand we have bald naturalism. This position disputes the *sui generis* nature of the reason side of the dualism. It rejects the claim that: "whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are different in kind from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of nature."¹⁴ Since such a view merely labels the *sui generis* nature of the two logical spaces as an illusion, it offers no explanation of our intuition to the contrary. As such, in terms of a therapeutic dissolution, bald naturalism fails because it attracts the same sceptical

¹³ McDowell (1994) pxx

¹⁴ McDowell (1994) p4. Ignoring this claim is what Sellars' terms 'a naturalistic fallacy'. The reasons for bald naturalism's therapeutic failure will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

worries as coherentism. It does not explain away the attraction of minimal empiricism and so it induces the reader to recoil back towards the Myth of the Given.

By contrast, McDowell outlines a ‘liberal naturalism’:

“All we need to do is to stress that they [normative concepts] are concepts of occurrences and states in our lives”¹⁵

“To reassure ourselves that our responsiveness to reasons is not supernatural, we should dwell on the thought that it is our lives that are shaped by spontaneity, patterned in ways that come into view only within an enquiry framed by what Davidson calls ‘the constitutive ideal of rationality’. Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals.”¹⁶

McDowell effects an escape from the oscillation by accepting both the separation of the two logical spaces, and the “transcendental”¹⁷ thought captured by minimal empiricism. There is a normative relation holding between perceptual experiences and thought because perceptual experience is not isolated from our conceptual capacities in the manner which the Myth of the Given suggests. The same capacities that are active in understanding are also involved in experience. In Kantian terms, spontaneity is drawn on in receptivity; the intake of sensibility is already structured by “a faculty that is exercised in actively self-critical control of what one thinks in the light of the deliverances of experience.”¹⁸ On McDowell's picture, perceptual experience can be placed firmly within the logical space of reasons without disputing its claim to be an occurrence in nature because not all that is natural is

¹⁵ McDowell (1999c) p95

¹⁶ McDowell (1994) p78

¹⁷ McDowell (1998a) p365. The thought is transcendental because McDowell claims that minimal empiricism is necessary for “it to be intelligible that our thinking has objective purport at all.” [McDowell (1998a) p365]

¹⁸ McDowell (1994) p49

subsumed under natural scientific description. Bringing out the divergence between McDowell and Davidson, we can see how, for McDowell, experiences figure in the logical space of reasons under the same description as that in which they feature in nature. By contrast, Davidson's monism maintains that reason-giving experiences will figure in nature only by being identical with episodes describable in purely natural scientific terms.

In motivating his diagnosis, McDowell cites the 'demystification' or 'disenchantment' of nature by scientific progress over the last few hundred years, which has led to the removal of reasons from natural scientific description. With this has come 'scientism'. Such a view amounts to the belief that scientific theory details all there is in reality. Anything which lies beyond the realm of scientific investigation is unreal and must be accounted for by way of an error-theory. This view explicitly adheres to the dualism of reason and nature: natural scientific description provides the framework through which all natural episodes can be depicted. As a result of the advancement of science such 'scientism' has become widespread. It is only to modern eyes that the incorporation of reason-giving perceptual experience within nature presents a difficulty. Our human rationality has been separated from our animal nature. For the former can be described only by reference to the realm of reasons, whereas our animal nature must be describable purely in natural scientific terms, if scientism is correct. As a result it seems necessary to incorporate the realm of reasons within natural science in order to unify our human rationality with our animal nature. In this way, bald naturalism and other reductionistic theories have emerged. This need to reconcile rationality and nature would not arise, however, if we rejected the

dualism of reason and nature and refused to see all of nature as describable by natural science.

Second Nature

McDowell suggests a partial re-enchantment of nature based on the notion of second nature, which he finds in Aristotle's ethics. This concept is supposed to allow us to appreciate how reason-giving experience can be part of the natural way of being for rational animals like ourselves, without collapsing into a form of rampant Platonism. Second nature is both a part of our animal nature and within the realm of reasons. Second nature reveals how some of nature falls within the realm of reasons and enables us to reject the rigid dichotomy of the dualism of reason and nature.

For Aristotle, virtuous behaviour can only be performed by a subject who has been taught to appreciate an ethical framework in which such human interactions can be classified, a framework in which the salient features of actions include their ethical decency. This way of thinking incorporates minimal empiricism because the normative connection between thought and the world occurs through the subject perceptually appreciating features of the environment, even though the subject only becomes attuned to these features by acquiring an appropriate conceptual framework. Actualisations of conceptual capacities in perception are part of human beings' second nature: "exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals."¹⁹ McDowell utilises the German word '*Bildung*' to bring out this point. Our *Bildung* includes those aspects of

¹⁹ McDowell (1994) p78

the social context which inform our second nature; it involves the inculcation of a vast stock of knowledge that is embodied in the conceptual framework. Importantly our *Bildung* shapes our animal nature rather than creates it.²⁰

An essential component of our *Bildung* is language, which affects which conceptual capacities one actualizes in perception. 'Generalizing' Aristotle's notion of second nature, McDowell aims to show how our *Bildung* inculcates us with the tenets of practical wisdom, and allows reasons to be perceptually appreciated in a manner akin to that in which ethical values are appreciated in Aristotle's system:

“If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the mounding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature.”²¹

Second nature ensures that the domain of law does not take over the space of nature. Nature is partially re-enchanted because not all its workings will be subsumable under natural scientific descriptions. It enables us to see how our capacity to operate in the space of reasons is not something alien to our being the human animals that we are. We have a first nature, covered by the realm of law and described by natural science, but we also have a second nature. Inculcation into a *Bildung* allows the intelligibility of the space of reasons to permeate our experience and enables us to form a world-view. Re-enchantment does not affect the intelligibility of the realm of natural science; it merely dislodges its claim to encompass the entirety of the natural side of the dualism of reason and nature:

²⁰ McDowell (1994) p88

²¹ McDowell (1994) p84. Inculcation with a *Bildung* is the usual manner for 'having one's eyes opened', but it is not the sole route: McDowell cites the idea of conversion in other contexts [(1995b) p102]

“The point is that the realm of law must not be allowed to usurp the position of the natural. If we prevent it from doing so, we remove the supposed difficulty about how spontaneity can be *sui generis* even while its operations are natural.”²²

Reason and Internal Critical Scrutiny

In considering the reason side of the dualism, McDowell suggests a parallel move to enable us to reject the dualism. We need to be able to see how minimal empiricism can be upheld, and that requires us to make sense of experience as both natural and reason-giving. In other words, such experience must be an occurrence in nature but it must also already possess with conceptual content. It is the absence of this last facet which makes the Myth of the Given a myth. Conceptual content is necessary in order for experience to provide objective grounding for our beliefs and judgements, but it must be included without lapsing back into the dualism of reason and nature. In particular, McDowell suggests that we need to avoid a sideways-on account of understanding. His clearest definition of the concept is as follows:

“a sideways-on picture ... [is] a picture that places reality outside a boundary enclosing the conceptual”²³

McDowell introduces this concept intuitively. In his picture, all sideways-on views disassociate the thinker from the contents of their thoughts (the world) by holding apart the conceptual realm and reality. This disassociation occurs because such views present reality as lying outside the conceptual. One might naturally read his rejection of such views as the thought that the world must be (in principle) capable of being captured in thought. In other words, the world must have a conceptual nature

²² McDowell (2002b) p269

²³ McDowell (1994) p82

if it is to stand in rational connections to our beliefs. McDowell takes this thought to be innocuous. However, as I noted earlier, this idea is important because McDowell justifies a number of other more controversial theoretical commitments on its basis.

In the remainder of this section I shall spell out the connections (which can be discerned in *Mind and World*) between McDowell's rejection of sideways-on views of understanding, the dualism of reason and nature and certain other key concepts: the Neurathian conception of objectivity and the Aristotelian account of ethical perception. (At the end of this chapter, I shall return to the notion of a sideways-on account of understanding and expand upon the characterisation given here. This is mostly helpfully done by looking at McDowell's application of the term in his discussion of other philosophers' works. Distinguishing accounts which are 'sideways-on' from those which are not brings out more precisely what, for McDowell, the rejection of such accounts amounts to. In particular, I shall note that how innocuous his claim in fact is turns on the conception of 'the conceptual realm' which is employed.²⁴)

The most explicit way to link the rejection of sideways-on views of understanding to the dualism of reason and nature is to note that McDowell sees the its rejection as fundamental to his therapeutic dissolution of the philosophical problem. It provides for this dissolution in two ways. Its rejection is an element in

²⁴ In brief, one version of the sideways-on view is provided by conceiving reality as causally defined, in line with natural science. Such a world is incapable of standing in rational connections to our beliefs. This is the model McDowell rejects in his discussion of Donald Davidson and in Kant. He also rejects a model of the world suggested by Robert Brandom in which reality lies within the conceptual realm, but not within the subject's own conceptual realm. Brandom's suggestion is that the radical interpreter can place the subject's behaviour within a framework in which the world can be seen to bear rationally on their beliefs and utterances. McDowell regards this as another version of the sideways-on account because the world lies beyond the subject's conceptual capacities.

McDowell's Aristotelian inspired account of conceptual experience, revealing how conceptual capacities can put us in touch with reality without needing to overcome the insurmountable boundary which the dualism imposes. In addition, the rejection of such accounts allows the Neurathian metaphor of internal critical scrutiny to ensure the objectivity of our beliefs: a more externalist conception of justification is unobtainable. To reiterate: rejecting sideways-on accounts of understanding shows both how conceptual experience might put us in touch with the world (by rejecting the idea that the world exists beyond the conceptual realm) and also forces us to adopt a new account of objectivity (since we cannot have the external foundations that the Myth of the Given promised us).²⁵

Reason and Fully Conceptual Experience

McDowell refers to Sellars, who emphasized the *sui generis* nature of the logical space of reasons in contrast to the space of "empirical description" (the realm of natural science). The logical space of reasons is the realm of normative relations, whereas empirical description is premised on law-like connections and regularities:

"in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state, we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify."²⁶

The relations of justification which make up the space of reasons stand together as a whole, since there is no Given to provide a foundation. Conceptualised

²⁵ To clarify the connections between metaphysics and epistemology, McDowell's rejection of sideways-on accounts is elucidated as an ontological thesis. (I noted earlier that it justifies his idealist metaphysics and this claim will be supported in Chapter Three.) In the light of the way the world is, the epistemic notion of justification has to be re-conceived.

²⁶ Sellars (1956) p76

experience provides the mechanism by which worldly content is injected into the system, and the pervasive nature of the structure of the space of reasons is evident in experience. Returning to McDowell's discussion of Aristotelian ethics, the possible com-presence of ethical values makes it the case that appreciation of individual virtues cannot yield a complete ethical view; a full appreciation of all the subtleties of ethical considerations requires the subject to have the concept of right actions, rather than any particular virtue.²⁷ Analogously, the subject cannot count as perceptually appreciating reasons in the absence of the concept of reasons in general. In particular, what is in view in perceptual appreciation of a reason must be conceived of as standing in rational reason-giving connections to other beliefs and action. With this conception comes an awareness of the obligation to scrutinize our beliefs and make choices, which we shall consider in the next sub-section. The only form of justification available is one launched from a view point which is internal to the system, as a result changes can only be made in a piecemeal fashion.

McDowell's attempt to still the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism relies on his conception of the constraint that experience places on "the domain of responsible freedom".²⁸ The conceptual domain is unbounded on the outside; there is no boundary across which the Given impinges because only fully conceptualised experience imparts constraint. In this way minimal empiricism can be incorporated into a satisfactory theory of world-directed thought. In order for experience to justify beliefs and judgements, however, it must be objective. Rejecting the Myth's demands that the Given be non-conceptual and hence immediate, an alternative notion of objectivity is required. McDowell sees the conceptual domain as

²⁷ McDowell (1979) p53

²⁸ McDowell (1994) p13

governed by its internal rational relations. One cannot occupy the realm of reasons without due sensitivity to one's obligation to scrutinize the content and connections between the beliefs one holds.

The capacities drawn on passively in experience count as conceptual precisely because of the rational relations that govern them. They are also the very same capacities that are operative in judgement. This identification is vital because the obligation to scrutinise the concepts one employs will only be achievable if the very same capacities are operative in passivity and spontaneity:

“The very same capacities must also be able to be exercised in judgments and that requires them to be rationally linked into a whole system of concepts and conceptions within which their possessor engages in a continuing activity of adjusting her thinking to experience.”²⁹

McDowell claims that unless the very same capacities are operative at the passive and spontaneous levels, the import of experience could never exercise constraint on a thinker's beliefs because it would be incapable of forming an aspect of the thinker's world-view. What is more, because of the ever-changing nature of experience, the obligation critically to reflect is constant – no end point can be assumed as this might arouse the latent suspicion of a pernicious idealism. The world must not be defined as that which would be discovered at the end of inquiry, for such a conception is a form of subjective imposition. The world is not a product of the Understanding.

²⁹ McDowell (1994) p47

As we shall see in the next section, McDowell's rejection of sideways-on views of understanding precludes the possibility of external validation or external foundations for our thoughts. Irrespective of this, however, McDowell launches an attack on the idea of external validation based on his Aristotelian account of ethical perception. It is an essential part of that account that ethical values are only perceivable by those who have been properly brought up. Education provides for indoctrination into a shared *Bildung*, and this is a pre-requisite for such perceptual appreciation. No charge of 'irrationality' can be levelled at those who stand outside the community's value system.

External Validation and Secondary Properties

McDowell's criticism of any attempt to provide external validation for our judgements is essentially that such a form of justification is unsatisfactory because it cannot provide for the validity of secondary properties. Proponents of such external models of validation argue that secondary properties are simply projections of our subjectivity and must be explained by way of an error theory. However, he contends that such secondary properties are legitimate and that the argument instead shows that external validation is not the correct conception of justification. He argues against adopting the sideways-on perspective in 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World'. Such a perspective would be acceptable only if "the world is fully describable in terms of properties that can be understood without essential reference to their effects on sentient beings."³⁰ In assuming this, however, the proponent of an external model of validation is begging the question.

³⁰ McDowell (1983) p114

Taking colour concepts as a prime example, McDowell concludes that the sideways-on approach cannot accommodate such secondary properties. It is not possible to abstract from the point of view from which colours are seen as aspects of experience and explain colour concepts simply as aspects of a parochial point of view on a unique reality. The concepts themselves cannot be in view from a perspective that is insensitive to the underlying similarities that the concepts pick out: the concept of, say, red is inextricably linked to the idea of looking red, and this latter concept is unavailable from a sideways-on perspective. The sideways-on approach concludes from these considerations that such properties are not legitimate. By contrast, McDowell's concludes that the sideways-on approach is not legitimate. In *Mind and World* he provides an account of objectivity which relies instead on our on-going obligation to engage in critical scrutiny of the elements of our world-view (concepts). According to his account, since secondary properties are capable of entering into judgements and featuring in conceptualised experience, such concepts are legitimate aspects of the world.

McDowell rejects the sideways-on theorists' claim that such secondary properties are 'subjective' in any pejorative sense. He claims that the subjectivity lost in the sideways-on account is indispensable. Such concepts are only subjective because they do not belong in a conception of objectivity which requires concepts to be grounded in a reality conceived as external to the conceptual domain. However, colour concepts do belong in an alternative conception of objectivity: they are "there to be experienced, as opposed to being a mere figment of the subjective state that

purports to be an experience of it.”³¹ He concludes that an account which fails to appreciate concepts that are subjective only in the former sense cannot be acceptable. It should be clear that the argument between McDowell and the external validation theorist is moot: neither has conclusively proved their case. However, McDowell’s quietism can be seen at work in this context. He aims to undermine a requirement which conflicts with his therapeutic alternative, rather than to argue positively for his own theory.

Without a sideways-on view in place, the objectivity of perceptual judgments in McDowell’s account is derived from the fact that the concepts that are actualised in receptivity are those very concepts that are exercised in spontaneity. In spontaneity the conceptual framework is open to critical evaluation, and it is held to be vital for normative constraint on thought that the concepts drawn on in receptivity are susceptible to critical reflection. Perception constrains the perceiver’s world-view for, in the face of conflict, critical reflection will justify changes to the world-view. However, change can only be piecemeal. The relevant metaphor is Neurath’s ship: only piece by piece can the system be overhauled.

Reason and Neurathian Objectivity

The metaphor of sailors rebuilding their ship at sea originates with Otto Neurath: “We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able

³¹ McDowell (1983) p136

to dismantle it in dry-dock and reconstruct it there out of the best materials.”³² For McDowell, the salient features of the metaphor are:

“One can find oneself called on to jettison parts of one's inherited ways of thinking; and, though this is hard to place in Neurath's image, weaknesses that reflection discloses in inherited ways of thinking can dictate the formation of new concepts and conceptions.”³³

Neurath, as a logical positivist, was trying to explain how components within a scientific theory could face the Quinean “tribunal of experience”³⁴ despite the holism that Quine and Duhem maintained existed within any scientific theory or enclosed belief system. In the absence of content that is Given, the mechanism of self-correction is vital for the integrity of the conceptual system. As Wilfred Sellars notes:

“[E]mpirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation*, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, thought not *all* at once.”³⁵

McDowell stresses that new concepts can be formed – unlike Neurath's vision of a boat at sea, which cannot (presumably) take on new planks. Following the analogy, he makes use of the thought that some planks may be easier to change than others. Pieces of the hull, for example colour concepts, would be incredibly difficult to remove: “[n]o doubt there is no serious prospect that we might need to reshape the concepts at the outermost edges of the system, the most immediately observational concepts, in response to pressures from inside the system.”³⁶

³² Neurath (1959) p201

³³ McDowell (1994) p81

³⁴ Quine (1951) p41

³⁵ Sellars (1956) p79

³⁶ McDowell (1994) p13

To summarise: rational beings are under a standing obligation to adopt a critical stance and to assess the relations that obtain between concepts in their conceptual framework; this obligation is, in part, constitutive of the realm of reasons. It is the place of concepts in the realm of spontaneity that justifies labelling them as conceptual because it is in this region that the thinker can consider and assess them. However, because the very same concepts are drawn on passively in experience they satisfy the requirements for objectivity (as the subject of internal critical scrutiny) and because of their place in the conceptual framework, they are capable of featuring in judgements and beliefs. Minimal empiricism is secured because perceptual content directly features in our evolving world-view, unlike in the perceptual content given in the Myth which is incapable of providing reasons.

Critical reflection is vital if experience is to impact on the freedom of spontaneity. However, critical assessment can take place only from within the conceptual framework being assessed. There can be no external validation of the conceptual framework because it is only from within the framework that the relevant similarities and differences can be appreciated. Our conceptual capacities are actualisations of our second nature, informed and honed by our *Bildung*, our social training which primarily includes learning a language. Talk of 'second nature' allows for the possibility of our being initiated into the space of reasons without needing to think of the space of reasons as supernatural.

McDowell's use of the Neurathian metaphor rests on his rejection of sideways-on views of understanding. Rejecting accounts in which reality and the thinker's conceptual systems are separated requires us to give up the idea that we can base the

objectivity of our beliefs on foundations which lie outside the realm of the conceptual. Such foundations would be bits of Given content, reaching us from beyond the conceptual. With such a vision dispelled, the possibility of external validation must also be dismissed. Following this, the corresponding Cartesian conception which identifies the objective with that which is susceptible to external validation must also be abandoned.

As we saw in the previous sub-section, McDowell does not simply reject the possibility of external validation, he aims to undermine its attractiveness by focusing on the case of secondary properties. This is necessary to avoid his account being susceptible to claims of “arrogant anthropocentrism”³⁷ from the thinkers his therapy is meant to cure. He replaces the Cartesian conception of objectivity with an internal conception of justification. Internal critical scrutiny is designed to provide his response to such sceptical worries by explicitly recognising the source and power of the Myth's hold over us. It serves to quell the urge to return to the Cartesian model. This is important because McDowell's picture requires the idea that experience draws on the perceiver's conceptual capacities in order to avoid the Given, which cannot be accorded reason-giving status. A critical perceiver cannot pretend to be a rational thinker, unless he has fulfilled his obligation to scrutinize the relations that hold between the concepts in his conceptual framework.

Despite its importance, McDowell's quietism means that he does not give any further content to the intuitive idea of ‘critical scrutiny’ other than his stress on the appropriateness of the internal piecemeal changes. For example, he considers the

³⁷ McDowell (1994) p30

suggestion that our *Bildung* might be perceived as a bastion of “parochialism or reliance on bad prejudice”³⁸ and responds by stressing the Neurathian metaphor. His approach is to reject the unargued assumption that external validation gives us a correct conception of objectivity. He aims to persuade us to reject the idea that external validation of our beliefs is necessary before we can ignore the sceptic:

“It is pointless to chafe at the fact that what we believe is what we believe. We can justify beliefs we hold about how things are... only by appealing to what are in fact further beliefs we hold about how things are; but it would be a mistake to let this tend to undermine our confidence in the beliefs, or in their possession of a subject-matter largely independent of themselves – our confidence that we have reality more or less within our cognitive grasp.”³⁹

Direct Perception: Conceptualised Experience and Disjunctivism

Another benefit that McDowell sees in rejecting the sideways-on view is that one can make space for a robust notion of intentionality: our perception essentially allows the world to reveal itself to us. McDowell contends that one of the most obvious forms of sceptical concern that arises in the coherentist position and prompts the recoil back to the Myth of the Given is the idea that the content of our beliefs arises from the causal relations we stand in to the environment. The dualism of reason and nature is present here in the forced separation between our beliefs and our interaction with the environment. The causal relations we stand in are outside the realm of reasons. The connection between the mind and the world cannot be reason-giving, as minimal empiricism requires. In *Mind and World* the Gadamerian image of “having one's eyes opened” presents in McDowell's account in two ideas: facts, the contents of the world, are made manifest in our fully conceptualised experience; and

³⁸ McDowell (1994) p81

³⁹ McDowell (1983) p128

our singular thoughts are object-dependent. The first idea is by far the most prominent in *Mind and World*; the second idea, however, has a significantly longer history in his philosophical writings.

Facts are made manifest in fully conceptualised experience

This idea arises from McDowell's contention that in order for experience to allow us direct access to the world it must be capable of providing reasons for our beliefs. This requires it to have two important characteristics: there must be no epistemic intermediaries of the kind traditionally offered by empiricists' between experience and the world; and what is given in experience must be conceptually structured and hence able to be reason-giving. The Myth of the Given secured the first goal without the second; Davidson's coherentism achieves the second without even pretending that our beliefs are normatively constrained by the world – only causal connections link our beliefs with the world, not rational ones. McDowell's account postulates that in order to still the oscillation between the two “we need a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive but reflect conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity.”⁴⁰ ‘Reflect’ here amounts to the claim that the type of experience enjoyed by sapient creatures is essentially conceptual. In order for it to be reason-giving, such experiences must passively draw on conceptual capacities that also operate at the spontaneous level. The same concepts that feature in our evolving world view are also elements of conceptualised experience. McDowell expresses the same idea using the phrases that experience is

⁴⁰ McDowell (1994) p23

“equipped with conceptual content”⁴¹ and that conceptual capacities are “already at work in experiences”.⁴²

More than this is required, however, because the conceptualised nature of experience must not force a boundary between mind and world that needs to be overcome. What is taken in during fully conceptualised experience is the world itself, ‘everything that is the case’. On this Tractarian conception, aspects of the world can be directly perceived in fully conceptualised experience and also directly considered in thought:

“In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience... *That things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the world... a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.”⁴³

Put differently: the contents that features in true possible thoughts are identical with aspects of the world. This identity statement is very important and will be considered again in Chapter Three. McDowell’s proposal is that when experience is veridical, the subject is in contact with the world, and since there are no epistemic intermediaries between the contents of thought and the world, the conceptual structure of experience does not re-introduce a barrier between mind and world: our eyes are open to the world because that which we perceive can also be an element of reality. The world is one of conceptualised facts and so conceptualised experience allows for the world to exercise constraint over our world-view.

⁴¹ McDowell (1994) p25

⁴² McDowell (1994) p24

⁴³ McDowell (1994) p26

The mechanism by which facts can be made manifest in fully conceptualised experience is dependent on Kant's notions of spontaneity and receptivity and his claim that both make a non-separable contribution to the content of experience. Spontaneity, the Understanding, is the realm of conceptual freedom. In actively judging whether to accept a thought with a particular content the subject is unconstrained. In an intuition, however, the conceptual capacities freely exercised in spontaneity are drawn on passively: the operation of receptivity in intuition ensures that the mind's freedom is constrained by the world. The contribution of both elements is non-separable: it is not possible to factor out the individual contributions, as the Myth of the Given allowed. In his Woodbridge Lectures, McDowell talks explicitly about the impossibility of aspects of the world being available in experience in the absence of the involvement of operations of spontaneity (and its conceptual connections). This connection operates in the other direction too. Following Kant:

“Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”.⁴⁴

In order for facts to be made manifest to us the operations of both spontaneity and receptivity are jointly necessary for the existence of such experience. As a result facts, which are elements of the world, can be the content of perceptual experience and, because of the conceptualised nature of experience, facts can also be the content of an active judgement.

⁴⁴ Kant (1929) A51/B75

Singular thoughts are object-dependent

The second idea at work in McDowell's thought ensuring openness to the world is the object-dependence of singular thought. He connects this form of semantic externalism with the disjunctive theory of perception. In his early writings, adopting object-dependence overcomes the gap between the subjective realm and the objective realm. It requires thought to be fundamentally world-directed. Allied to this, disjunctivism allows McDowell to unsettle Cartesian scepticism. It provides for the possibility of intrinsically world-directed thought and is used to unsettle the sceptic's right to employ the indistinguishability of veridical and non-veridical thought in his argument. The default assumption that we are entitled to is the unproblematic possibility of world-directed thought. (Outside McDowell's concerns with Cartesian scepticism, it is not necessary to expound both these theories about the individuation of thought-content together.) We shall consider 'Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space' in order to clarify the exact nature of McDowell's objection to the Cartesian divide, and the interconnection he sees between object-dependence and disjunctivism.

Bertrand Russell wanted to eliminate the possibility of a speaker failing to express a thought. Such possibilities arise when a speaker uses a singular referring expression with no extension. By restricting singular referring expressions to objects with which the speaker is acquainted, namely sense-data, Russell preserves the Cartesian insight that the contents of the mind are transparent: "the epistemology of acquaintance shapes itself accordingly into a rejection of fallibility."⁴⁵ However,

⁴⁵ McDowell (1986a) p236

adopting this Cartesian motivation leads to the disconnection of mind and world. The transparency of the mental irrespective of how things are in the material world leads one to wonder how it is possible for thought to be world-directed: “within the Cartesian picture there is a serious question about how it can be that experience, conceived from its own point of view, is not blank or blind, but purports to be revelatory of the world we live in.”⁴⁶ McDowell therefore, suggests a broadening of Russell's notion of acquaintance to allow, for example, that one has acquaintance with a cat that one can see in front of one:

“A typical visual experience of say, a cat, situates its object for the perceiver... we can see how the experiences' placing of the cat equips the perceiver with knowledge of where in the world it is... In view of the kind of object a cat is, there is nothing epistemologically problematic in suggesting that this locating perceptual knowledge of it suffices to know of which object it is”.⁴⁷

Unlike Russell's original theory, this extension does not conflict with the Fregean distinction between sense and reference. Frege's principle individuates senses such that where speakers may, without failure of rationality, take opposing views towards sentences containing co-referring names, the senses will not be identical. Russell believed that thoughts were actually composed of the objects referred to in them, thus conflicting thoughts could not be rationally held when co-referring names are used. Russell's own individuation of thoughts is therefore too coarse-grained to be extended beyond the realm of sense-data, in which names cannot but be recognized as co-referring.

⁴⁶ McDowell (1986a) p243

⁴⁷ McDowell (1986a) p231

According to McDowell, Russell's mistake is to think that it is the reference rather than the sense which is important for distinguishing thoughts.⁴⁸ Once that assumption is rejected, Russell's conception of singular thoughts can be united with object-dependent senses in thoughts about objects other than sense data: "Russell's insight can perfectly well be formulated within this framework, by claiming that there are Fregean thought-constituents (singular senses) which are object-dependent, generating an object-dependence in the thought in which they figure."⁴⁹ Thus rather than having object-dependent sense-data, we have object-dependent senses: one could not have a thought made up of these very thought-constituents in the absence of the object to which they pertain. This expansion of Russell's notion of acquaintance and his conception of singular thought, McDowell claims, allows us to sidestep the Cartesian motivation behind Russell's thinking and so utilise his tool against the sceptic.

Disjunctivism and Cartesian Scepticism

McDowell's most significant deployment of *de re* singular thought is against the Cartesian conception of experience. Object-dependence, as we have seen, overcomes the Cartesian divide between thoughts and the world. Despite this, scepticism can still appear to be a worry: the possibility of object-dependent thoughts does not remove the worry that all of our thoughts are actually object-independent. We could still be brains-in-vats, because there is no way for us to tell whether or not our thoughts are object-dependent, thoughts of both types are subjectively indistinguishable. McDowell adopts disjunctivism along with externalism to

⁴⁸ Nathan Salmon's *Frege's Puzzle* [(1986) Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press] provides an alternative diagnosis of this problem.

⁴⁹ McDowell (1986a) p233

overcome this type of scepticism. The central tenet of disjunctivism is the falsity of the claim that there is an experiential core common to both veridical perceptions and misleading perceptions (when both purport to reveal the same situation). McDowell labels this view, which entails the possible illusory character of every experience, the 'highest common factor conception'. This view has led empiricists to postulate sense data or other mediating entities which occur whenever perceptual experience does, regardless of the accuracy of its representation of the world.

The empiricists' stance on experience is motivated by the subjective indistinguishability of veridical and misleading experiences; it appears that in either case, there is nothing accessible to the subject that justifies drawing a distinction between them. Therefore, the content in each case is the same – namely some intervening object whose content is the 'highest common factor', rather than, when the experience is veridical, the object that one immediately perceives. McDowell does not dispute the indistinguishability of the experiences; he merely provides a picture in which the 'common factor' approach is not required.

The disjunctive theory of perception allows that when one has a singular thought there is no inherent boundary to be overcome to justify the idea that we are in touch with the world, such as would be introduced by a reduction of singular thought to Russell's theory of descriptions.⁵⁰ "In a given case the answer to the question 'Which [disjunct]?' would state a further fact about the disposition of things in the inner realm; since this further fact is not independent of the outer realm, we are

⁵⁰ Russell's theory of descriptions distinguishes the grammatical form and the logical form of sentences containing definite descriptions. The former is given by the subject-predicate analysis, but the latter contains an existential proposition. For example, the sentence 'The king of France is bald', where $Fx = x$ is the king of France and $Bx = x$ is bald, would be given by: $(\exists x) (Fx \ \& \ (\forall y) (Fy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Bx)$.

compelled to picture the inner and outer realms as interpenetrating not separate from one another by the characteristically Cartesian divide.”⁵¹

McDowell's therapeutic approach means his account does not have to justify the conviction that most of our experience falls into the favourable disjunct.⁵² McDowell takes it that in revealing how the difficulty to which scepticism attaches can be in principle possible, we earn the right to shrug our shoulders at the sceptic's questions. Thus in this case, in revealing how it is possible for us to have world-directed thought, he has achieved his aim. Sceptical questions are exorcised because the common-sense conviction that we do in general have world-directed thought is the “default”⁵³ position. All McDowell believes needs to be done is to reveal the unproblematic *possibility* of world-directed thought; a highly persuasive argument involving empirical considerations or a guarantee involving non-empirical considerations is not his aim. The sceptic's starting points has been undermined and so the doubts have become question-begging. “It would matter if it [the sceptic's argument] showed that the very idea of openness is unintelligible, and it does not show that.”⁵⁴

The default presupposition works at several points in McDowell's philosophy. Its main contention is that we must start from the common-sense point of view rather than the sceptic's and that this serves to rule out sceptical doubt so long as the sceptic does not internally undermine the common-sense situation. In the Cartesian brain-in-

⁵¹ McDowell (1986a) p241

⁵² Michael Williams raises this as an objection [Williams (1996) p106]; and Davidson also countenances a similar thought [Davidson (1999) p107].

⁵³ De Gaynesford (2004) p5. McDowell's right to the 'default' presumption is discussed again in the next chapter.

⁵⁴ McDowell (1994) p113

the-vat scenario, the supposition that we could have experience that is qualitatively indistinguishable from that which we currently enjoy and actually be brains stimulated by a mad scientist creates problems for common-sense. It implies, by utilising the 'common-factor' approach to perception, that the experience we currently enjoy is necessarily divorced from the world – we never really reach out to objects in thought. Disjunctivism blocks this implication, though and once invoked McDowell claims that the persistent sceptical doubt that one might be a brain-in-a-vat can be ignored. The default position is that our conviction that we are generally in touch with the world is correct.

Conclusions on Direct Perception

It is important to note that the two ideas which both yield the image of openness in *Mind and World* do not necessarily sit together comfortably. Object-dependence, in the light of disjunctivism, overcomes the separation between the subjective realm and the world. Similarly, fully conceptualised experience in which the world is made manifest to the perceiver also overcomes the forced separation between the subjective realm and the world. However, two different conceptions of the world are being deployed by McDowell: a world containing objects is employed in *de re* thought; whilst his account of reason-giving experience is premised on a Tractarian notion of the world in which it is composed of facts not things. These two sources of openness will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Three, where I will challenge McDowell's belief that his account can make use of both these positions.

Sideways-on Views of Understanding: Historical Application

Before concluding this initial elucidatory chapter I wish to add a further note on the idea of sideways-on accounts of understanding. In *Mind and World* McDowell contends that sideways-on views of understanding must be abandoned. Recall that such views take as their starting point the assumption that the world and the thinker's conceptual scheme can be held apart in the account of understanding. The thinker is disassociated from his or her thoughts because reality lies outside the conceptual domain.

“a sideways-on picture ... [is] a picture that places reality outside a boundary enclosing the conceptual”⁵⁵

The problem with this picture, McDowell maintains, is that it fails to inject content into the thinker's conceptual system: “it cannot depict anything genuinely recognizable as understanding of a set of concepts with empirical substance.”⁵⁶ When we come to share a conceptual system with the thinker, we are not in the position suggested by sideways-on theorists, in which thinkers stand apart from the content of their thoughts. McDowell contends that placing the world outside the boundary of the conceptual systems forces our thinking into a shape in which Cartesian concerns about our ‘confinement’ within our belief systems are encouraged.

We have already discussed McDowell's use of this claim in *Mind and World*. We saw the connections which he makes between the notion of a sideways-on view and the dualism of reason and nature, the Neurathian conception of internal

⁵⁵ McDowell (1994) p82

⁵⁶ McDowell (1994) p35

justification and his conception of experience. In this section my aim is to get clear on which types of account McDowell's rejection of this model prohibits. Firstly we will look at McDowell's discussion of Kantian metaphysics, where he explicitly rejects the sideways-on model. Next, Davidson's coherentism will be discussed. Once his rejection of the scheme/content dualism has been outlined, we will consider McDowell's criticisms of certain aspects of his work. McDowell objects only to certain ways of understanding Davidson's radical interpreter. Distinguishing those that are acceptable from those which are not allows us to see more clearly how McDowell understands the rejection of sideways-on accounts. This section is important because, as I noted, the claim is supposed to be innocuous. My aim is not to argue at this stage that the claim is not a common-sense platitude. My concern is only to elucidate as clearly as possible how McDowell uses his rejection of such accounts in criticising other philosophical models.

Kantian Metaphysics

According to McDowell the sideways-on view manifests itself in a number of theories of the interaction between the mind and the world: the Empiricist's Myth and coherentism are two examples, Kant's transcendental philosophy another. The underlying dualism of reason and nature is manifest when the separation between the world and the conceptual realm places the realm of nature outside the conceptual realm. In such accounts, the sideways-on picture essentially involves a boundary that precludes anything natural falling within the realm of reasons. McDowell compares the outside realm of this particular form of sideways-on account with Kant's realm of the supersensible, and maintains that:

“[t]he way to correct what is unsatisfactory in Kant’s thinking about the supersensible is rather to embrace the Hegelian image in which the conceptual is unbounded on the outside.”⁵⁷

It is important to appreciate that sideways-on pictures are metaphysical in spirit. The essential claim of a sideways-on picture, that reality exists outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual, is metaphysical. In rejecting the possibility of any sideways-on picture, McDowell is claiming not simply that we cannot hope to formulate such a picture because of our inability to transcend our own conceptual scheme (a purely epistemic limitation). He is claiming rather that such a picture gives a fundamentally false model of the world and the mind’s place in it (a metaphysical claim).

The rejection of sideways-on views of understanding and the abandonment of the traditional conception of objectivity are both necessary to overcome the dualism of reason and nature, and as we saw above, they are intimately linked. The sideways-on view, in McDowell’s opinion, encourages the idea that external validation of our beliefs is possible. Such a view provides for the object of our thoughts (the world) to be accessible from perspectives other than our own. Hence sideways-on pictures and the external validation conception of objectivity re-inforce each other as obstacles standing in the way of the therapeutic dissolution he recommends. When the sideways-on picture appears in a Kantian guise, McDowell suggests that the traditional notion of objectivity arises because the conception of reality as external to the conceptual realm presents itself as ‘the seat of true objectivity’:

⁵⁷ McDowell (1994) p83

“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... We are asked to suppose that the fundamental structure of the empirical world is somehow a product of spontaneity, in interaction with supersensible reality, which, as soon as it is in the picture, strikes us as the true seat of objectivity.”⁵⁸

Since the sideways-on picture places reality outside the conceptual realm, the spectre of a pernicious form of idealism emerges because anything less than the reality, understood as remote from the conceptual domain, will appear to have missed ‘the seat of true objectivity’. McDowell aims to remove this illusion, and recast objectivity so that the reality which features within the conceptual realm can support the required objectivity. In order of therapeutic importance, the rejection of sideways-on views of understanding and the metaphysical picture which embodies this error, comes first. Once this has been achieved, a re-working of objectivity will help to ease us out of sceptical worries.

Davidson’s Official Position

It is not necessary to espouse the extreme realism manifest in the Kantian conception of noumena, however, to propound a sideways-on view of understanding. Davidson’s causal theory can also be seen as establishing such a view in which the empirical world (rather than the noumenal world) lies outside the conceptual realm. Recall that McDowell characterises sideways-on accounts as those which place reality outside the realm of the conceptual. Kant’s theory defines the supersensible realm as being (in principle) unthinkable. It clearly, therefore, falls within the definition of a ‘sideways-on account’. Davidson’s theory, by contrast, defines reality along natural scientific lines: reality is governed by causal relations. This too is a sideways-on

⁵⁸ McDowell (1994) p42

account, in McDowell's view, because reality cannot stand in rational relations to our beliefs. Reality must be capable of having normative significance: it must therefore have lie within the conceptual realm.

In 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', Davidson attacks the scheme/content dualism, the so called 'third dogma of empiricism'. This argument reveals that the Given is a Myth. Davidson considers the plausibility of the claim that different conceptual schemes could be adopted by rational creatures. Allowing that conceptual schemes are embodied in language⁵⁹ entails that translation failure indicates the presence of conflicting conceptual schemes. There are two possible cases: total failure of translation and partial failure of translation. On the first possibility, Davidson argues that "nothing... could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour."⁶⁰ The opponent of this claim must provide some neutral ground as a basis for the claim that different conceptual schemes are present. The strong dependencies between language and attitude ascription mean that one cannot argue that the absence of a change of terminology indicates the absence of a change of conceptual scheme. As Thomas Kuhn has argued, when a language transforms after a scientific revolution, the fact that some of the old vocabulary is still in place does not provide evidence for or against the identification of changes in the conceptual scheme.⁶¹

⁵⁹ This assumption is relatively uncontroversial. The dependencies between language and ascriptions of attitudes such as believing, wishing and intending are particularly strong once one starts dealing with any attitudes more complicated than very basic and immediate wants.

⁶⁰ Davidson (1974) p185

⁶¹ See Kuhn (1962).

Davidson envisages that one might argue that the neutral ground is provided by the world, or experience, which is organized by or made to fit with the conceptual scheme. He discerns four possible combinations here, corresponding to the aforementioned contrasts (world/experience and organized by/made to fit with) and proceeds to group them into pairs and argue against each of them in turn. The first two combinations are: organising the world, and organising experience. The idea would be that either the world or experience provides the neutral ground against which alternative conceptual schemes can be measured according to their success at organising the subject matter. Davidson argues, however, that only a collection of objects can be organised and so in order to recognize an alternative conceptual scheme one would need a shared ontology that individuates the same objects as the ones to be organised. But, this level of similarity is likely to enable interpretability making it a language much like ours. Consider local failure of translation between two languages, which are inter-translatable: “what enables us to make [or identify] this point in particular cases is an ontology common to the two languages, with concepts that individuate the same objects.”⁶²

Davidson then turns to the second pair of combinations: fitting with experience and fitting with the world. The idea is that the neutral ground for comparison is, once again, either the world or our experience and that alternative conceptual schemes can be measured against the criteria of fitting with the subject matter. Davidson argues that for ‘fitting’ to take place the conceptual scheme must match the entirety of the empirical evidence: fitting is really a covert way of ensuring the truthfulness of the conceptual scheme. However, Davidson’s way of

⁶² Davidson (1974) p192

understanding truth, Tarski's Convention T,⁶³ relies on the notion of translatability. Thus identification of alternative conceptual schemes cannot proceed from their ability to fit the evidence, because inter-translatability is required and this conflicts with the characterisation of alternative conceptual schemes as non-translatable.

Next consider the idea of partial translatability. The principles of Quinean radical interpretation will have to be adopted to interpret that part of the language which is translatable. The interpreter will have to determine both the meaning of an utterance and the belief expressed by that utterance, under the assumption that the utterance is held true by the speaker. However, it will not be possible to solve for both determinants unless the interpreter further assumes a broad correspondence between his beliefs and the speaker's beliefs. Partial translation is only possible if we adopt a principle of charity:

“the principle directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker.”⁶⁴

Broad agreement is a pre-requisite for cases of disagreement to arise. Thus, once the interpreter starts on his partial translation, the remaining collection of non-translatable phrases will not (Davidson argues) provide evidence that an alternative conceptual scheme is being employed by the speaker, it will always be possible to cash out the differences in terms of beliefs rather than concepts.

⁶³ “[A]ccording to Tarski's Convention T, a satisfactory theory of truth for a language L must entail, for every sentence s of L, a theorem of the form ‘s is true if and only if p’ where ‘s’ is replaced by a description of s and ‘p’ by s itself if L is English, and by a translation of s into English if L is not English.” [Davidson (1974) p194] Both Davidson and McDowell agree that this is the best way of understanding truth.

⁶⁴ Davidson (1983) p148

As McDowell notes,⁶⁵ the argument attacks the thought that the conceptual scheme is autonomous – that the world does not determine the scheme to be adopted. Davidson launches a second attack on the third dogma in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'. In this paper the idea that content can arise from outside the scheme, in the form of the Given, is refuted. These two arguments can be seen as working in tandem to disprove the third dogma of empiricism by attacking each side of the scheme/content dualism.

Radical Interpretation and the Conceptual Realm

If one reads the interpreter as imposing the content of the thinker's beliefs upon them purely on the basis of the causal environment in which they stand (as for example, Richard Rorty reads Davidson) then a 'sideways-on' model is in use. The causal environment (the object of the subject's beliefs) is in view independently of the subject. A boundary is drawn around the conceptual and the world which exists beyond it. (McDowell does suggest an alternative reading on which, in coming to find a thinker comprehensible, we move to a standpoint in which we share "with her a standpoint *within* a system of concepts".⁶⁶ In this next chapter I shall consider those aspects of Davidson's account which McDowell is happy to adopt.)

We have seen that Kant's model of the supersensible, and Davidson's causal model of reality are both examples of 'sideways-on' accounts: they both locate reality beyond the realm of the conceptual. Another model which McDowell rejects is one

⁶⁵ McDowell (1994) p137

⁶⁶ McDowell (1994) p35-6

suggested to him by Robert Brandom.⁶⁷ This model does locate reality within the conceptual realm, but not within the subject's own conceptual realm. McDowell insists that a model in which the radical interpreter imposes their standards of rationality onto the subject will still be a sideways-on model because it cannot entitle us to see the subject as operating within the domain of reasons:

“it is someone other than the individual he hopes to be entitled to see as an observer who is supposed to place what Brandom hopes to be entitled to see as observational judgements or reports in a rational context along with the facts they concern.”⁶⁸

In the ‘Afterword’ to *Mind and World*, McDowell explicitly confirms that such an account would be a sideways-on view of understanding: he rejects the thought that one can assess rationality from outside the subject's own point of view. He claims that making thought reasonable only “from the standpoint of rationality”⁶⁹ precludes an adequate conception of intentionality. Consider a cyclist who makes certain manoeuvres in completing a course. Each bodily reaction to the changes in the course can be explained as rational from an outside standpoint, but it is highly implausible that they are done by the cyclist for those reasons. “The connection between a movement and the goal is the sort of thing that *could* be a reason for making the movement, but a skilled cyclist makes such movements without needing reasons for doing so.”⁷⁰

Whether the subject's response is made for a reason is to be assessed from the subject's point of view only. A state is only possessed of the relevant rational representational content if it could be appreciated to have that content by the subject

⁶⁷ Brandom (1998)

⁶⁸ McDowell (1998b) p408

⁶⁹ McDowell (1994) p163

⁷⁰ McDowell (1994) p163

themselves. “The subject’s being in that state must be an actualization of conceptual capacities it possesses.”⁷¹ The interpreter goes wrong, therefore, if he imputes rationality from the outsider’s perspective. He does this when he makes use of conceptual capacities which the subject lacks or when he makes use of conceptual capacities that are not in fact actualised in the subject’s experience (as in the case of the cyclist).

McDowell’s thinking serves, therefore, to preclude not merely accounts which try to ground rationality outside the conceptual realm. It also rules out ones which, whilst locating reality within the conceptual domain, place a boundary between the *subject’s* conceptual realm and the world:

“To avoid a sideways-on picture of a given thought, we need to individuate it from the perspective of someone who thinks it. We do this when we say what it is that someone thinks in thinking it.”⁷²

In conclusion we can see that McDowell uses his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding to dismiss two different forms of account which place reality outside the conceptual domain. He rejects the pictures of Kant and Davidson because they claim that reality lies outside the conceptual domain of any thinker. Kant’s realm of the supersensible cannot be the subject of thought. Davison’s use of the radical interpreter ensures that the world has to be in view independently of every thinker (it is the world described by science). In addition, McDowell rejects Brandom’s suggestion. He reasons that whilst the position sees the radical interpreter as working in a world which is conceptual, it is still a sideways-on view. The world

⁷¹ McDowell (1998b) p418

⁷² McDowell (1998b) p420. McDowell alludes, in the second sentence, to a theory based on Tarskian truth-principles. We shall look at these in Chapter Five. It can be noted that they are neutral as between sideways-on accounts and those which remain faithful to the subject’s perspective.

does not lie within the subject's own particular conceptual scheme. Clearly the platitude with which McDowell begins must be understood in less innocuous way to justify the rejection of this second type of account.

Synopsis

McDowell is committed to stilling the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. Both poles are unsatisfactory: in different ways they both isolate the mind from the world. They are united in their commitment to the dualism of reason and nature, which McDowell's therapeutic dissolution aims to unsettle. Kantian philosophy suggests that if the mind and world are seen as strongly complicit in experience (both necessary to the existence of reason-giving experience), the urge for epistemic intermediaries in an account which preserves minimal empiricism can be overcome. The division between reason and natural science remains but McDowell's 'dissolution' is to contend that not all that is natural sits on the natural science side of the dualism.

Chapter Two

Preliminaries

In this chapter the ground will be laid for the objection which I shall present in the next chapter. Before the objection can be presented, we need to cover a couple of preliminary points. Firstly, I shall attribute three assumptions to McDowell on which the objection will be based. Since these assumptions can uncontroversially be attributed to McDowell, the main focus will be to show how they function in his picture and that they are fundamental to his thinking. Once this has been done his metaphilosophical notion of a therapeutic dissolution will be analysed. In his writing three criteria can be detected which any successful therapeutic dissolution must meet.

McDowellian Philosophy: Three Key Elements

In this thesis I shall offer a criticism of McDowell's work which centres on three key propositions. In brief, these are:

1. All sideways-on views of understanding must be rejected. The rejection of such views has metaphysical importance and is not simply an epistemic claim. McDowell intends to exclude the possibility of such a perspective on the subject and their place in the world being obtained.
2. Senses are object-dependent. This version of semantic externalism, refers specifically to a domain of objects (the realm of reference) towards which our conceptualised thoughts are directed.

3. Experience is fully conceptual. Experience must allow for constraint to be exercised over our thoughts and beliefs by the world (minimal empiricism).
In fully conceptualised experience facts are made manifest to us.

First, I shall simply to offer textual evidence of McDowell's motivation for accepting each of these elements. In doing this, I shall engage with the historical background of his position and the landscape which he claims has led to the oscillation he seeks to still. Support for the three elements emerges from his reading of Aristotle and his understanding of the Cartesian problematic, both of whose influence on *Mind and World* are clear.

Aristotle and the Exercise of Rationality

McDowell's reading of Aristotle utilises notions of upbringing and critical reflection which he finds attractive and which suggest the first and third elements identified above. Within recent writing on rationality, the question of whether norms govern states or the processes by which these states are obtained has been raised. Nico Kolodny has suggested that principles governing processes of acquisition obviate the need for principles of static rationality: "once we have specified the process-requirements of rationality, state requirements become superfluous."¹ McDowell, following Aristotle, implicitly accepts this reasoning. For Aristotle, rationality was a capacity in use; similarly, for McDowell rationality's greatest tool is the process of critical scrutiny.

¹ Kolodny (1995) p520

We shall consider first the assumption that experience is fully conceptual. Aristotle dismissed the idea that there might be rules that govern conduct in every situation that could be fully detailed. Instead, he maintained that our perceptual sensitivity to the demands of ethics provides the guidance for our moral conduct:

“But up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the sense; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception.”²

Practical wisdom is a product of perceptual sensitivity rather than knowledge of explicit rules. Practical wisdom is two-headed though, since Aristotle also equates it with appropriate motivation.

“It, then, is characteristic of men of practical wisdom to have deliberated well, excellence in deliberation will be correctness with regard to what conduces to the end of which practical wisdom is the true apprehension.”³

McDowell counsels against distinguishing too deeply between these two definitions. Practical wisdom shapes the intellect, and practical wisdom is constituted by what is perceptually appreciated and by what is conceived as a fitting end. However, it is not the case that the motivational aspect of one's conception of a fitting end determines the shape of practical wisdom. Indeed such an interpretation removes all normative force from the dictates of practical wisdom. It will portray practical wisdom as hypothetical imperatives which apply only to those with the appropriate motivations.⁴ It is also not the case that the intellectual aspect of practical wisdom

² Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) 2.9.1109b23

³ Aristotle NE 6.9.1142b33

⁴ McDowell argues against such a view of practical wisdom in his (1995b).

dictates to the motivational propensity. This Platonistic interpretation would give independent force to the dictates of practical wisdom.

McDowell suggests that “what determines the content of a virtuous person's correct conception of the end is not an exercise of practical intellect, but rather the moulding of his motivational propensities in upbringing”.⁵ In other words, there is a non-rational 'moulding' of character that is a pre-requisite to a correct conception of a fitting end, before the practical intellect is even on the scene to assess actions according to the correct conception. This suggestion accords with Aristotle's claims that virtue is responsible for determining the correct end, and that virtue is instilled by upbringing and learning by example (where for McDowell learning is seen as a non-rational indoctrination⁶).

McDowell's Aristotle and External Models of Justification

Given that according to McDowell's reading both aspects of practical wisdom are moulded by upbringing, it seems natural to credit McDowell's Aristotle with an implicit commitment to the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. It is anachronistic to suppose that Aristotle would have formulated the thought that reality cannot be grounded in a foundation beyond the conceptual. However his rejection of external validation suggests that he would be amenable to the idea that the subject's thoughts and their content (the world) should not be essentially remote from each other. For given the absence of external validation, Aristotle appeals only to those with an appropriate upbringing who will, as a result, respond in the correct manner:

⁵ McDowell (1998b) p31

⁶ McDowell disputes alternative readings of Aristotle that would allow 'learning' to be a rational process. [McDowell (1994) p79]

“Hence anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits.”⁷

His denial that rules can be codified is also suggestive:

“the equitable is just, but not the legally just but a correction of legal justice. The reason is that all law is universal but about some things it is not possible to make a universal statement which will be correct. In those cases, then, in which it is necessary to speak universally, but not possible to do so correctly, the law takes the usual case, though it is not ignorant of the possibility of error. And it is none the less correct; for the error is not the law nor in the legislator but in the nature of the thing, since the matter of practical affairs is of this kind from the start. When the law speaks universally, then, and a case arises on it which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, when the legislator fails us and has erred by over-simplicity, to correct the omission – to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present, and would have put into his law if he had known.”⁸

The uncodifiability of rules forces the legislator to cover only the general case.⁹ Internal justification seems to flow from Aristotle's adoption of a perceptual account of our appreciation of ethical values. However, to the extent that McDowell suggests that in Aristotle's theory there is “a tendency towards smugness”¹⁰ arising from his insensitivity to the demands of critical reflection, there is discontinuity in their respective accounts. McDowell contends that within Aristotle's account a more solid notion of critical reflection (the Neurathian metaphor) can be unearthed and that this enables his theory to stand as an example of the ‘naturalized platonism’ he advocates. McDowell suggests that Aristotle fails to explicitly recognise the need for critical reflection because his work pre-dates the Cartesian problematic: the sceptical

⁷ Aristotle *NE* 1.4.1095b4-6

⁸ Aristotle *NE* 5.10 1137b11-24

⁹ Similar worries to these operate in Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following – the legal principles may be thought of as existing Platonically and in new cases having the correct interpretation applied; or the legal principles may be thought of more sceptically, as being emended with the addition of novel cases.

¹⁰ McDowell (1994) p81

worries generated by Descartes picture, in which the subject and the world are disassociated, does not motivate Aristotle's picture.¹¹ McDowell's Aristotle contains the foundations of critical scrutiny only implicitly. Whilst remaining neutral on the real Aristotle's intentions here (whether, for example, he leant towards a rampant platonism¹²), it should be noted that contemporary commentators¹³ have frequently adopted a far stronger interpretation of the notion of objectivity within the Aristotelian framework.

McDowell suggests an anachronistic spirit for the tendency to ascribe Aristotle a naturalistic account of ethics¹⁴ and denies that Aristotle considered an external verification for his ethical theory. Reflect on this passage concerning the student of political science:

“For the facts are the starting-point, and if they are sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points.”¹⁵

Here McDowell sees the Neurathian metaphor in Aristotle's words. Once one is in a position to embrace the starting points no further material is necessary to affect

¹¹ This connects up with the fact that, as I noted earlier, Aristotle's commitment to a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding can only be inferred from his other theoretical commitments. It is only recently that the natural scientific conception of the world has served as the backdrop to philosophical thinking about the mind.

Descartes picture is clearly a sideways-on account and it provides a classic example of the manner in which the subject's thoughts are disconnected from reality once the latter is taken to have its foundations outside the conceptual realm.

¹² Recall from Chapter One that a rampant Platonism postulates a domain of meanings set over from our animal nature in such a manner that its existence and our connection with it is entirely mysterious.

¹³ For example, David Charles' reading of Aristotle deploys the notion of pre-conceptual sensitivity to ground the objectivity of learning [Charles (1995)]. This reading will be considered in detail in Chapter Five.

¹⁴ McDowell (1994) p79

¹⁵ Aristotle *NE* 1.4 1095b3-8

the transition to reason.¹⁶ Aristotle fails to spot that critical reflection, whilst it cannot remove wholesale every aspect of an initial viewpoint, may slowly morph sufficiently to undermine its own starting points. However the absence of a radical transition in Aristotle's account, McDowell contends, represents his appreciation of the fact that only internal justification is possible.

Cartesian Philosophy of Mind and Object-Dependence

McDowell's overriding motivation for introducing object-dependence (the second key element identified above) is to avoid the problematic division between mind and world that is central to Cartesian philosophy. As we saw in the last chapter, McDowell extols the benefits of enlarging Bertrand Russell's object-dependent account of singular thoughts beyond the restricted scope of sense data which its author allowed. Extending our conception of the location of the mind beyond the boundaries of the skull allows for a denial of the highest common factor picture of the mental on which Cartesian philosophy of mind is parasitic.

In 'Putnam on Mind and Meaning', McDowell reiterates the importance of the abolition of the Cartesian picture of the mind. Hilary Putnam's famous twin-Earth thought experiment gives credence to the idea that the extension of natural kind terms are determined at least in part by environmental considerations. Consider a twin-Earth, on which there is a substance with the same observable properties as water – an odourless, colourless liquid that falls from the sky as rain and is consumed for its thirst-quenching quality. The chemical composition of twin-water is XYZ however, in

¹⁶ McDowell (1995d) p213

contrast to our H₂O. It seems true to say that an Earthly visitor to twin-Earth, who exclaimed “You have water, just like on Earth”, would have spoken falsely. McDowell extends this line of thinking, using the idea that extension must be closely tied to meaning as follows:

“Meanings are in the mind, but, as... [Putnam's] argument establishes they cannot be in the head; therefore, we ought to conclude, the mind is not in the head.”¹⁷

Putnam's argument, McDowell claims, has frequently being perverted to give support to a dual-component view of mind. However, the division between narrow and wide content of mental states undermines the idea that we might be in contact with the world.¹⁸ Against this McDowell maintains that our singular thoughts are object-dependent and are unavailable in the absence of the appropriate object.

Although references do not feature in the content of the thought, the relation between reference and the components of thought is one in which the existence of the reference is necessary for the very identity of the sense. In this way, our singular thoughts are directly referential. McDowell contends that the external context can feature in the content of a thought without impugning thought's fully conceptualised nature. Undermining the counter-suggestion reveals how Putnam's argument in fact supports semantic externalism within the Fregean sense/reference framework. In '*De Re Senses*', McDowell characterises Tyler Burge's argument for the counter-suggestion thus:

¹⁷ McDowell (1992) p276

¹⁸ McDowell also cites scientism about our mental states as an effect of the narrow/wide content division: “On this account, what makes the “duplex” reading of the thesis that the mind is not in the head attractive is that, by leaving part of the truth about the mind wholly in the head it offers comfort to a possibly residual scienticism about how our understanding of the mental works.” [McDowell (1992) p279]

“Given that conceptual content is made up of *means* of representation in thought, a belief's being fully conceptualised can mean only that it has a fully propositional content exhausted by some collection of thought *symbols*; and it would follow that there is no room for contextual factors to contribute to determining how such a belief may be correctly ascribed.”¹⁹

McDowell contends that Burge equivocates between concepts as the components of thought and concepts as the means of representation. The possibility that senses can function as components of thought with an essentially *de re* nature is obscured by taking concepts to be the vehicles of content. Clearly taking thought and its component senses to manifest the essentially *de re* nature of their content in their symbolised form is absurd, but this is no more required than that the sense of a certain red post box should actually be red. The sense is used not mentioned and it is the reference of the sense that should be red, or an object in the world, not the sense itself. With the counter-suggestion undermined, McDowell concludes that one can see clearly how it is that the object-dependence of singular thought can be made to fit with the sense/reference distinction without difficulty.

In summary, McDowell makes clear both that the motivation for object-dependence is a wish to avoid the problems that Cartesian philosophy of mind has produced, and that this is established by seeing how *objects* can be the direct reference of our thoughts. As a result McDowell offers an account in which objects are presented as mind-independent components out of which the world is made up.

¹⁹ McDowell (1984a) p218

McDowell combines object-dependence with disjunctivism in his attempt to earn the therapeutic right to ignore the sceptic's questions. However, Anthony Brueckner has argued that his attempt to grapple with the Cartesian sceptic is not only insufficient, but it also fails to fully motivate adopting the thesis of object-dependence:

“In order to block the radical scepticism, we need to augment the thesis that there can be singular thoughts with some view which will turn out to be sufficient to answer this scepticism. This renders superfluous the appeal to singular thoughts for the purpose of undermining the Cartesian scepticism.”²⁰

McDowell's disjunctivism attaches to the doctrine of singular thought to make it the case that: *either* the subject is having a pseudo-singular thought in which it only seems that such-and-such is the case; *or* the subject is having a genuine singular thought in which such-and-such is the case. Brueckner reads McDowell as further claiming that the capacity to entertain pseudo-singular thoughts is parasitic on the subject's having the concept of genuine singular thoughts.

“The claim about conceptual connection is presumably that possession of the concept of a mere seeming presupposes (and requires) possession of the concept of an object which can seem to be the way it is and can seem to be otherwise as well.”²¹

However, Brueckner contends that this conceptual connection does not establish the metaphysical truth that we actually ever have genuine singular thoughts. It only establishes its possibility. In order to secure an account which overcomes

²⁰ Brueckner (1993) p110

²¹ Brueckner (1993) p114

scepticism, a guarantee that we are not in the unfortunate position of the brain-in-the-vat is required. Thus the interpenetration of the inner subjective realm and the outer objective realm that object-dependent singular thought seeks to achieve is unnecessary. Whatever else is required to justify the claim that we do actually have singular thoughts will already have bridged the gap.

Breuckner's reading seems unsympathetic to McDowell's actual position. McDowell claims that the possibility of singular thought – of direct perceptual appreciation of the world – is a pre-requisite for perceptual experience. His thought is transcendental rather than analytic: “In undergoing perceptual experience one has to have it at least seem to one as if things in one's environment are a certain way.”²² The concept of experience is parasitic on direct perceptual appreciation. Without prejudicing the issue of whether we actually have singular thoughts, McDowell has derived the conclusion that we must be able to make sense of our having *direct* perceptual awareness of the world. Recall from Chapter One that he contends the sceptical scenario needs to be countered only in so far as it must be shown that genuinely world-involving thought is possible. Therapeutically we do not need to start from the sceptical scenario and construct an account that guarantees we are not within it.

From the perspective of McDowell's philosophical methodology, the very possibility of our having singular thoughts *is* sufficient. We do not need to meet the sceptic on his own terms. Nor does McDowell intend to satisfy Brueckner's demands for a guarantee that we inhabit the favourable disjunct. With the mere possibility

²² McDowell (2003) p7

made out, Wittgensteinian considerations allow him to put the sceptic on the back foot:

“it constitutes a response [to the sceptic] to insist that we *can* make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment.”²³

Brueckner's insistence on a guarantee amounts to a refusal to accept McDowell's therapeutic approach. McDowell's dismissal relies on the methodology of beginning from the common-sense 'default' position from which the sceptic must unsettle us.

Wittgensteinian Therapy and the Default Position

McDowell claims that we do not need to meet the sceptic on his own terms. We have the right to take our unproblematic access to the empirical world as 'the default assumption'. As Maximillian de Gaynesford states: our unproblematic access to the world “is the starting point and stance that we would need to be argued out of, not one that we need to be argued into.”²⁴

We need to unearth the background assumption that makes the sceptic's questions appear pressing. The philosophical therapy should reveal how we can abandon that mistaken assumption and thereby earn the intellectual right to 'shrug our shoulders'. The following criteria can be drawn from McDowell's writings, and they detail what is required for successful therapy:

²³ McDowell (2003) p6

²⁴ de Gaynesford (2004) p6

- The therapy must acknowledge the truth in the background assumption whilst revealing how we can abandon the appearance of an insurmountable problem.
- The therapy must not embody anything revisionary or contentious.
- The therapy must not offer a constructive theory.

The attribution of these criteria for a successful therapy to McDowell will now be textually supported, largely from his clarificatory comments in the ‘Introduction’ and ‘Afterword’ to *Mind and World*. The evidence supports the claim that McDowell’s picture must meet at least these criteria. This section is important in the overall argument of the thesis because I aim to show that McDowell’s account does not meet these criteria and therefore fails in its own terms.

The therapy must acknowledge the truth in the background assumption whilst revealing how we can abandon the appearance of an insurmountable problem

McDowell states that: “a proposed exorcism is more satisfying to the extent that it enables us to respect, as insights, the driving thoughts of those who take the familiar philosophical anxieties to pose real intellectual obligations.”²⁵ This first point will be examined by considering three interrelated critiques which McDowell offers. These critiques focus on the ideas of Jonathan Lear, the (stereotyped) bald naturalist and Richard Rorty. McDowell rejects Lear’s reading of Wittgenstein because it prevents sceptical questions about the connection between mind and world from

²⁵ McDowell (1994) pxxii

being asked. Lear proposes a transcendental idealism according to which the world is not independent of our thinking. In this way the dualism between reason and nature is sidestepped because nature because a species of the subjective and is subsumed into the reason side. Similarly, bald naturalism is unsuccessful therapeutically because it rejects the *sui generis* logical space of reason and tries to construct it out of element of nature (where nature equates to natural scientific).

McDowell rejects Richard Rorty's account because it accepts the consequences of the dualism without showing how we can inoculate ourselves against sceptical doubt. Rorty's position is unsatisfactory because whilst it acknowledges the tension, it fails to show how we can be comfortable with the dualism. Reason and nature are left separated, with no account offered of how it can be that our beliefs apply to the world. All three critiques are based on the overall premise that a successful therapeutic dissolution must appreciate some truth within the offending background assumption. After each critique is considered I shall discuss how McDowell's therapy aims to avoid the particular problems identified.

Jonathan Lear

McDowell cites the work of Jonathan Lear as an example of an approach to philosophy that provides a guarantee against scepticism and is thus therapeutically bankrupt. Guarantees serve to re-ignite sceptical worries rather than quell them, because the solution they provide simply prevents the sceptical question being framed. This is therapeutically unsatisfactory because no explanation of the appearance of a problem is offered and we are simply precluded from raising the sceptical issue. A

brief look at Lear's work should reveal the nature of this type of project and why McDowell distances himself from it.

Lear reads Wittgenstein as follows. Wittgenstein imposes a restriction on philosophy, which he elucidates in the *Tractatus* in terms of what can be shown but not said. Any statements about our form of life are framed from within that form. They manifest truth to those who understand them but such statements are technically false.²⁶

This restriction, when applied to the question of the truth of our language, leads to interesting consequences. While an important fact is captured by saying that it is only because we are so minded that our words have the meaning that they do, it is unsayable. However, the counter-factual that if we had been other minded our words would have had different meanings cannot be allowed either because it is non-sense. Lear suggests that Wittgenstein induces a *gestalt*-switch in his reader:

“the fact of our being minded as we are appears alternately contingent and necessary. In one *gestalt*, one becomes aware that there is nothing to guarantee one's continued correct use of language... As the *gestalt* shifts, one comes to see that there is no genuine possibility of having fundamentally different routes of interest and perceptions of salience...”²⁷

Their unsayability makes the claims of both the realist and the solipsist non-empirical: “Here we see that solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism.”²⁸ The non-empirical nature of philosophical positions suggests that philosophy provides explanation where natural science has gone as far as it can.

²⁶ Lear (1982) p385

²⁷ Lear (1982) p386

²⁸ Wittgenstein (1922) 5.64

However, not everything can be explained. When philosophy produces non-sense no further explanation or justification can be given. This is when the therapeutic nature of the method comes into force:

“Our reasons have been stated, we have already given the full empirical explanation, our justifications are spent. And still we want to know: how do we go on? Philosophy provides a means of coping with *empirical exhaustion*....Philosophy tries to make us feel comfortable with our inexplicable, unjustifiable activities.”²⁹

Against this background, Lear claims that Wittgenstein provides a clear route to help us avoid the sceptical consequences of the fact that we only appreciate the world in the manner we do because of the contingency of our being so minded. We must accept idealism, but only transcendently. Lear’s dissolution, therefore, rejects the nature side of the dualism between reason and nature. Fundamentally, the world is a species of our subjectivity.

Lear argues that it can be shown, using a Wittgensteinian re-working of Donald Davidson’s argument, that no alternative conceptual scheme is possible. As we saw in the last chapter Davidson’s argument relies on the principle of charity, which states that radical interpretation can proceed only by imputing as many true beliefs as possible to the subject. For, in the absence of general agreement in beliefs, the subject cannot be seen as a language speaker with a world-view at all. A consequence of this principle is that alternative schemes that are not broadly in agreement with our own are impossible. Total failure of translatability is incoherent because there could never be evidence that a subject was speaking which was not simultaneously evidence that the subject was responding to stimuli in a similar

²⁹ Lear (1982) p388

manner to ourselves. Partial failure of translatability can only arise against a background of broad agreement.

On Lear's reading once one accepts the truth of the claim that statements about our mindedness are not empirical, the possibility of substantially different alternative conceptual schemes is removed. The world is the way we take it to be (at least broadly) because no other alternatives are possible for us.

McDowell is unreceptive to Lear's suggestion. He thinks that Lear's rejection of the nature side of the dualism fails because it 'solves' the problem by preventing sceptical concerns even from being framed:

"The idea that any intelligible conceptual scheme has a necessary structure needs care. If we find ourselves inclined to take the thought that the structure is necessary as a reassurance that our thinking must be on the right tract, I think we have gone astray, in the direction of supplying a solution, rather than a dissolution, of traditional philosophical problems."³⁰

McDowell objects to Lear's version of idealism because it fails to allow for the possibility of sceptical questions. Instead it provides a guarantee of the mind-world fit:

"the constituting of this harmony between world and mind is supposed to be a transcendental operation of mind: not, of course, the empirical mind, which is in constituted harmony with the world, but an off-stage transcendental mind."³¹

McDowell claims against Lear that the 'off-stage transcendental mind' is not required to constitute the harmony between our empirical minds and the world

³⁰ McDowell (1994) p158-9

³¹ McDowell (1994) p159

because we are already “*ex hypothesi* in constituted harmony with our world”.³² In the picture he offers in *Mind and World*, he aims to provide for the harmony between our empirical minds and the world. This is McDowell’s own form of idealism,³³ which relies on the non-separable contribution of spontaneity and receptivity in experience. However it is a form which, he claims, stays true to Wittgenstein’s teaching that idealism must coincide with realism: it allows for sceptical questions to be raised.

It is not an inevitable consequence of McDowell’s picture that we are in a position to have the world of facts made manifest to us in conceptualised experience. It is only a possibility. In order for us to hope to occupy such a position we must fulfil our standing obligation to critically assess our beliefs. Once we have lived up to our obligations, however, our unproblematic access to the empirical world is the default position. McDowell writes that there is “no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment.”³⁴

McDowell contends that it is a pernicious form of idealism to claim that at the end of inquiry we will necessarily have the world in our grasp. However, the default position is that our experience is world-directed. The world is not ‘completely’ within our reach but it is at least partially available to us. The idea is that our standing obligation to check the content of our beliefs allows us to hone in on those concepts and conceptions which accurately reflect the way the world is.

³² McDowell (1994) p159

³³ In his *Mind and World* he aims to “domesticate the rhetoric” of Hegel’s Idealism [(1994) p44, and he has more explicitly stated his view as a form of Hegelian idealism in the papers in his (2009a) and (2009b).

³⁴ McDowell (1994) p40

McDowell's commitment to the mechanism of internal self-critical scrutiny is vital to distinguishing his form of idealism (one which overlaps with realism) from Lear's pernicious form of idealism which prevents the sceptical question from being formulated. I shall return to McDowell's attempt to provide a theory which overlaps with 'pure realism' and his own use of Davidson's principle of charity below.

The Bald Naturalist

The bald naturalist drops the reason side of the dualism between reason and nature, preferring instead to construct the dictates of reason out of material available in natural science. As a result the bald naturalist falls into the same mistake as Lear: he tries to reject one side of the dualism, thereby failing to acknowledge the truth encapsulated within it.³⁵

Bald naturalism is characterised by the rejection of the claim that the domain of reasons is *sui generis*: it denies that "the concepts are *sui generis* precisely in that it is not by virtue of their location in the realm of law that things instantiate those concepts".³⁶ Bald naturalists aim to construct the domain of reasons out of elements in the natural scientific arena. This will usually be by way of a reductive account. In this way the dualism between reason and nature is resolved: the domain of reasons does not stand in opposition to nature, because its subject-matter is after all within the natural realm.

³⁵ McDowell (1994) pxi

³⁶ McDowell (1994) p75-6

McDowell's reason for dissatisfaction with this position is that the apparent tension remains because the illusion of conflict has simply been repressed, not addressed:

"[A] 'How possible?' question of the sort I am concerned with expresses a distinctive kind of puzzlement, issuing from an inexplicit awareness of a background to one's reflection that, if made explicit, would yield an argument that the topic of the question is not possible at all. To respond to a 'How possible?' question of this kind in, so to speak, engineering terms, with a perspicuous description of the requisite material constitution, would be plainly unhelpful; it would be like responding to Zeno by walking across a room."³⁷

McDowell's ground for rejecting bald naturalism is that it fails to do justice to "the power of the illusion's sources" because it rejects both minimal empiricism and the *sui generis* nature of the space of natural scientific description and the space of reasons. It is worth noting here that to the extent that Davidson advocates monism as an answer to the dualism of reason and nature he is also vulnerable to this objection.³⁸ His anomalism, the claim that concepts in the space of reasons are subject to 'the constitutive ideal of rationality', reflects a firm commitment to the *sui generis* logical spaces of natural science and of reasons. However, his monist identification of mental events with physical events gives some ground to the bald naturalist. It accepts the underlying thought that in order to be an item in nature, the event must be within the realm of natural scientific description. It is this which prompts the dualism and leaves us detached from the world because, according to McDowell,³⁹ it precludes us from seeing how the world rationally constrains our thoughts. In particular, it prevents us

³⁷ McDowell (1994) pxxi. McDowell concedes that such "engineering"-style explanations may be legitimate for other purposes, thus he does not mean to produce a knock-down argument that a reductionist project cannot be made to work. He simply claims that it fails to provide a satisfactory therapeutic dissolution to the philosophical problem he addresses.

³⁸ McDowell (1994) p154 n29 identifies the dualism as the underlying motivation for Davidson's monism. At p146-6, McDowell suggests that Davidson's aim, unlike the bald naturalist, is not constructive theory building.

³⁹ McDowell (1994) p75

from appreciating that experience might possess conceptual content and therefore able to stand in rational connections with our beliefs.

It should be clear that McDowell's account aims to preserve both minimal empiricism and the distinction between the logical spaces of natural science and reason. His conception of second nature aims to show how experience, though an event in nature, can still be within the domain of reasons. It is important that McDowell's conception of the world allows us to see how both these logical spaces can have application. In particular, the environment that natural science legitimately depicts must still be part of the natural world in which we as thinkers operate.

Richard Rorty

Rorty's reading of Donald Davidson features in *Mind and World* as "an object lesson in how not to rid ourselves of the illusory intellectual obligations of traditional philosophy."⁴⁰ McDowell dislikes the approach because it leaves the sceptical questions that the tension causes firmly in place. One reason for McDowell's dissatisfaction with Rorty's approach is the external perspective on philosophical problems that he adopts. McDowell claims that Rorty leaves sceptical questions in place because he does not reveal why we are 'entitled' to ignore them.⁴¹

McDowell singles out Rorty's exposition of Davidson as an account which wholeheartedly accepts the dualism of reason and nature and offers a sideways-on

⁴⁰ McDowell (1994) p146

⁴¹ McDowell (1994) p142 n17

approach to understanding⁴² as a result. McDowell accepts that the dualism is operative in Davidson's thinking, but he suggests it is against his better judgement, rather than a central concern.⁴³ Coherentism rightly rejects the Myth of the Given but in failing to credit experience with anything more than a causal role in belief generation, it ensures that the world can never be immediately accessible to us. In particular Davidson's argument against the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes does not effectively provide that our beliefs are world-directed and therefore have empirical content.

McDowell terms Davidson's line of thought 'Cartesian'. Consider the case of a brain in a vat being stimulated electronically by a scientist. Davidson's theory would seem to imply⁴⁴ that the brain's thoughts, as viewed by a radical interpreter, concerned beliefs that are true of its immediate environment – in other words, beliefs about the electrodes attached to it. This interpretation is suggested by claims such as: “a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is this pattern that determines the subject matter of a belief, what the belief is about.”⁴⁵ The thought that the brain's beliefs are mostly true – because interpreted as referring to the brain's electronic

⁴² Recall from the previous chapter that McDowell defines sideways-on accounts as any which “places reality outside a boundary enclosing the conceptual” [McDowell (2002b) p269]. The sideways-on view disassociates the thinker from the contents of their thoughts (the world) by holding apart the conceptual realm and reality: the unifying feature of such accounts is the thought that reality is based on foundations outside the conceptual domain.

⁴³ “I find the dualism operative in Davidson's thinking...[s]o I am not in a position to dissent outright from Rorty's reading of Davidson. But in my reading, Davidson's vulnerability to the dualism is a defect; it is out of line with his better thinking on interpretation.” [McDowell (1994) p153]

⁴⁴ Another possible Davidsonian response would be to deny that the brain in the vat has any conscious thought because of the lack of any actions on its part. Whilst this does seem to be consistent with Davidson's theory, McDowell [(1994) p17 n13] cites Rorty [(1986) p340n] as accrediting the view cited in the main text to “unpublished remarks” made by Davidson at a symposium with Quine and Putnam in Heiselburg (1981). The brain in the vat case is not the sole cause of McDowell's rejection of Davidson's framework, however: “perhaps the extempore remark cited by Rorty was just a mistake. If that is right I lose a means to make my discussion of Davidson's easy rejection of minimal empiricism vivid. But this leaves the dissatisfaction unallayed.” [McDowell (1995a) p289]

⁴⁵ Davidson (1975) p168

environment - McDowell finds counter-intuitive and invites scepticism.⁴⁶ Following McDowell's deeper diagnosis, the dualism of reason and nature is operative in this picture because the subjective realm is isolated from any interaction with the external world: no reason giving status can be credited to perception in Davidson's picture.

McDowell's commitment to minimal empiricism means that Davidson's guarantee that most of our beliefs are true suggests the 'confinement imagery' that McDowell believes motivates the recoil back to the Myth of the Given from coherentism. Since "the objects that the interpreter sees the subject's belief as being about become as it were merely noumenal so far as the subject is concerned,"⁴⁷ reality becomes unknowable. This picture of thought and experience as something that could be a certain way regardless of the state of reality does violence to McDowell's conception of intentionality, because it suggests that the subject's perspective cannot be considered a perspective on the world.

McDowell, however, believes that elements of Davidson's account can be successfully annexed to his own account. (He thinks that Davidson's picture can be cleansed of those components which make it a sideways-on account.) By contrast Rorty's exegesis emphasises the aspect of Davidson's view which McDowell finds objectionable: the idea that the subject's thoughts and the world can be kept separate. Rorty commends the fact that Davidson provides the resources to separate the external interpreter's point of view from that of the subject. The former can be expressed using Tarskian truth principles to state references; whilst the subject's own viewpoint operates in the domain of reasons. Rorty co-opts Davidson into the

⁴⁶ McDowell (1994) p17

⁴⁷ McDowell (1994) p17n14

pragmaticist tradition because he provides for these two notions of truth to be kept hygienically separate. On the one hand we have the descriptive use, which is determined by the radical interpreter, and based on the causal environment of the subject. On the other hand we have the normative use which operates only within the subject's belief system and is governed by the rational relations of coherence. Rorty insists that the subject's language must be detailed from the external view point associated with the radical interpreter, rather than from the internal viewpoint. The causal story is thereby strictly disassociated from the normative perspective:

“if we occupy a standpoint from which our beliefs are in view along with their objects and our causal engagements with the objects, then we cannot, from that standpoint, bring the beliefs under the norms of inquiry.”⁴⁸

Rorty's picture holds firmly onto the dualism between reason and nature: we cannot see how our experience could put us in touch with the world. The natural world is essentially remote from us and our operations within the domain of reasons. As a result, McDowell contends that sceptical questions are still pressing: given Rorty's divided notion of truth, one cannot help wondering how it is possible that the norms of inquiry have anything to do with the disquotational notion of truth:

“If the view from this second standpoint [the subject's] is not allowed to embrace the causal interactions between the believers and the objects of their belief – since those interactions are the preserve of the outside view, which has to be held separate – then it simply becomes mysterious how we can be entitled to conceive what organizes the subject matter of the second standpoint as the norms of inquiry.”⁴⁹

It seems that the world itself can have no bearing on the use of our norms of inquiry. The ordinary objects that make our beliefs true or false are insulated from the

⁴⁸ McDowell (1994) p150

⁴⁹ McDowell (1994) p150

normative conception of truth. Any relation between the two looks mysterious and it is this aspect of the philosophy that makes sceptical questions seem urgent:

“he says, without ceremony... ‘there seems no obvious reason why the progress of the language-game we are playing should have anything in particular to do with the way the rest of the world is’. But this is an extraordinary thing to say.... Rorty’s own thinking, so far from being shaped so that the [sceptical] questions cannot arise, positively exacerbates their apparent pressingness.”⁵⁰

Rorty’s position stands to McDowell’s as an attempted dissolution which misses the more significant background assumption behind the oscillation: the dualism of reason and nature. In holding the normative and descriptive apart he provides a position that robustly embodies the flawed division. As a result his therapy is unsuccessful and scepticism remains alive.

Rorty’s reading of Davidson is a sideways-on view of understanding because the only relations between our beliefs and the world are causal, not rational. Reality is located outside the conceptual domain and the world is always remote from the subject’s thoughts. By contrast, McDowell’s preferred reading sees the radical interpreter coming to occupy a position with the subject within the space of reasons:

“Davidson’s field linguist aims to work into an appreciation, as from within, of the norms that constitute the language she investigates: the specific sense of when it is right to say what according to which that language-game is played.”⁵¹

“When the specific character of [the subject’s]... thinking starts to come into view for us, we are not filling in blanks in a pre-existing sideways-on picture of how her thought bears on the world, but coming to share with her a standpoint *within* a system of concepts”.⁵²

⁵⁰ McDowell (1994) p151-2

⁵¹ McDowell (1994) p152

⁵² McDowell (1994) p35-6

McDowell's idea is that the use of Tarski's truth-principles does not preclude the inside perspective. Provided the world is not conceived to lie beyond the conceptual realm, there is no conflict with detailing both the internal and external view-points using the same machinery. McDowell rejects the distinction between the two notions of truth (a coherentist conception and a minimalist conception) at work in Rorty's reading.⁵³

I noted earlier that McDowell believes elements of Davidson's view can be incorporated into his own. We have just seen how McDowell rejects Rorty's suggestion that the normative use of truth must be kept separate from the Tarskian truth conditions employed by a Davidsonian radical interpreter. Another element of Davidson's view which McDowell latches on to is the principle of charity. In writings subsequent to *Mind and World*, McDowell attempts a comparison between this principle and Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons.⁵⁴ The idea that in interpretation the subject's and the interpreter's horizons may fuse is one which McDowell applauds:

"Our worldview, precisely because it is, qua worldview, open to every other, has as its topic the world itself, not some supposed item constituted by just what we think."⁵⁵

⁵³ How this is to be achieved is described only sketchily by McDowell. Akeel Bilgrami in his (1992) questions the coherence of supposing that Tarskian truth conditions can be conceived as both stating references and embodying the subtlety to the subject's perspective which McDowell means to incorporate. In Chapter Five I shall look in detail at Bilgrami's objection and the cogency of McDowell's conception of Tarskian truth-conditions.

⁵⁴ McDowell (2002a) p180. There is no conflict between this and the thought that "Perhaps Martians have an echo-locating capacity, which figures in the rational basis of their world-view in the way our senses do in the basis of ours. I have no need to deny that there might be concepts anchored in sensory capacities so alien to ours that the concepts would be unintelligible to us." [McDowell (1994) p123 n11] The principle of charity only requires broad agreement in conceptual schemes.

⁵⁵ McDowell (2002a) p176

It may seem a little strange, in the light of McDowell's critique of Lear's attempt to utilise Davidson's principle of charity, to find him adhering to a similar principle. There are two versions of the principle to be discerned, however. The first is innocuous and does not conflict with McDowell's idealism; the second is conditional on the primacy of the third-person perspective. McDowell can utilise statements such as that "there is an *a priori* link between the status [of being a speaker of English] and the idea of recognition [by fellow English speakers]." ⁵⁶ However, he does not mean to advocate a version of the principle according to which the interpreter's perspective is supreme. Such a version of the principle would licence the stronger claim that to be a speaker of English one must be interpreted by a fellow speaker of English as such. Davidson himself has been accused of sliding between the two versions of his principle of charity. Two commentators, Lepore and Ludwig, note that the initial characterization that Davidson gives draws on the innocuous observation, but Davidson's final conclusion relies on the second more substantial claim.

Davidson starts with statements of epistemic import to the effect that it is not possible for us to come to appreciate the existence of an alternative conceptual scheme. However, the conclusion he reaches with the principle of charity is supposed to pertain to the possibility of there actually being alternative conceptual schemes, a statement of metaphysical import. Lepore and Ludwig suggest that Davidson's initial claims are plausible enough when taken as *identification* conditions for alternative conceptual schemes but suggest that what he needs is *individuation* conditions – only if the failure of identification on our part precludes the metaphysical existence of an

⁵⁶ McDowell (2008) p168

alternative scheme can we allow the argument to go through. The publicity of language and thought will support only (1b), whereas his argument requires the stronger (1a):

“(1a) For *any* speaker *s* and *any* speaker *s'*, and *any* environment *e*, *s* is interpretable by *s'* in *e*. ...

(1b) For *any* speaker *s*, it is *possible* that there be a speaker *s'*, and *an* environment *e*, such that *s* is interpretable by *s'* in *e*.”⁵⁷

Having clarified the two different versions of the principle of charity it is easy to see how McDowell is able to reject Lear's deployment of the principle of charity, whilst at the same time suggesting that the fusion of horizons (which he adopts from Gadamer) is equivalent to the very same principle. Lear's use of the principle ensures that it provides a transcendental guarantee that our world-view is correct. It is a version of (1a) which upholds the supremacy of the third-person perspective. McDowell himself can make use of the principle of fusion conceived as a version of (1b).

Synopsis

It should be clear that holding onto the underlying dualism (along with accepting the dualism and simply constructing one side from resources available on the other) will not amount to successful therapy in McDowell's eyes. In terms of what can be said positively of a successful therapy, McDowell offers less clear-cut suggestions. He insists on 'dissolution', though this term is hard to pin down. He talks about the background assumption of the dualism of mind and nature as “deep rooted”

⁵⁷ Lepore & Ludwig (2005) p333

but “non-compulsory”,⁵⁸ thus a dissolution does not appear to need to show the background assumption to be incoherent or greatly misguided. The therapeutic effect of dropping the assumption seems to justify the removal: successful relief from philosophical anxiety provides the only check on the validity of discarding the assumption and no external justification is available to persuade the unconverted.

One can say this much: some truth must be acknowledged in the background assumption, but not sufficient truth to entirely retain the dualism or leave in place the appearance of an insurmountable problem. The sceptical questions must no longer appear to reveal that world-directed thought is impossible.

The therapy must not embody anything revisionary or contentious

The second point attributed to McDowell’s conception of a successful therapeutic dissolution encapsulates the fact that McDowell’s project is governed by the Wittgensteinian aspiration of ‘quietism’. His comments are frequently programmatic and his aim is to provide ‘reminders’ of ‘truisms’ rather than propose a new theory. This principle can be seen at a number of points in his work, for example: McDowell’s aim to present an idealism which overlaps with ‘pure realism’; and he insists that it is a mistake to present a truism as “imposing a real limitation”.⁵⁹

We saw above that McDowell intends his idealistic theory to coincide with ‘pure realism’. This is the common-sense notion of the world we all have at our disposal. It embodies such thoughts as that “the world is populated by *things*, by

⁵⁸ McDowell (1994) p85

⁵⁹ McDowell (2009c) p79

objects”.⁶⁰ We shall examine in later chapters McDowell’s ability to incorporate the common-sense realist conception with respect to objects. McDowell’s semantic externalism is particularly important because of his conceptualised notion of the world. McDowell’s Tractarian conception of the world is capable of being a truism, but it must not seem to impose a limitation upon our access to the world. This additional aspect of McDowell’s quietism appears in his thoughts on Kant.

McDowell aims to show why Kant’s model fails to provide relief and has to be superseded by the Hegelian idealism which he himself propounds. As we saw in the last chapter Kant’s metaphysics, with its inclusion of the realm of the supersensible, provides a sideways-on model. Mind and world are held apart and we have in place the dualism of reason and nature. Kant’s introduction of the supersensible is problematic because it unsettles the therapy: the idealist equipoise between spontaneity and receptivity is suddenly undermined by the appearance of objects-in-themselves. These extra-conceptual items strike us as the ‘true seat of objectivity’ and the equipoise appears as a subjective imposition. Of his own revised conception of objectivity, McDowell writes that:

“Wanting a different conception of objectivity is not chafing at a supposed limitation imposed by the truism... Kant handles what should be that truism so as to depict it as imposing a real limitation, as a truism could not do.”⁶¹

The presence of the supersensible is what conjures up the appearance of a limitation, according to McDowell. For the supersensible presents an individually isolatable contribution from receptivity. The feature of Kant’s model that causes the

⁶⁰ McDowell (19) p179. McDowell puts this claim into the mouth of an objector and he then explains how his own account can make space for the intuition.

⁶¹ McDowell (2009c) p79

therapeutic dissatisfaction is the presence of something outside the space of concepts. It is not per se the postulation of objects-in-themselves, for a model which places the ordinary empirical world outside the space of concepts is equally problematic, as we saw in Rorty's reading of Davidson. This therapeutic slip therefore can be made without succumbing to a radical form of realism.

McDowell's own theory attempts to avoid this by placing a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding at the heart of the picture. This feature of his position will have to be applied consistently if he is to meet the demanding requirements of quietism. McDowell's whole picture must overlap with realism and its common-sense conception of the world, it must avoid offering anything revisionary or non-truistic, and it must also handle these truisms so that they do not seem to present any limitations on our access to the world.

The therapy must not offer a constructive theory

In *Mind and World*, McDowell defines constructive philosophy as philosophy which attempts to answer the sceptical questions. It is misguided because the need to answer such questions only arises because some mistaken background assumption makes an answer impossible. Thus constructive philosophy is misconceived:

“Evidently it can seem sensible to embark on such a project only if one does not quite understand the predicament that seems to motivate it.”⁶²

⁶² McDowell (1994) pxxiii-xxiv

This aspect of McDowell's position is best seen by considering an objection put to him by Robert Brandom. He notes that McDowell's embraces a 'rational constraint constraint': the constraint that accounts of experience show how it can rationally constrain thought (minimal empiricism). Brandom then claims that one of the main ways of explicating this constraint takes "the rational or inferential articulation of concepts on which the critical assessment of their credentials depends as essential to the contents [the 'empirical conceptual content'] of those concepts."⁶³ He takes it that this constraint drives McDowell's account but questions the move from the idea that there must be rational constraint on the belief system to the idea that the rational constraint must come from conceptualised experience. The lesser requirement, he claims can be met by several other accounts of meaning, including coherentism.

In depicting McDowell's argument in this way, Brandom co-opts McDowell into the realm of constructive philosophy. Brandom assumes McDowell's argument is supposed to be deductively valid and will rule out other accounts on the basis of their failing to meet certain clearly stated principles. Brandom's own project⁶⁴ is essentially an episode in theory building within modern philosophy of language, it is not aimed at relieving therapeutic discomfort.

⁶³ Brandom (1998) p370

⁶⁴ Brandom offers an account of language based on inferential semantics which rejects referentialism and the notion of a confrontation between language and reality. The meaning of a term is given by the inferential connections that hold between the other terms in the speaker's language. There is something to be set over and against the individual's holistically-conceived language, however, which ensures that changes in belief do not always effect global changes in concept identity. A complicated pattern of scorekeeping of the community's commitments and entitlements is aggregated. The interplay of others' beliefs, which determines their perspective on a concept's inferential commitments and entitlements, yields a structure that dictates the nature of the actual inferential connections between the concepts of the language.

McDowell's response clarifies that Brandom has missed the point of his project. His engagement with the philosophical background does not warrant the claim that he is "putting forward a theory":

"I mention coherentism and the Myth of the Given, not as competitor theories, but with a view to making the discomfort vivid... My point here is to help bring out what it takes to relieve the discomfort I am concerned with... Only someone who feels the pull of the thoughts I uncover will be subject to the philosophical discomfort I aim to deal with."⁶⁵

McDowell does not therefore engage with Brandom's objection directly, but rather stresses the background to the relevant philosophical discomfort.⁶⁶ Because of McDowell's therapeutic interests he needs a picture in which there is "a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive but reflect conceptual capacities";⁶⁷ one in which our perceptual experience puts us directly in touch with the world. But this is not "a first move in the sort of theory-construction Brandom envisages."⁶⁸

Brandom's own constructive focus on the systematic nature of judgements blinds him to the need for McDowell's conception of conceptually articulated experience. According to McDowell he misses the point at which empirical content is injected into that system – at the level of perception. Perceptual experience must also be inferentially articulated if minimal empiricism is to be in place. This response echoes his comments in *Mind and World* against Davidson's coherentism.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ McDowell (1998b) p403-4

⁶⁶ "The real question is whether it is philosophically worthwhile to isolate and relieve the specific discomfort that is my concern." [McDowell (1998b) p404]

⁶⁷ McDowell (1994) p23

⁶⁸ McDowell (1998b) p404

⁶⁹ McDowell (1994) p68

McDowell's conception of his task influences the nature of the dissolution he proposes. His own account should not, he contends, be divorced from that project. The objection launched in this thesis aims to avoid this type of McDowellian response. It will not be argued, therefore, that he fails to effectively answer the sceptic, nor that his account lacks the necessary detail.⁷⁰

We can see how McDowell might envisage his picture working by considering some comments made by William Child. He elucidates the possibility that the idealist's balancing of the subjective and the objective is not meant to serve as an alternative explanation but rather as the dismissal of the need for an explanation. He writes:

"There are at least two ways in which we could take the claim that the correct position in philosophy is one that avoids both Platonism and conventionalism... [The first takes the philosophical debate to be a substantial debate about the lay out of reality.] On the second interpretation, the whole debate between Platonism and conventionalism does not, in the end, make sense. The parties to the debate think they are disputing a substantive, metaphysical matter. But there is no real, intelligible issue about which they are disagreeing. On this view of the matter, the suggestion that our view of the world is the joint product of two contributions that cannot be disentangled is not intended as a third metaphysical thesis, on the same level as Platonism and conventionalism. Rather, it is what we are left with when we make sense of claims about our criteria of correctness in the only way possible – the ordinary way – and try to achieve an accurate and realistic account of the nature and source of those criteria."⁷¹

Child thinks that the quietist need not be seen as advancing a further metaphysical position. Instead, the quietist accepts the partial truth captured by both Platonism and conventionalism. It is not the case that our criteria of correctness are mere subjective impositions (as conventionalism would have it), so the Platonist is

⁷⁰ I shall return to Brandom's objection in Chapter Six where the nature of my objection will be distinguished from his own in greater detail.

⁷¹ Child (2001) p108

right to think that the criteria have some independence of our patterns of usage. However, it is also not the case that our criteria of correctness can be conceived in isolation of our usage, so that they are something which stands over against us as beacons guiding our way (as Platonism would have it), so the conventionalist is right that the criteria cannot be fully divorced from our usage. Respecting both thoughts requires an account in which mind and world interact, but it calls for no further explanation, as it is not a substantial metaphysical position.⁷²

McDowell's account falls within the quietist tradition and his own comments suggest that his conception of his task is in line with that which Child proposes. He claims his picture embodies only truisms. He disavows the need to offer positive arguments, rejects the suggestion that he is propounding a 'theory' and insists that his account aims only to remind us of common-sense platitudes. His dissolution of the philosophical discomfort with which he is concerned aims to reveal how we can, unproblematically, accept these platitudes and 'shrug our shoulders' at the sceptic.

Conclusions

McDowell's therapeutic aspirations commit him to the following criteria of success:

⁷² Child contends that given the quietist's claim not to offer a metaphysical position, his account does not bear on the question of whether Platonism or conventionalism is correct. I think Child is right, but I will not pursue this comment further because it will become clear in the course of the thesis that I believe McDowell's account does offer a substantial metaphysical position. As a result his account does bear on the metaphysical debate between Platonism and conventionalism, but it also requires positive arguments to support it (or amendment to remain a quietist position).

- The therapy must acknowledge the truth in the background assumption whilst revealing how we can abandon the appearance of an insurmountable problem.
- The therapy must not embody anything revisionary or contentious.
- The therapy must not offer a constructive theory.

As we have just seen, further elucidation can be gleaned from McDowell's deployment of the criteria against specific failures in other authors. As a result of considering each claim, we have noted that there are certain areas in McDowell's account where he needs to be careful to avoid falling foul of his own criteria. In particular, Lear provides a guaranteed solution by adopting a transcendental re-working of Davidson's principle of charity. As a result, McDowell needs to ensure that his own account provides a form of idealism which does genuinely overlap with realism. Bald naturalism fails to acknowledge the power of the illusion by rejecting the *sui generis* nature of the realm of reason. So McDowell needs to respect the illusion by ensuring that there is still a space for the *sui generis* space of natural science. Rorty makes sceptical questions pressing because he reads a sideways-on view of understanding into Davidson's work. McDowell needs to be sure that his own rejection of the sideways-on picture is consistently applied in order to avoid the re-emergence of sceptical doubt. Further, McDowell's work must stand true to the dictates of his quietism and his own picture must not embody anything contentious or contrary to common sense.

McDowell credits the therapeutic approach that he propounds to Wittgenstein,⁷³ though the specific criteria he deploys are not explicit Wittgensteinian doctrines. Wittgenstein's more pervasive influence is evident in McDowell's overall conception of therapeutic dissolution: philosophical problems ought to be therapeutically overcome rather than constructively answered⁷⁴; deeper dualisms must be abandoned rather than bridged⁷⁵; and, quietism is required.⁷⁶

The criticism of McDowell's picture which is to follow will be based around these criteria. I shall argue that McDowell's own picture fails to meet the standards he himself sets. I aim to present an internal critique of McDowell's philosophy which is quite distinct from the majority of other criticisms of his work. He rejects criticisms which ask for positive arguments to support his picture, because, he claims, his picture relies only on common-sense platitudes. It is the 'default' position from which we must be argued out of. My criticism takes this quietist conception to be acceptable. However, I will argue that his position is not consistent with our common-sense realist intuitions. It therefore falls outside of the quietist tradition. If the argument is successful, he will not be able to dismiss it as question-begging.

⁷³ Aristotle's influence is not discussed by McDowell, but the following is also suggestive of the first criteria attributed to McDowell's therapeutic method: "We must, as in all other cases, set the phenomena before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the reputable opinions about these affectations or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the reputable opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently." Aristotle *NE* 7.2 1145b3-8

⁷⁴ McDowell (1994) p86: he seeks, "[i]n Wittgenstein's poignant phrase... 'the discovery that gives philosophy peace.'"

⁷⁵ McDowell (1994) p94 "to build as a close a likeness as possible to what threatened to seem out of reach, using only materials that are reassuringly present on the hither side of the golf... is one more spasm of ordinary modern philosophy, touting itself as the last; not what Wittgenstein aspires to..."

⁷⁶ McDowell (1994) p177: "I do not mean to suggest that Wittgenstein seriously contemplates a state of affairs in which ordinary philosophy no longer takes place. The intellectual roots of the anxieties that ordinary philosophy addresses are too deep for that... The impulse finds peace only occasionally and temporarily."

Synopsis

In this chapter the groundwork for the objection of this thesis has been laid. Three key assumptions have been noted in his thinking. The objection I intend to raise will be outlined in the next chapter. The remaining chapters are designed to show that McDowell cannot meet his own the criteria for a successful therapeutic dissolution.

Chapter Three

Unsettling the Therapy

Having laid the groundwork in the last two chapters, we are now in a position to sketch the main argument of this thesis. In outline, I shall present a line of thought which strongly suggests that McDowell's account fails in its therapeutic aims. His dissolution cannot stop the oscillation he detects between the Myth of the Given and coherentism because he makes use of two elements which, once explicitly articulated, draw on conflicting underlying motivations. The combination of these elements re-awakens the philosophical anxieties that McDowell intends to dispel. For, he offers us an account which, whilst internally consistent, fails to meet the standards he sets for a successful therapeutic dissolution of his philosophical problem.

This chapter is introductory. The required supporting arguments will be developed in the next three chapters, where we will also consider possible McDowellian responses to my concerns. This chapter will be structured as follows: I shall begin by briefly recounting the content of the three key elements in his picture presented in the previous chapter. After that, I shall introduce some technical terms: Julian Dodd's distinction between modest and robust identity theories of truth and Kit Fine's notion of 'grounding'. The conflicting motivations which underlie McDowell's rejection of 'sideways-on' views of understanding and his version of semantic externalism can be made explicit using these resources.

There is a *prima facie* tension in McDowell's account. His claim that senses are object-dependent suggests that objects are, to put the point intuitively, 'more basic than' or 'prior to' senses. Because the identity of each sense is determined by the object it is about, the existence of objects in the world is a pre-condition for the possibility of thoughts about them. The availability of singular thoughts is parasitic on the existence of real world objects which determine the identity of the senses out of which such thoughts are composed. The manner in which McDowell's elucidates his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is at odds with such reasoning. He claims that the world does not lie beyond the boundary which encloses the conceptual realm: our experience of the world is parasitic on the non-separable contributions of spontaneity and receptivity. He fleshes out the idea of an idealist "equipoise between subjective and objective"¹ in terms of an ontological and an explanatory claim. The first is expressed in his adoption of a so-called 'identity theory of truth': facts and true possible thoughts are identical. His explanatory claim can be termed a 'no-priority thesis': he claims that there is no explanatory priority as between facts and true possible thoughts. Neither can be understood in isolation from the other. These two claims guarantee his commitment to a fact-based conception of reality which places facts not objects at the heart of his metaphysics. Objects have a role which is derivative from facts: "objects figure in the world by figuring in facts, which are true thinkables".²

McDowell's semantic externalism is based on the claim that senses are dependent on objects. Facts, which are identical to true possible thoughts, are composed of these object-dependent senses. One would expect that facts would also be object-dependent. His semantic externalism suggests that there can be no facts composed of senses which

¹ McDowell (2009c) p75

² McDowell (1999a) p94

lack a reference; objects in the world determine the facts. On the other hand, however, McDowell's rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding leads him to assert that objects are derivative from facts. Facts, which are identical to true possible thoughts, are composed of senses. The relationship between senses and objects cannot be one in which senses are dependent on independently intelligible objects in the distinctive manner that traditional externalism suggests. Following such a line of reasoning, his form of semantic externalism cannot be what I shall term a 'substantial' one. For, the sense's identity is not ultimately determined by objects in the world if the world is fundamentally one of facts and not things.

There is an alternative way to understand the claim that there can be no sense without a reference. In outline, on McDowell's fact-based conception of the world, objects can be conceived as the 'centre for' or 'subject of' multiple predications. In this way, objects are derived from facts: the sum of the true inferences in which the name attached to a particular reference figures can be seen as giving the identity of the object of reference. (This characterisation will be explained later.) Stipulatively, I shall give such a reading of McDowell's semantic externalism the non-pejorative title of 'truistic' or 'trivial'.³ The claim that there can be no sense without a reference will be guaranteed to be a truism about any sense featuring in true possible thought because of the conception of objects at work.

These considerations suggest that there is a *prima facie* tension between McDowell's semantic externalism (the claim that senses are object-dependent) and his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. It is the latter claim which leads him

³ McDowell's quietism applauds metaphysical claims when trivial or truistic.

to claim that spontaneity and receptivity make non-separable contributions to the content of experience. He reasons that since reality is not remote from the subject in the manner which a sideways-on account would suggest, reality cannot be in view in experience without a contribution being made by the Understanding (albeit a contribution which is non-separable from the contribution made by receptivity).

The tension just noted can be elucidated both in terms of the type of identity theory of truth offered by McDowell and of the asymmetric explanatory notion of 'grounding'. In Dodd's terminology, it appears that he offers two versions of the modest identity theory. On one account facts, like their component senses, are object-dependent. However, on the other, senses are only object-dependent in the truistic manner mentioned previously. If so, object-dependence does not encapsulate a traditional externalist account of meaning according to which external reality determines the contents of our thoughts. Expressing the point in Fine's terminology, his commitment to semantic externalism provides a picture in which propositions about objects ground propositions about facts. By contrast, the 'equipoise' between spontaneity and receptivity gives a picture in which propositions about objects are grounded in propositions about facts.

In the final section of this introductory chapter, I shall point towards the ultimate conclusion of the argument. McDowell's account, I shall claim, fails his own therapeutic aspirations. The tension I have identified is dissolved in his own work by rejecting a common-sense notion of objects and trivialising the distinctive claim of semantic externalism. However, this position fails to meet the three criteria that he requires of a successful therapeutic dissolution (as adduced in Chapter Two). As we shall see in

Chapter Four, the position cannot accommodate common-sense realism and so re-awakens sceptical doubt about the possibility of world-directed thought.

The Key Elements

The three key propositions which lead to the tension are present within McDowell's own work and, as we saw in the last chapter, are vital for the project he wishes to undertake. In summary form, they are:

1. All 'sideways-on' views of understanding must be rejected.⁴ The rejection of such views has metaphysical importance and is not simply an epistemic claim. McDowell intends to exclude the possibility of a perspective of this type on the subject and their place in the world.
2. Senses are object-dependent. This version of semantic externalism, refers specifically to a domain of objects (the realm of reference) towards which our conceptualised thoughts are directed.⁵
3. Experience is fully conceptualised. Experience must allow for constraint to be exercised over our thoughts and beliefs by the world (minimal empiricism).

The tension I identify in McDowell's work emerges from considering these propositions and their inter-relations.

⁴ The idea of a 'sideways-on view' was defined in Chapter One. Such pictures presume that the world lies beyond the conceptual realm.

⁵ McDowell's semantic externalism ties singular terms to objects. Other forms of externalism are available, for example Bilgrami's theory basis his externalism around concepts.

Proposition 1

Recall from Chapter One that McDowell rejects ‘sideways-on’ views of understanding. Such accounts place reality outside the conceptual realm. He claims that in doing so they make it impossible to see how conceptual experience could put us in a position to gain rationally constrained beliefs about the world (the requirement of minimal empiricism). This difficulty is particularly vivid in the case of the Myth of the Given. It guarantees that the subject and the world must be held apart because it maintains that reality can feature in experience only in the form of conceptually unstructured content. As a result, reality is placed outside the subject’s conceptual system. He reasons that such experience can offer us only ‘exculpations’ rather than ‘justifications’⁶ because no rational relations can hold between conceptually unstructured contents and our beliefs.

McDowell’s rejection of ‘sideways-on’ views is vital for the project in *Mind and World*. He claims that only an account which upholds minimal empiricism can overcome the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism he has identified. Minimal empiricism requires that the world as presented in experience can stand in normative relations with our beliefs and judgements. Proposition 3, the claim that experience is fully conceptual, cannot by itself ensure the truth of minimal empiricism. Proposition 1 is required in order to show how fully conceptual experience can put us in touch with the world. Recall from Chapter One that his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is supposed to be an innocuous claim: a common-sense platitude which one might understand as the thought that the world must be (in principle) capable of

⁶McDowell (1994) p8

being captured in thought. However, I also noted that he uses the claim to justify a number of more controversial theses. In order to see how propositions 1 and 3 incorporate the truth of minimal empiricism into his picture, the first proposition has to be taken as a strong claim. McDowell goes beyond the idea that we are limited by our inability to know about a reality beyond the conceptual realm. He claims that there is no such reality for us to know. Proposition 1 does not merely indicate an epistemic limitation. His rejection of sideways-on accounts is a metaphysical claim. The world does not lie beyond the conceptual realm: it is identical with the contents of the subject's true conceptual judgements or thoughts. Without the incorporation of reality into the conceptual realm, experience of a conceptual nature (Proposition 3) could not put us in touch with the world. A world beyond the conceptual realm will always be remote from thought because such a world has no conceptual articulation. If the world lies beyond the conceptual realm, its appearance in conceptualised experience would seem to result from the "subjective imposition"⁷ of conceptualised form by the Understanding. If the world itself is not of a conceptual form, its presence in conceptual experience indicates an isolatable contribution made by spontaneity to the deliverances of receptivity.

McDowell claims that sideways-on accounts of understanding present false metaphysical pictures of the world. Such accounts are not incoherent, but create insuperable philosophical problems. He uses his rejection of sideways-on views of understanding to undermine scepticism. In an account in which reality exists beyond the conceptual realm, it is natural to worry about the gap between our conceptual thought and reality. In such accounts, the appearance of conceptually articulated facts in experience seems to be a case of spontaneity imposing conceptual form onto the world. The urge to

⁷ McDowell (2009c)p76

recoil to the Myth of the Given cannot be overcome without rejecting sideways-on accounts and their conception of reality as existing beyond the conceptual realm. As an example, recall from Chapter Two that McDowell rejects the Kantian realm of the supersensible. The supersensible can never be known or thought about and so its presence in the metaphysical picture imposes a limitation on our thought. According to him, it is the fact that Kant's picture embodies a sideways-on account that this leads us to recoil to the Myth.

Proposition 2

The second proposition does not feature prominently in *Mind and World*.⁸ However, it is evident in McDowell's adherence to Evans's *de re* account of singular thought:

"Evans's master thought is that Frege's notion of sense, which Frege introduces in terms of modes of presentation, can accommodate the sorts of connections between thinkers and particular objects that have been recognized to make trouble for the generalized Theory of Descriptions."⁹

Its use in McDowell's philosophy is clearer in 'Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space'. There, he explicitly shows how adopting the object-dependence of singular thought allows for the rejection of traditional Cartesian philosophy, and its problematic account of perceptual access to the empirical world. His basic idea is that *de*

⁸ As we noted in Chapter One, McDowell's thought spans forty years of publications and therefore cannot be expected to form a unity. However, he maintains his commitment to object-dependence in works post-1994. For example in his Woodbridge Lectures he writes: "for a conceptual episode to possess intuitional content just is for it to stand in a certain relation to an object; so if there is no object suitably related to a conceptual episode, then there is no such relation, and accordingly no such content." [(1998b) p477] Most commentators (as we shall see in Chapter Five) take his recent claims about the object-dependence of senses to relate to his 1970s work on semantic externalism.

⁹ McDowell (1994) p106

re senses allow objects to ‘figure in’ thought without being constituents of it. The dependence of our thought on objects, the basic tenet of his semantic externalism, reveals how our thoughts can be world-directed. The contents of thought, senses, are object-dependent and as such would not exist if the objects to which they relate do not exist:

“which configurations a mind can get itself into is partly determined by which objects exist in the world.”¹⁰

McDowell’s adoption of Evans’s theory is presented as a traditional form of externalism. The dependence of sense on reference, which McDowell posits, results from an object in the world determining whether a thought with a certain content is available to be conceived. The absence of the reference will therefore ‘rob’ the thinker of such thoughts:

“there can be an illusion of understanding an apparently singular sentence (or utterance) involving the illusion of entertaining singular proposition expressed by it, when, since there is no suitably related object, there is no such proposition available to be entertained.”¹¹

Scepticism emerges in the traditional Cartesian account because of the gap between conceptual thought and reality. McDowell’s insistence on object-dependence overcomes this gap, enabling us to shrug our shoulders at the sceptic’s protests. Despite the fact that the contents of thought are conceptual, the dependence of our thoughts on objects in the realm of reference ensures that there is no gap between conceptual thought and reality to overcome.

¹⁰ McDowell (1986a) p230

¹¹ McDowell (1986a) p229. McDowell expands Russell’s notion of acquaintance beyond the limited category of sense data because he accepts the possibility of such an illusion.

I referred earlier to two forms of semantic externalism: ‘substantial’ and ‘truistic’. We can now explore the significance of this distinction. McDowell presents his version of semantic externalism as a substantial thesis. When we investigate whether our terms have a reference, we look at the world to see whether there is an object corresponding to the sense of our term. The realm of reference determines which senses are possible because it precludes thinkers from conceiving of senses which lack a reference.

By contrast, a form of semantic externalism is truistic if, once the name attached to the reference is seen to function as a singular term, no further questions can be asked about the reference. No further investigation (empirical or a priori) can be undertaken. This form of semantic externalism encapsulates a metaphysical form of Frege’s syntactic priority principle. This principle states that the only meaningful questions that can be raised about whether a name has a reference are those concerning the term’s role in the language: whether it operates as a singular term.¹² This claim must be understood to impose, not merely an epistemic limitation, but a limitation arising out of the very nature of objects. There can be no sense without a reference because any *de re* sense which attaches to a name which features as a singular term in true inferences is guaranteed to have a reference.

Quine famously accepted the epistemic form of this principle. He writes: “to be assured as an entity is purely and simply, to be reckoned the value of variable”.¹³

McDowell rejects Quine’s reasoning. McDowell insists that the problem with our

¹² Wright elucidates the principle, as follows: the “injunction that we should never ask after the *Bedeutung* of a term in isolation but only in the context of a proposition is to be understood as cautioning us against the temptation to think that *after* the syntactic role of a class of expressions has been settled, *after* we are satisfied that, by syntactic criteria, those expressions are functioning as singular terms in sentential contexts, a further genuine question can still remain about whether their role is genuinely denotative at all.” [(1983) p14]

¹³ Quine (1948) p13

knowledge of objects in the empirical world arises on Quine's naturalistic account because they stand outside the conceptual realm. By contrast when taken metaphysically, the syntactic priority principle does not impose such a limitation on our knowledge of objects. To be an object is 'purely and simply' to be the reference of a name which is the subject of true predications. No more substantial characterisation of an object can be given: the object is not that which makes the true predications true. For, the object is not intelligible otherwise than as the entity denoted by a term which features syntactically as a singular term. Once the name's grammatical role in the language has been ascertained reference is guaranteed. Any *de re* sense attached to that name has a reference.

One might think that the stipulation that only senses which figure in *true* possible thoughts undermines the distinction between substantial and truistic semantic externalism. This is not the case. The truth of the system of inferences which a subject endorses does not uniquely determine a particular ontology. McDowell holds a minimalist theory of truth. He rejects the traditional correspondence model and instead maintains that Tarskian truth-principles and a few further platitudes provide all there is substantial to be said about truth. As a result which object and subject terms feature in the language will provide the ontology. Alternative formulations with differing object and subject terms will be possible, without affecting the truth of the thoughts in which they feature. For, the minimalist theory of truth which McDowell upholds does not provide for correspondence between thoughts and states of affairs.

This point can be related to Quine's concerns. His conception of an object emerges in his discussion of indeterminacy in translation. That discussion led him to

reject the correspondence model.¹⁴ Once the world is conceived as conceptually structured, rather than as composed of objects, we have conceptual freedom as to which ontology we adopt. We might, for example, utilise an ontology of object-slices, or undetached object parts. Alternatively we might decide to use complex predicates. For Quine, ontological relativity of this type justifies focusing on the interpretability of alternative theories rather than a unique, or preferred, ontology:

“What makes sense is to say not what the objects of a theory are absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable or reinterpretable in another.”¹⁵

Our freedom to shift between a range of possible ontologies emerges because McDowell’s conception of the world is fact-based. The realm of sense breaks down into smaller pieces than references. Timothy Williamson makes this point as a criticism of McDowell. Assuming that the world contains objects that are not derived from facts (something which we shall see is not the case in McDowell’s metaphysics), he questions how his modest identity theory can be true:

“McDowell’s claim “When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* the case” is false, because what one thinks is individuated at the level of sense while what is the case is individuated at the level of reference.”¹⁶

¹⁴ McDowell has discussed Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. He suggests that the difficulty can only be local because one cannot hold apart the content of thoughts and the world. A conceptually structured world limits our conceptual freedom: “[t]he argument can work only if the language in which we capture experience can be held separate from the language of the theory, so that the relevant experience does not, as it were, already speak the language of the theory.” [McDowell (1994) p160]. McDowell is reiterating his prohibition on sideways-on accounts of understanding: we must not think that the subject and the world can be held apart. The subject’s entire conceptual system cannot fail to have application to the world in the manner which Quine’s indeterminacy thesis suggests. Quine’s own theory is very similar to Davidson’s: our experiential impressions are non-conceptual and therefore do not allow us to see how our experience of the world can have rational bearing on our beliefs. By contrast, McDowell’s theory postulates fully conceptual experience, according to which experience ‘already speaks the language of the theory’. On such an account, experience does have rational significance for our beliefs.

McDowell’s rejection of Quine’s logic does not impact on the point of the main text. My comparison of their conceptions of objects is based simply on their mutual rejection of the correspondence model and not Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

¹⁵ Quine (1969) p50

¹⁶ Williamson (2007) p16

Williamson's point is that once the world is conceived as structured out of senses (which are the components of facts), it will be more fine-grained than a world conceived as structured out of references (objects). Therefore, since we must assess our system holistically, the truth of the system of facts we are presented with will not uniquely determine the correct ontology. The absence of correspondence between facts and states of affairs leads McDowell to the idea that the conceptual system is governed by internal rational relations and there is a standing obligation incumbent on thinkers to critically assess their beliefs. The traditional conception of objectivity, according to which reality is depicted from a 'view from Nowhere' has been replaced in his account by the Neurathian metaphor. This level of constraint within the system is entirely consistent with its being the case that no unique or preferred ontology is privileged.¹⁷ We shall see later how this level of conceptual freedom leads one commentator to maintain that in the McDowellian system the "distinction between sense and reference... does not imply a genuine contrast".¹⁸ (In addition, I shall return to McDowell's conception of objects in the next chapter.)

¹⁷ This point is related to Wright's proof that if one's resources are limited to the minimalist conception of truth (as McDowell's are), one cannot provide a unique characterisation of truth. In his (1992) Wright shows that a truth predicate can be defined over any discourse displaying appropriate syntactical structure. No particular truth predicate is privileged without more substantial resources than those invoked by the minimalist. Wright shows that the minimalist conception of truth does not privilege any particular truth-predicate. He suggests, therefore, that the minimalist theory does not impact upon issues of realism. My claim that the minimalist cannot privilege any particular ontology is therefore supported by his proof. Another philosopher who tries to express the same point about McDowell's conception of truth is Williams. My argument provides one way of spelling out the following difficulty in McDowell's work: "The doctrine of the Given offers external constraint, but the constraint is causal [because what is Given is not conceptualized and therefore cannot be reason-giving] rather than rational. The constraint offered by thoroughgoing coherentism is rational through and through, but the essential element of externality, rational constraint by the world, is lacking... McDowell's dilemma is related to the apparent need to choose between a foundationalist and a coherentist theory of knowledge." [Williams (1996) p100] The rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding points towards coherentism, whilst a substantial object-dependence points towards foundationalism. Since the latter is in fact absent from McDowell's account, his picture leans towards coherentism. He cannot hold onto the foundationalist claim that there is a privileged ontology because of the conceptual freedom attributed to the mind by his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding.

¹⁸ Thornton (2004) p243

Proposition 3

McDowell's conception of experience is, perhaps, the most ingenious aspect of his picture. In order to overcome the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. He must (in his view) uphold the truth of minimal empiricism. The positions at both ends of the oscillation fail to meet this requirement and hence we are driven to oscillate between them. We cannot (in his view) escape from this intellectual treadmill until we see how experience puts us in touch with the world:

“in order to escape the oscillation, we need a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive but reflect conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity, in operation.”¹⁹

McDowell states that the conceptual capacities that are active in spontaneity are drawn on passively in experience. Experience is fully conceptual.²⁰ He rejects outright the accounts of Evans and Peacocke which depend on the notion of non-conceptual content. Experience, he claims, cannot fulfil its normative role if it is conceived in this

¹⁹ McDowell (1994) p23

²⁰ In his 2007 Gareth Evans Memorial Lecture at Oxford, McDowell amends his account of the conceptual nature of experience to avoid ascribing propositional content to perception. McDowell's recent 2009 collections make no reference to the material, and no transcript is available, so it is difficult to know how much weight to give his suggestion and its content will be considered here only briefly. McDowell's change in position arises from his appreciation of the fact that intuitional content is not a fragment of discursive content, experience is an entitler to a belief not the very belief already. The content of our experience, even if fully conceptual, is much richer than the beliefs we actually take up as a result of the experience. To allow for this slippage and to avoid the illusion of adopting a Dretsian belief-theory of perception, McDowell states that intuitional content is not propositional. Despite the radical sound of this amendment, from the point of view of this thesis the content of McDowell's account has not changed, except terminologically. Intuitional unity, rather than propositional unity, simply means that the visual presence of the object occurs because of the unity with which it is manifested in the visual presence of its physical features. The object remains a 'formal' property – in the absence of such unity, which is reserved exclusively for sapient perception, the object's existence is still precluded. The world is still a world of facts and not things. Although not propositional in form, the content of vision is such that that very content could figure in discourse. Intuitional content is still 'given', it is not put together by us, however, it is not Given because it cannot be provided by sensibility alone – spontaneity and receptivity still make non-separable contributions to the content of experience. To be an object is still to be the reference of a name which is the subject of true predications, as objects are still derived from facts and so propositions about objects are still 'grounded' by propositions about facts.

way. In light of Proposition 1 (with its depiction of the world as one of facts), Proposition 3 reveals how facts can be appreciated in experience and provide constraint on our beliefs.

Technical Machinery

Having laid out the three key propositions on which my argument is based, I shall now sketch a couple of pieces of terminology which will be used to expose the underlying conflict between propositions 1 and 2. The first is Dodd's distinction between modest and robust identity theories of truth. The second is Fine's explanatory notion of 'grounding'. Once this terminology is clear the tension in McDowell's account will be detailed.

The Identity Theory of Truth

There is an additional element required to generate McDowell's distinctive picture. In developing the claim that experience is fully conceptual he sets out an 'identity theory of truth':

"there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing that one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case."²¹

An identity theory states that facts are identical to possible true thoughts. Rejecting the traditional correspondence theorists' claim that facts and true thoughts

²¹ McDowell (1994) p27

stand in a correspondence relation, the identity theorist claims that the relation between these two elements is one of identity.

It is clear that McDowell's commitment to an identity theory is a response to the threat of idealism. He claims that experience is fully conceptual and that it is this feature of experience that allows the world of facts to be made manifest to us. However, in order for experience to be conceptual, it must draw on conceptual capacities, in particular, those that are actively used in spontaneity. This move awakens a fear of idealism, because such capacities do not appear to be sufficiently independent of the subjective realm. For those mesmerised by the Myth of the Given, the fear is that any conceptual form present in experience will have been imposed by spontaneity, undermining the idea that we are responsive to the world itself. In order to pacify this anxiety McDowell makes two claims: an ontological one (the identity thesis) and an explanatory one (the no-priority thesis, to which we shall turn later). The combination of these claims ensure that facts ('the sort of thing that can be the case') are not essentially distinct from thoughts ('the sort of thing one can mean or think').

It should be clear that McDowell's position concerns the content of the thought, rather than the act of thinking. As he puts it: "The constraint comes from outside *thinking*, but not from outside what is *thinkable*."²² He does not discuss the nature of the identity or whether it is one of token or type. One might think that there would be particular facts as well as general facts in order to match the distinction between particular thoughts and general thought-contents. However, since there are no individuation conditions for either

²² McDowell (1994) p28

thoughts or facts provided in *Mind and World*, we can only speculate as to McDowell's theoretical commitments. Nothing in the argument of this thesis turns on this issue.

Dodd distinguishes two forms of the identity theory of truth. These differ in how facts are conceived:

A modest identity theory takes facts to be composed of senses (items within the conceptual realm).

A robust identity theory takes facts to be composed of objects and properties (spatio-temporally structured items).²³

The modest identity theory takes facts and true thoughts to be conceptually articulated. Both are composed of senses. By contrast, the robust identity theory takes objects and properties themselves to compose facts and hence also to be the contents of true thoughts. A version of the latter theory is evident in Bertrand Russell's claim that Mont Blanc itself features in the thought that 'Mont Blanc is more than 4,000 metres high'.

In his original paper, Dodd accuses McDowell of conflating these two theories. He suggests that McDowell seeks to maintain both that his identity theory is a truism (which points towards modesty) and that his theory pertains to mind-world relations

²³ This is a paraphrase of Dodd's distinction:

"Let us call an identity theory *robust*, if facts are conceived along the lines favoured by correspondence theorists: items with particular objects and properties as constituents whose totality makes up the world... Frege famously identified facts with true Thoughts... But because Thoughts and hence facts, have senses, and not objects and properties, as constituents, he did not take facts to be worldly things. For Frege, facts are true Thoughts *rather than* occupants of the world. Let us call an identity theory *modest*, if facts are conceived in this Fregean way." [Dodd (1995) p161-2]

(which points towards robustness). However, it should be clear from my earlier exposition that this is not the case. McDowell's rejection of 'sideways-on' views of understanding precludes the world from existing beyond the conceptual realm. His identity theory is manifestly modest. In accusing him of equivocating, Dodd presupposes (as we noted Williamson also does²⁴) that McDowell intends to make space for a world composed of objects. Dodd's reasoning fails to take account of the strength of the Wittgensteinian claim that: "The world is the totality of facts, *not of things*"²⁵ and its role in McDowell's thinking.

McDowell has given up the idea that reality exists beyond the conceptual realm. The world is composed of facts, and the only sense in which the world contains objects is based on the idea that objects can be derived from the role played by their senses in true possible thoughts. Dodd is, in effect, begging the question against his notion of the world by maintaining that the world contains objects. In so doing, he presumes that a robust identity theory is needed to account for mind-world relations. He has assumed that objects (the elements of a robust theory) are the basic components of the world, whereas McDowell's fact based conception explicitly rejects this model.

Subsequently Dodd has come to appreciate this aspect of McDowell's position:

"McDowell avoids the incoherence I attributed to him... by denying that the world is the realm of reference".²⁶

²⁴ Recall Williamson protests that McDowell's identity theory must be false because objects are more coarsely-grained than senses. McDowell rejects the idea that the world is fundamentally composed of objects and this undercuts the force of Williamson's objection to his picture of the world.

²⁵ Wittgenstein (1922) 1-1.1, my italics.

²⁶ Dodd (2008) p77

“To McDowell’s mind, if the world is to be a genuine rational constrainer of acts of thinking, it cannot be a heap of objects”.²⁷

Under pressure from Dodd, McDowell himself has expressed his commitment to a modest identity theory more clearly:

“I aim to combine the truism that when one thinks truly that what one thinks is the case, the so-called identity theory of truth, with a ‘Tractarian’ conception of the world as everything that is the case. Dodd thinks this Tractarian conception of the world requires the ‘robust’ or Russellian conception of facts, not the Fregean conception... I see no justification for this.”²⁸

At this stage, we have identified McDowell’s identity theory as a modest one. This theory simply states that facts are composed of senses. This entails that the domain of facts lies within the conceptual realm, but does not determine the location of reality. The modest identity theory does not state that facts make up the whole of reality, nor that a realm of objects lies beyond the conceptual realm. This lacuna can be brought out in the following way, according to whether the modest identity theory is consistent with a truistic version of semantic externalism or a substantial one.

The Modest Identity Theory, Elucidation 1: A truistic object-dependence

Proposition 1, the rejection of ‘sideways-on’ accounts of understanding, claims that reality does not lie beyond the conceptual realm. Facts are within the conceptual realm and the world is one of facts. If we hold firm to McDowell’s rejection of ‘sideways-on’ accounts of understanding, the relevant modest identity theory will be one according to which objects are derivative from facts. To be an object is to be the

²⁷ Dodd (2008) p82

²⁸ McDowell (1999a) p93-4

reference of a name which is the subject of true extensional predications. The world is fundamentally composed of facts and objects feature in the world only by appearing (indirectly via *de re* senses) in facts. Thoughts are composed of senses, not objects. Thus facts, which are identical to true possible thoughts, are also composed of senses. It is this feature of facts which allows for their conceptual articulation and ensures that they can stand in justificatory relations to our beliefs. Minimal empiricism requires the conceptual articulation of that which we are given in experience.

Objects feature in this account of reality only because of the appearance of singular senses in our true possible thoughts (or facts). Objects, however, are not senses. The identity conditions for senses and objects differ and there may well be a one-to-many relation holding between the reference and its senses. Senses are distinguished by Frege's principle: when speakers may, without failure of rationality, take opposing views towards sentences containing co-referential names, the senses attaching to each name will not be identical. By contrast, individual objects are given their identity by the sum of our true thoughts (and experiential intuitions²⁹) concerning them. The account will allow an expression of object-dependence (the claim that sense and reference are linked), but it will not be the substantial form that traditional externalism offers. Instead the claim is truistic because once the sense is fixed, the reference is fixed: the fact that the sense features in a fact guarantees the existence of the reference. The prohibition on senses without references can be understood in this way. There is no separate question of the object's existence which needs to be resolved by investigating the world.

³⁰ Both thoughts and experiential intuitions exhibit the logical structure which McDowell identifies with the object itself, since both rely on the mutual non-separable contributions of spontaneity and receptivity for their existence.

The object-dependence of singular senses is truistic because it relies on the derivative nature of objects and does not embody a substantial form of externalism. The object-dependence of singular senses cannot be understood in any stronger form because the world is fact-based. Any suggestion that our thoughts are linked to an empirical world which lies beyond the conceptual realm would re-introduce the image of a barrier which McDowell's first proposition rejects. The image of 'openness' which he wishes to introduce by talk of facts made manifest in experience requires there to be no barrier between the conceptualised realm and reality. The empirical world must be subsumed within the conceptual realm. This is achieved by placing conceptually articulated facts at the centre of the metaphysical picture and allowing objects to feature only on the basis of the role played by their senses in conceptually articulated facts.

The Modest Identity Theory, Elucidation 2: A substantial object-dependence

Proposition 2, McDowell's version of semantic externalism, states that there is a domain of objects (the realm of reference) towards which our thoughts are directed. These objects need to be accommodated in the metaphysical picture we are offered. The second manner in which McDowell's modest identity theory of truth might be understood is based on taking his version of semantic externalism to be (what I termed earlier) a 'substantial' one. In apparent tension with the line of reasoning supported by Proposition 1, McDowell presents his second proposition as a traditional form of externalism. Its incorporation in his account points towards a picture in which the world is made up of objects. These objects satisfy our common-sense realist conception. Senses are object-dependent: our singular thoughts are given content by the objects in the world to which they are tied. We have already seen that he has disavowed a robust identity theory,

according to which facts have objects as their constituents. He states unequivocally that facts are to be understood modestly: facts are true possible thoughts, and thoughts are composed of senses. He therefore rejects the idea that facts get their content from objects by being composed of objects: his identity theory is not a robust one. I noted earlier, though, that since the modest identity theory simply states that facts are identical to true possible thoughts, it does not determine where reality lies. In particular, it does not exclude the idea that the world is composed of objects which lie beyond the conceptual realm. The claim that senses are substantially object-dependent can, therefore, be united with a modest identity theory as follows.

Modestly conceived facts can be taken to be dependent on objects for their content in the same manner as *de re* senses. Indeed, one would expect this to be the case given that facts are composed of object-dependent items, namely senses. The suggestion remains true to the contention that a modest identity theory is all that is required. Facts are given their content by their object-dependent senses. The world will manifest itself in conceptual experience as one of facts and not things, but reality will actually contain objects too. Objects, on this account, meet our common-sense realist conception of them. They do not feature in reality only because their corresponding senses appear in true possible thoughts (as the previous theory held). Instead, objects are intelligible independently of their presentation to our senses. Such a theory appears to fit Dodd's second reading of McDowell's work. He writes that McDowell: "places facts in the realm of senses whilst leaving the entities constituting the realm of reference exactly where they were."³⁰

³⁰ Dodd (2008) p84. In his earlier paper, Dodd also suggests that object-dependence can play the requisite role of accounting for mind-world relations: "McDowell's own independently argued view... that there can be object-dependent Thoughts entails that certain Thoughts can only be had if the environment is a certain

Conclusions

The two alternative elucidations of the modest identity theory stand in tension with each other. This is a problem because both versions are suggested by two key elements in McDowell's picture: the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, and his semantic externalism. We shall see in more detail in the next chapter that it is elucidation 1 which he in fact accepts. Before I explicitly state the apparent tension between the two key elements, Fine's notion of 'grounding' should be considered. Alongside the distinct elucidations of the modest identity theory, this notion also provides a clear manner in which to express the apparent tension.

Fine's notion of 'Grounding'

Fine's notion of metaphysical 'ground' can be used to give greater clarity to the suggestion that McDowell's first two propositions are in conflict. In 'The Question of Realism', Fine introduces the notion of 'ground'. It is not a form of logical analysis, rather it is the most basic form of explanatory relation. He offers its canonical form as being:

"Its being the case that *S* consists in nothing more than its being the case that *T*, *U*, ..." ³¹

The propositions on the right ground those on the left. This relation is asymmetric. The notion of ground is neutral as to the existence of the proposition on the left (since the

way, and we might want to gloss this by saying that there is no radical separation between content and the world." [(1995) p164 n5]

³¹ Fine (2001) p15, *S*, *T* and *U* are particular sentences.

relation is explanatory not reductive). The evidence required to form a judgement of ground is two-fold. Firstly, there is intuitive evidence: “[w]e appear to be in possession of a wealth of intuitions concerning what does or does not ground what.”³² Secondly, there is explanatory evidence: “a system of grounds may be appraised, in much the same way as any other explanatory scheme, on the basis of such considerations as simplicity, breadth, coherence, or non-circularity.”³³ These explanatory constraints operate both at the local level, on individual assignments, as well as globally, on the system as a whole.

As highlighted above, the robust and modest identity theories appear to present us with opposing claims concerning ontological basicness. Despite the fact that McDowell only offers a modest identity theory, the intuitions lying behind his rejection of sideways-on views of understanding and his advocacy of the object-dependence of singular thought force the issue of ontological basicness to re-surface. This is not because of a conflation of identity theories but because the world of facts (that he has introduced to exclude the world existing beyond the conceptual realm) cannot accommodate the common-sense realist conception of objects which a substantial object-dependence invokes.

The apparent conflict in McDowell’s thinking can be expressed using the notion of ground. On the fact-based conception of the world, propositions about facts (which are true possible thoughts) ground propositions about objects, but on the ‘substantial’ reading of his semantic externalism propositions about objects ground propositions about thoughts. As I noted earlier, we will see during the next few chapters that McDowell himself does not intend his semantic externalism to be read in this way. He offers a revisionary account of objects, according to which they are derived from facts and the

³² Fine (2001) p21

³³ Fine (2001) p22

distinctive claim of semantic externalism is watered down. His externalism does not accommodate the thought that sense is dependent for its identity on the object, but rather is based on the idea that once a sense features in a true possible thought no further questions about the reference can be raised. This less demanding form of object-dependence does not in fact stand in tension with his fact-based conception of the world. However it weakens the concept of object involved in McDowell's work, for, as we noted earlier the truth of the thought does not uniquely determine the ontological situation.

Synopsis

With this terminology before us, the apparent tension which I have been intuitively describing can be diagnosed more clearly. The *prima facie* tension is one between the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding and a substantial claim that senses are object-dependent. The following line of reasoning leads to a logical inconsistency (between Proposition 6 and 8). It should be noted that McDowell does not hold proposition 8, thereby avoiding the logical inconsistency. He is able to reject proposition 8 because it is based on the thought that his semantic externalism (proposition 2) is a substantial claim, something which is in fact not the case. He avoids the inconsistency just mentioned because proposition 7 is not entailed by proposition 2.

The following line of reasoning is important for two reasons. Firstly, as a result of abandoning proposition 8, McDowell can no longer sustain a common-sense conception of objects (as we shall see in Chapter Four) and this causes him to fail to satisfy his own criteria for a successful therapeutic dissolution. Secondly, whilst the reasoning does not accurately portray his position (since it presents a logical inconsistency which is not to be

found in McDowell's work), it reveals the challenge he will face in trying to amend his picture, given his rejection of proposition 8. Chapter Five will argue for the claim that *were* his semantic externalism of a substantial form there would be a tension in his account which would need to be resolved. In particular, he would need to reveal how a substantial semantic externalism can be made compatible with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. However, as the reasoning is not deductively valid, it has not been shown that McDowell cannot resolve the apparent tension identified in this chapter.

The Tension

The reasoning which leads to an apparent tension in McDowell's position is as follows:

1. All sideways-on views of understanding must be rejected. The rejection of such views has metaphysical importance and is not simply an epistemic claim. McDowell intends to exclude the possibility of such a perspective on the subject and their place in the world.
2. Senses are object-dependent. This version of semantic externalism, refers specifically to a domain of objects (the realm of reference) towards which our conceptualised thoughts are directed.
3. Experience is fully conceptualised. Experience must allow for constraint to be exercised over our thoughts and beliefs by the world (minimal empiricism). In fully conceptualised experience facts are made manifest to us.
4. Some form of modest identity theory is true. (from 3)

5. Objects are derivative from facts. Proposition 2 is to be read 'truistically'. (from 1 & 3)
6. A trivial object-dependent modest identity theory is true. Propositions about facts ground propositions about objects. (from 1, a 'truisitic' reading of 2, 3 & 4)
7. Objects are to be conceived along common-sense realist lines. (from a 'substantial' reading of 2)
8. A substantial object-dependent modest identity theory of truth is true. Propositions about objects ground propositions about facts. (from a 'substantial' reading of 2, 4 & 7)

The argument is not deductively valid, but it is in keeping with McDowell's own non-deductively based reasoning. He advocates propositions 1-3. Although proposition 4 does not follow strictly from 3, he presents his adherence to a modest identity theory as required by his adherence to a fully conceptualised notion of experience against the background of scepticism. The modest identity theory is supposed to allow us to ward off the fear of a pernicious idealism inherent in the idea of fully conceptual experience and hence accept his account. It has been noted that McDowell's manner of elucidating proposition 1 involves a number of claims about the world which are more controversial than the apparently innocuous rejection of sideways-on accounts with which he begins.

The remaining steps taken are most natural against the philosophical background that McDowell presents. Step 5, as we have seen, is a claim that he makes because he needs to incorporate objects into his system without unsettling the fact-based conception of the world. We have reasoned to proposition 6 on the basis of McDowell's claims. His metaphysical rejection of sideways-on views conjoined with the need for some form of

modest identity theory led us to conclude that his modest identity theory must be of a trivial object-dependent form. Since objects are derived from facts, the claim that there can be no sense without reference is to be understood weakly: proposition 2 expresses a ‘truistic’ form of semantic externalism. No further questions about the object can be asked once the name attached to it is seen to function as a singular term in true inferences. *De re* senses attached to that name are guaranteed to have a reference. The idea that propositions about facts ‘ground’ propositions about objects on this metaphysical picture is supported by intuition (as laid out in our discussion of Fine’s work).

The remaining steps (propositions 7 and 8) are based on a straightforward reading of proposition 2, which would take it to present a ‘substantial’ version of semantic externalism. Such a reading would suggest that McDowell is committed to proposition 7. In addition, we saw in the last chapter that proposition 7 is one to which he is, in fact, committed. Proposition 7 is necessary if he is to offer us a successful form of therapy. If he is unable to accept this proposition, then his account will violate one of the necessary conditions he himself lays down for a successful dissolution of the philosophical problem. Specifically, the therapy will embody something revisionary or contentious. The argument which supports this is presented in Chapter Four.

I reasoned to Proposition 8 using the same principles as proposition 6: on the basis of the concepts employed in McDowell’s claims. Given that senses are object-dependent and that some form of modest identity theory is true, one would expect his modest identity theory to be a substantially object-dependence one. Facts, like the senses they are composed of, should be object-dependent. The idea that propositions about objects ground propositions about senses is suggested by this metaphysical picture.

The reasoning contains a logical inconsistency: Fine's notion of 'ground' is asymmetric so propositions 6 and 8 cannot both be correct. McDowell's work is not inconsistent, though since he does not in fact hold propositions 7 and 8. We shall see as we look at his work in more detail that the line of reasoning we have relied upon to yield proposition 8 is overturned by the explicit account of the world which he gives. Proposition 2 is not to be read substantially. He is only committed to propositions 1 to 6. However, it is not enough for him, if his therapy is to succeed, to avoid this inconsistency. In failing to incorporate proposition 7 he has failed to satisfy the criteria for a successful therapeutic dissolution that were set out in Chapter Two.

Synopsis

I shall, having introduced the basic contention of this thesis, spend the remainder of this chapter in previewing some of the material to be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters and in bolstering the intuitive plausibility of the critique of McDowell's work offered in the first half of this chapter. Firstly, the line of reasoning which he offers from the rejection of 'sideways-on' accounts of understanding will be considered (propositions 5 and 6). The revisionary conception of objects which emerges from his Kantian work will be discussed. This conception of objects, which will be the subject of Chapter Four, allows him to make the truistic form of object-dependence of singular thought (proposition 2) consistent with his rejection of 'sideways-on' accounts (proposition 1). In so doing he reasons from propositions 1, 2 and 3 to propositions 4, 5, and 6.

Second, McDowell's semantic externalism will be considered. Its presentation as a substantial commitment supports my attribution of propositions 7 and 8 to his picture. This attribution is incorrect, though, since he does not in fact hold these propositions. However, the naturalness of my reasoning points to a difficulty in his account. Rejecting proposition 7 leads to a revisionary account of objects and undermines his quietist position. Before concluding the chapter, the relation between the apparent tension detailed here and the criteria for a successful dissolution offered in the last chapter will be discussed. I aim to show that the account fails to meet the criteria he sets himself.

Reasoning from McDowell's Rejection of 'Sideways-on' Accounts of Understanding

As discussed in detail in Chapter One, McDowell presents a theory in which "reality is not located outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere."³⁴ There can be no rational relations holding across such a boundary. Therefore, if the world really is within our grasp, it must already be within the conceptual sphere: it must have content of a conceptual kind. There can be no holding apart of mind and world: on the one hand our conceptions, on the other a world which causally impacts upon us. Recall his critique of Davidson's radical interpretation. A sideways-on view of understanding, modelled under the influence of the dualism of reason and nature, forces the world to be pictured as made up of the objects and properties that science details as causally efficacious. The rejection of this model ensures that the world and the subject are not kept apart. The world is already within the realm of conceptual content; it is 'everything that is the case', a world of facts which can have rational bearing on our beliefs.

³⁴ McDowell (1994) p41

“The facts that are made manifest to us in those impressions, or at least seem to be, are not beyond an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere, and the impingements of the world on our sensibility are not inward crossings of such a boundary.”³⁵

As we saw, McDowell propounds an identity theory according to which facts are identical with true possible thoughts. In addition to this ontological claim, he propounds a no-priority thesis. Facts and thoughts emerge together, neither having explanatory priority over the other. Facts make up the world and he aims to avoid the possibility of reality existing beyond the conceptual realm by rejecting both the Kantian ‘objects-in-themselves’ and the Davidsonian causally defined empirical world. Both of these accounts place reality beyond the conceptual realm. In seeking to ensure that the realm of reference does not exist outside the conceptual realm, McDowell spends considerable time and effort³⁶ trying to bring out the conception of objects with which he is working.

In this section, I shall start by elucidating the explanatory theses which McDowell conjoins with the ontological claim we looked at earlier (the modest identity theory of truth). Once the no-priority thesis is clear, his conception of objects will be considered. Following his reasoning, we arrive at an account in which the distinction between sense and reference appears problematic. The distinction will be investigated and, whilst it can be drawn on a grammatical basis within his account, it is plausible that there is “no genuine contrast” between the two.

³⁵ McDowell (1994) p34

³⁶ One should perhaps be suspicious simply as a result of this fact, for McDowell officially disavows the need for constructive philosophy. The need to delve into his Woodbridge Lectures, with their detailed and difficult discussion of the work of Kant and Sellars, to find his conception of objects suggests he is not appealing to a common-sense position.

McDowell expresses a no-priority view of the relations holding between the elements identified in the modest identity theory. He claims there is no explanatory priority between modestly conceived facts and true possible thoughts:

“by saying the world is made up of the sort of thing one can think, a phobia of idealism can make people suspect we are renouncing the independence of reality...But we might just as well take the fact that the sort of thing one can think is the same as the sort of thing that can be the case the other way round, as an invitation to understand the notion of the sort of thing one can think in terms of a supposedly prior understanding of the sort of thing that can be the case. And in fact there is no reason to look for a priority in either direction.”³⁷

McDowell states that when a no-priority relation holds between A and B it will not be possible to give an explanatory definition of B on the basis of A, where A is independently intelligible, or vice versa. A and B emerge together as explanatorily linked items. The no-priority thesis, together with the identity theory of truth, leads him to the idea that the mind and the world must be conceived as making non-separable contributions to the content of experience. For, he holds that in order for minimal empiricism to be in place facts must be made manifest in fully conceptual experience. The content of experience (facts) must not be seen as an isolatable contribution made by receptivity. Identifying facts with true thoughts and establishing a no-priority relation between them achieves this. Although facts are made manifest in experience, facts and true possible thoughts are two-sides of the same coin. Talk of facts and talk of true possible thoughts are simply two different ways of talking about the same phenomena.

³⁷ McDowell (1994) p27-8. Even more explicitly he later writes “the question of a direction should not arise. Neither side of the identity thesis should be supposed to be intelligible in advance of understanding the other, as if it could be used to explain the other.” [McDowell (2005c) p84]

Spontaneity and the Understanding are already operative in conceptual experience because facts *are* true possible thoughts. Neither is intelligible independently of the other.

The ontological claim alone (the modest identity theory) is not sufficient to achieve this: for example, the claim that mental states are identical (either tokens or types) to physical states does not prevent one attributing explanatory priority to physical states.³⁸ The no-priority claim ensures that neither item is intelligible without the other. However, it would be difficult to maintain the no-priority claim without the ontological claim. The no-priority claim requires that neither item can be identified independently. It rests on the assumption that there is some form of mutual ontological dependence between the two items. Both the ontological and explanatory claims are necessary elements in McDowell's picture, but the ontological claim is more basic.

McDowell has endorsed a no-priority thesis between facts and true possible thoughts in his published work. In private correspondence he has also suggested a no-priority thesis with respect to objects and thoughts:

He writes "the very idea of an object needs to be understood as part of a package with the idea of the kind of expression whose instances have objects as their semantic significance, *Eigennamen*... the very idea of an object needs to be understood along with the idea of talk, and thought, about objects."³⁹

³⁸ Davidson's anomalous monism would be a case in point here, the explanatory priority of the physical state is provided by the fact that mental states appear in the causal order only because of their token identification with physical states. A claim of type identity is more suggestive of some form of no-priority claim: for if physical states and mental states are type identical, the reductionist urge to credit physical states priority is less acute. But maintaining priority is by no means inconsistent.

As noted in the discussion of the modest identity theory, McDowell is silent on whether his identity claim applies to tokens or types. It is plausible that one could identify facts with true possible thoughts, but still maintain that one side of the identity was intelligible independently of the other and so explanatorily prior.

³⁹ McDowell Private Correspondence (07/2007)

We have already seen that in McDowell's picture objects are derivative from facts and true possible thoughts. The suggestion here is that, together with the no-priority relationship holding between facts and true possible thoughts, there is a no-priority relationship holding between thoughts about objects and the objects themselves. It can be noted in support of this interpretation, that his later work on idealism appreciates the need to identify "objects themselves" with "objects as they are given to our senses".⁴⁰ Objects are given to our senses in perceptual experience in which facts are made manifest. It was suggested earlier that in a truistic version of semantic externalism, we cannot investigate the reference further once the name is seen to feature as a singular term. To be an object is to be the reference of a name which is the subject of true predications. The *de re* sense which attaches to the name has a reference guaranteed, as no further questions about the reference can be raised. We cannot go off and look in the world beyond the conceptual realm to see whether the object of our predications exists, the object's existence is ensured by its sense featuring in facts (which constitute all of reality). The ontological claim (that objects themselves are identical with objects as they are given to our senses) parallels the modest identity theory of truth which McDowell offers together with his original no-priority thesis.

It is unclear what content can be given to the idea that a no-priority relation holds between objects which meet our common-sense realist conception and thoughts about such objects. Our traditional conception allows objects to be identified independently of our thoughts: they are spatio-temporal entities which can be identified by their location or

⁴⁰ McDowell (2009c) p78. Kant fails to make the identity legitimate and ends up displaying the idea that "the conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are likewise conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*" [Kant (1929) A158/B197] as a constraint rather than a truism. By contrast, the Hegelian alternative provides for the idea of the objects of experience to be within the conceptual domain: "the relevant conditions are inseparably both conditions on thought and conditions on objects, not primarily either the one or the other." [McDowell (2009c) p80 n15] See also McDowell (2009d) p150.

their causal efficaciousness without reference to sapient experience.⁴¹ The claim that such objects are not intelligible independently of our thoughts about them seems implausible. Further, McDowell's recent ontological claim (identifying objects themselves with objects as they are given to our senses) strongly suggests that common-sense realist objects are not what he has in mind. His objection to the idea that natural science describes everything that is natural (which we considered in Chapter One) supports this analysis. His rejection of 'sideways-on' accounts leads him to offer a picture in which reality lies within the conceptual domain. By contrast, an independently isolatable ontology would provide the perfect resources for sideways-on theorising. For example, the spatio-temporal ontology which is identified by scientific methods in isolation from the subject is a component in Davidson's sideways-on account. The world is in view before the operations of spontaneity and, as a result, receptivity would make an isolatable contribution to the content of experience. McDowell intends to remove the possibility of such sideways-on views: his rejection is metaphysical in nature rather than simply epistemic. It follows that the no-priority thesis and identity claim which he proposes between objects themselves and objects as they are given to our senses cannot relate to such a conception of objects.

The line of reasoning just rehearsed can be expressed in terms of the distinction between robust and modest identity theories. As some other commentators note, the robust and modest identity theories present opposing metaphysical pictures of the world:

"According to the robust conception, the basic ontological elements of the world are objects and properties; facts on the other hand, are ontologically derivative – cases of objects bearing properties. The Tractarian [modest] conception reverses this order of

⁴¹ Child explicates an account of causation which is 'deeply internal'. The causal efficacy of objects will not be made without reference to sapient experience. This account will be considered in Chapter Four.

explanation; for the Tractarian, facts are the basic ontological elements of the worlds. Objects and properties are the derivative ontological class.”⁴²

Fish and Macdonald rightly identify a tension between the conception of the world presented in the modest and robust identity theories. On a robust conception of facts, the idea that objects stand in a no-priority relation with thoughts about objects is problematic. Without any explanation of how this perfectly harmonious explanatory balance arises, the claim appears obviously false. On a modest conception of facts, the idea that objects stand in a no-priority relation with thoughts is more plausible (though not obligatory⁴³). One can understand the modest identity theory along the lines of the first elucidation we considered above. On such a reading, since objects are derived from the role played by their senses in true possible thoughts, objects are not intelligible independently of thoughts. But, the conception of objects invoked does not appear to be the intuitive common-sense one. The world is one of facts and not things, and some account will need to be given of how objects feature in the world.

We have noted that McDowell only offers a modest identity theory. He is not guilty, therefore, of equivocating between the two. However, the apparent tension identified in the previous paragraph relates to a real tension between semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on views of understanding. The apparent tension emerges again, therefore, at the level of the appropriate elucidation of the modest identity theory. The first and second elucidations which we considered take his semantic externalism to

⁴² Fish & Macdonald (2007) p38 n3. Engel makes a similar point: “if we also want to take into account the notion of identity, we have to remember that the identity ‘A true thought is a fact’ can be read both from right to left, nudging thought towards the world, and from left to right, nudging the world towards thought. There are version of [the identity theory] which go one way, and versions which go the other.” [Engel (2001) p443]

⁴³ We saw earlier that since the modest identity theory simply identifies facts with true possible thoughts, it does not preclude the possibility of a realm of reference beyond the conceptual domain: such a theory is captured in our second elucidation of the modest identity theory.

be either a substantial or a truistic commitment. The source of this tension is that a substantial version of his semantic externalism (the object-dependence of singular thought) states that there is a domain of reference towards which our thoughts are directed. It invokes a notion of the world in which it is made up of objects. It is for this reason that Dodd originally took McDowell to be working with both a robust and a modest identity theory.

With McDowell's no-priority thesis before us, we can now turn to his conception of objects. This emerges from his no-priority thesis and his complementary modest identity theory of truth.

McDowell's Conception of Objects

Fully to appreciate McDowell's conception of objects, we need to consider his Kantian writings. In the Woodbridge Lectures, he contends that visual experience contains claims as its content – these claims can be the subject of a judgment as well as the content of the experience:

“Visual experiences “make” or “contain” claims in that they are conceptual episodes, actualizations of conceptual capacities, and as such are to be understood on the model of linguistic performances in which claims are literally made.”⁴⁴

On this linguistic model, conceptual capacities are drawn on such that they have a logical togetherness which ensures that they are predicated of the same object:

⁴⁴ McDowell (1998b) p438

“having objects in view... is to be understood in terms of the same logical togetherness in actualizations of conceptual capacities that makes sense of the unity of a judgeable content.”⁴⁵

“the function that gives unity to the various representations in an ostensible seeing is the same as the function that gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in an intuition.”⁴⁶

In other words, objects are capable of featuring both in judgements and in intuitions because they have a certain distinctive “logical togetherness” that can appear in both. It seems natural to gloss this “logical togetherness” in terms of the following thought, which we have already encountered: to be an object is to be taken as the subject of true extensional predications. The attribute of judgements and intuitions which allows this logical structure to emerge is the necessary involvement of conceptual capacities. No objects can be in view in non-conceptual intuitions, or pure receptivity, without the involvement of spontaneity. The unifying function gives ‘logical togetherness’ or ‘unity’ to both intuitions and judgements: it incorporates objects by allowing for centres of multiple predications.⁴⁷ He talks of seeing objects⁴⁸ as ‘conceptual shapings of visual consciousness’. The presence of an object in visual consciousness is provided for by its being a focal point or centre for multiple predication, and, given that the contents of experience are facts, these multiple predications are true. Objects provide the logical togetherness on which conceptual capacities hang.

⁴⁵ McDowell (1998b) p414. McDowell’s use of ‘in view’ is somewhat misleading here. The conditions which McDowell identifies as necessary for the capacity to have objects ‘in view’ (the logical unity they provide to both experience and judgements which contain them) are in fact conditions on the existence of objects. [See his (2009c).]

⁴⁶ McDowell (1998b) p459

⁴⁷ McDowell states that “The [conceptual] capacities have to be exercised with the right togetherness. If the judgment is to be that there is a red cube in front of one, the two capacities I have singled out [red and cube] have to be exercised with a togetherness that is a counterpart to the ‘logical togetherness’ of ‘red’ and ‘cube’ in the linguistic expression of the judgment, ‘There is a red cube in front of me’.” [McDowell (1998b) p458]

⁴⁸ Given the identity between ‘objects themselves’ and ‘objects as they are given to our senses’, this conceptual shaping of an intuition (its “logical togetherness”) feeds into the characterisation of objects which a truistic semantic externalism offers.

McDowell identifies “objects themselves” with “objects as they are given to our senses”.⁴⁹ He also suggests a no-priority theory between these two items: objects and thoughts of objects are not independently intelligible. In the same way that he unites facts and true possible thoughts (with an ontological claim and a no-priority thesis), he unites objects and thoughts about objects. In this manner, objects and our sensible intuitions of them are two-sides of the same coin:

“If an ostensible seeing is a seeing then the conceptual shaping of visual consciousness that constitutes it, those very conceptual capacities actualized in visual consciousness with that very “logical” togetherness, constitute – looked at as it were, from a different angle – an intuition: an immediate presentness of an object to sense.”⁵⁰

McDowell’s historical critique traces the emergence of a sideways-on view of understanding in Kant to his failure to perform this move. He glosses the identification as a truism, rather than an imposition which limits our knowledge of the world. It can be conceded that, in the light of the conception of objects he propounds, this claim is a truism. Whether the claim imposes a limitation on our knowledge of the world will depend on the system in which it is placed. McDowell claims that Hegelian idealism overcomes Kant’s failings by embedding the truism in an appropriate metaphysical picture:

“Wanting a different conception of object is not chafing at a supposed limitation imposed by the truism that things are knowable by us only in so far as they conform to the conditions of our knowing them. Kant handles what should be that truism so as to depict it as imposing a real limitation, as a truism could not do.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ McDowell (2009c) p78

⁵⁰ McDowell (1998b) p460

⁵¹ McDowell (2009c) p79

The derivative nature of objects is required by his commitment to the Kantian idea that spontaneity and receptivity make non-separable contributions to experience. For, it is the latter idea which prompts the fact-based conception of the world and both the modest identity theory and the no-priority thesis. He claims that if objects are taken to exist beyond the conceptual realm, then they must be conceived as having existence independently of the import of receptivity. Such a position forces sceptical doubt to emerge. On Kant's philosophy he comments:

“the transcendental perspective embeds this potentially liberating picture within a peculiar version of the sideways-on view... 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. The empirical world's claim to independence comes to seem fraudulent by comparison. We are asked to suppose that the fundamental structure of the empirical world is somehow a product of subjectivity, in interaction with supersensible reality, which, as soon as it is in the picture, strikes us as the seat of true objectivity.”⁵²

This reasoning clearly depends on a fact-based conception of the world. The therapy he wishes to perform, however, requires that his model does not depict this truism as a limitation. My thesis questions its success in the light of his specific inclusion of what appears to be a substantial commitment to the object-dependence of singular thought.

The metaphysical picture we are presented with here clearly provides a conception of objects according to which propositions about senses are not ‘grounded’ (to use Fine's notion) by propositions about objects in the manner suggested by traditional semantic externalism. There is no one-way ontological dependence flowing from senses to objects. Instead, objects and senses emerge together. The relation between objects and

⁵² McDowell (1994) p41-2

senses is not asymmetric, but the relation between objects and facts is. Propositions about facts ground propositions about objects, because objects are derived from facts. McDowell is explicit on this point: “objects figure in the *world* by figuring in facts, which are true thinkables”.⁵³ There is no separate question of the object’s existence which needs to be resolved by investigating the world. The appearance of a *de re* sense in a fact guarantees the object’s existence and its place in reality. No further questions about the reference of a name can be asked once the name is seen to be the subject of true predications.

The Sense/Reference Distinction and Sideways-on Accounts

In the light of the identification of objects as they appear to us and objects themselves, the distinction between the mode of presentation of an object (the sense) and the object itself (the reference) needs to be investigated. Given McDowell’s rejections of sideways-on accounts, he cannot sustain a distinction in which objects and senses are held apart in such a way that objects are conceived as existing beyond the conceptual realm. However, he clearly intends to maintain some form of distinction between sense and reference, and indeed it seems likely that this is necessary to avoid the appearance of a pernicious idealism in his picture.

Tim Thornton’s commentary on McDowell’s work brings out the difficulty with maintaining a sense/reference distinction within his account:

“once a distinction between sense and reference is in play then reference “tends to present itself as no more than the independence any genuine reality must have”... the world of

⁵³ McDowell (1999a) p94. My italics.

facts, understood as neo-Fregean senses, does not seem independent enough. This impression calls for therapeutic dissolution not dismissal.”⁵⁴

In his writings on object-dependence, McDowell distinguishes objects from the contents of thought. The former can “figure in” thoughts whilst only the latter can “be a constituent of” thoughts”.⁵⁵ Thornton suggests that the substance of this distinction between ‘figuring in’ and ‘being a constituent of’ a thought, which is supposed to mirror the reference/sense distinction, arises from two sources: the image of openness to reality and his commitment to the sense/reference distinction. The latter “emphasises the way contact with the world has always to be theorized from a perspective that makes *rational* sense of speech and action.”⁵⁶ The image of ‘openness’ which Thornton selects is the object-dependence of singular thought. It will be recalled from Chapter One that two images of openness were identified in McDowell’s work: the object-dependence of singular thought and the appearance of facts in fully conceptual experience. Thornton’s selection of the former image supports the suggestion that McDowell presents his semantic externalism as a substantial thesis.

Thornton’s reading sees McDowell’s commitment to the speaker’s perspective as conflicting with the object-dependence of singular thought. He suggests that with the sense/reference distinction in place, our thoughts stop short of the world (qua realm of reference) which is set over against our conceptualised experience of manifest facts (qua realm of sense). Thus he writes:

“The key element of this, I suggest, is to recognize the (obvious) fact that even the standard example of Hesperus and Phosphorus is told from a particular perspective within

⁵⁴ Thornton (2004) p239. ‘Dismissal’ refers to McDowell’s brief replies to such lines of criticism (for example p339 of his (2000)).

⁵⁵ McDowell (1986a) p237

⁵⁶ Thornton (2004) p234

the world, and not from a sideways-on perspective outside it... The abstract distinction between sense and reference serves as a reminder for particular cases that others' networks of belief about Venus, say, may differ from ours... this does not imply a genuine contrast between knowledge of the sense of a name and knowledge of its reference."⁵⁷

Thornton concludes that within McDowell's account the distinction between sense and reference is not a substantial one. Specifically there is no "genuine contrast" between sense and reference. This claim requires examination because, as we shall see in the next section, a straightforward externalist commitment to the object-dependence of singular thought requires such a distinction.

McDowell, in his earlier writings, alludes to a grammatical distinction which enables sense and reference to perform a different role:

"The grammatical distinction between knowledge of things and knowledge of truths guarantees a difference of role for 'sense' and 'reference'... This grammatical way of distinguishing sense and reference promises to free us from any need to worry about the ontological states of senses. As far as names are concerned, the ontology of a theory of sense, on the suggestion I am making, need not exceed the names and their bearers."⁵⁸

McDowell argues for a theory of sense based around Tarskian truth-principles. Such principles state the content of individual speech acts. Such a conception is 'austere' because it does not require that we can state the content without utilising the same terms: for example "'Hesperus" stands for (denotes) Hesperus".⁵⁹ McDowell's grammatical distinction between sense and reference is, so understood, the distinction between knowledge of truths and knowledge of things. This distinction relies on their being a distinction between the object itself and truths about the object. Common-sensically there is a clear distinction between the spatio-temporal entity which is the planet Venus and the

⁵⁷ Thornton (2004) p243

⁵⁸ McDowell (1977) p175

⁵⁹ McDowell (1977) p173

truth-principle cited above which mentions it. However, in a theory in which the common-sense conception of objects has been undermined this is less clearly true.

Recall our discussion of semantic externalism and our definitions of ‘substantial’ and ‘truistic’ forms of it. The substantial form takes there to be a further question, once the grammatical role of a term has been decided, whether or not there exists in the world an object of reference. Consider, by way of an example, a standard application of Russell’s theory of descriptions to all proper names.⁶⁰ The theory provides for the object of reference to be identified via a uniquely specifying description. If one takes the sense to be that description, it should be clear that one can distinguish between the sense and the reference. There will be cases where we have a description (a sense) but no entity corresponds to that description in the world (a reference).

On the ‘truistic’ form of semantic externalism no further questions about the reference can be raised once it is determined that there is a *de re* sense featuring in a true possible thought. Imagine a version of Russell’s theory, according to which the question of whether there is an entity in the world which corresponds to the description has no content. Such a system will preclude the asking of further questions about the reference once the semantics for the language have been given. It is not simply that the meaning of words cannot be given in isolation (Frege’s context principle), but rather that once it is established that a name is functioning as a singular term in the language there is no further questions to be raised about its reference (Frege’s syntactic priority principle). The syntactic features of the term determine the only meaningful questions that can be

⁶⁰Russell’s theory of descriptions distinguishes the grammatical form and the logical form of sentences containing definite descriptions. The former is given by the subject-predicate analysis, but the latter contains an existential proposition. For example, the sentence ‘The king of France is bald’, where $Fx = x$ is the king of France and $Bx = x$ is bald, would be given by: $(\exists x) (Fx \ \& \ (\forall y) (Fy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Bx)$.

raised about whether the term has a reference (in other words, whether it is in fact a singular term). The uniquely specifying description (the sense) would seem to provide the only identity conditions for individual objects.

In such an account there is grammatical distinction between object terms and predicates. Recalling the characterisation of objects that a truistic form of semantic externalism yields, to be an object is to be the reference of name which is the subject of true predications. One might maintain on this conception that there would be no ‘genuine contrast’ between the sense and the reference. For, whilst the *de re* sense attached to the name must feature in a true possible thought, this does not determine which ontology we should recognise. We have the conceptual freedom to treat singular terms as predicates, or vice versa, and also to recognise objects as, for example, temporally extended or as object-slices. There is a free exchange between ideology and ontology.

One might construct the following line of reasoning to support Thornton’s claim that in McDowell’s picture there is no ‘genuine contrast’ between sense and reference. Within McDowell’s system “the conceptual is unbounded on the outside”.⁶¹ There can be no adoption of a ‘view from Nowhere’, and so Thornton correctly reasons that we cannot escape the fact that the sense/reference distinction is drawn “from a particular perspective within the world”. The distinction enables us to make sense of other’s differing beliefs on a *local* level: one can note that for bearerless names, like ‘Mumbo-Jumbo’,⁶² there is no reference. In such cases, the subject treats the term as a name, whilst the interpreter does not.

⁶¹ McDowell (1994) p83

⁶² McDowell (1977) p184

If Thornton is correct, however, this distinction cannot be drawn at the *global* level. For, there is no possibility of a “genuine contrast” between “knowledge of the sense of a name and knowledge of the reference”. Knowledge of the reference is derivative from knowledge of the sense on the fact-based conception of the world. The grammatical distinction which McDowell relies upon will be based on our choice as to which objects we in fact recognise. It will not be based on the world privileging one particular ontology over any other which licenses the same true inferences.

Synopsis

We have seen in this section that reasoning based on the first proposition leads to a weakened notion of objects, according to which objects themselves are identified with objects as they appear to us. We have also seen the reasoning behind this move. His criticism of Kantian metaphysics sees scepticism as arising from Kant’s inclusion of a domain of objects external to the conceptual realm. To avoid scepticism we need to remove such objects. We have also noted the impact that this exclusion has on the nature of the sense/reference distinction.

Reasoning from the Object-Dependence of Singular Thought

Recall Wittgenstein’s remark, quoted earlier, that: “When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this-is-so*.”⁶³ One can see some form of semantic externalism naturally emerging from such a thought. For, if meaning connects directly up with the world in the

⁶³ Wittgenstein (1953) §95

manner Wittgenstein postulates, no epistemic interface or interpretation can be allowed. It seems that our thought reaches right out into the world, connecting up with it directly.

Wittgenstein's aphorism suggests a conception of the world as fact-based. However, despite this, McDowell frames his semantic externalism around the object-dependence of singular thought. Cartesian scepticism paints a picture of the mind in which we have transparent introspective awareness of our thoughts. Against this, McDowell states that the connection between our thoughts and the world should be direct. When no object exists in the world as the reference of our thought, the thought should be without content. He reasons that if any such content were available in the object's absence, then our thought would already be disconnected from its object. The senses out of which our thoughts are composed must be dependent for their existence on their reference.

Putnam's Externalism

McDowell cites the work of Hilary Putnam, which makes plausible the idea that external environmental conditions have an impact on meaning and the content of thought. He integrates this into the Fregean sense/reference distinction by claiming that senses have an essentially *de re* nature. "[O]bjects belong in the realm of reference (*Bedeutung*), not the realm of sense",⁶⁴ but through the *de re* nature of senses we can entertain thoughts about objects despite the fact that they are not the contents of thought. Semantic externalism ensures that the external world impacts on our thinking by tying our thoughts

⁶⁴ McDowell (1994) p179

to external reality and violating the Cartesian mantra of transparent introspective awareness of our mental states:

“We cannot understand what constitutes the fact that a natural-kind word like ‘water’, as used by ordinary competent speakers of English, has the extension it does without appealing to the actual scientifically discoverable nature of a stuff that figures in their lives in a way that has an appropriate connection to the correct use of the word, and to facts of a broadly sociological kind about relations within the community of English speakers.”⁶⁵

McDowell’s claim that senses are object-dependent presents a picture in which objects are independent of thought and the conceptual realm: propositions about senses are grounded by propositions about objects. For according to his semantic externalism the dependence runs one way – from objects in the world to the contents of thought. Whether one is actually in the position to entertain a thought about a particular object that appears to be in the immediate environment is dependent on the existence of that object. There are no senses without references and the state of the external world determines whether or not there is a thought to be had with that content:

“In theorizing thus [in providing descriptions about the content of our beliefs] about the place of our speech in our world, we are no better placed than external observers of ourselves; indeed we may be worse placed, if we are less well-informed about the extra linguistic facts.”⁶⁶

Denying senses purely descriptive content, McDowell’s appeal to extra linguistic facts seems to advert to the plausible thought that externalism embodies a commitment to a realist conception of objects through its claim that meanings are dependent on the state of the external world.

⁶⁵ McDowell (1992) p275

⁶⁶ McDowell (1977) p190

The Sense/Reference Distinction

A further look at the sense/reference distinction reveals the extent of the divergence between the present metaphysical picture and the one which McDowell's first proposition presents. Against the background of externalism we are given a picture in which, if facts are to be modestly conceived, they will be object-dependent because they are composed of object-dependent senses. By contrast, according to a trivial object-dependence form of the modest identity theory, the dependence of sense on reference is provided for by the derivative nature of objects. We can draw out this distinction by examining how senses are individuated on the alternative conceptions. The identification of senses is due to Frege's principle: where subjects can, without failure of rationality, take alternative attitudes to statements containing different names with the same reference, the senses will be distinct.

Different forms of Frege's principle arise from these different pictures. On a substantial externalist conception, objects will ground propositions about sense because senses are object-dependent. Thus the appropriate reading of Frege's principle will assess rationality from a perspective which determines what ought to move the mind, in the light of the subject's place in the world. McDowell terms this 'the point of view of rationality'. The rationale behind this should be clear: externalism ties our thoughts to the world. The elements of thought, senses, are dependent on objects in the world. Our thoughts must therefore be individuated in the light of the way the world actually is (what ought to move the mind), rather than simply the way we take the world to be (what in fact moves the mind). McDowell, at times, adopts this line of reasoning:

“An interpreter’s ascription of propositional attitudes to his subject is in general constrained by the facts (as the interpreter sees them). This is partly because intelligibility, in ascriptions of belief at least, requires conformity to reasonable principles about how beliefs can be acquired under the impact of the environment; and partly because the point of ascribing propositional attitudes is to bring out the reasonableness, *from a strategic standpoint constituted by possession of the attitudes*, of the subject’s dealing with the environment.”⁶⁷

By contrast, the line of thinking which flows from the rejection of ‘sideways-on’ accounts of understanding requires Frege’s principle to be applied only from within the system under consideration. Recall from Chapter One the discussion of the cyclist who might make adjustments to his course in response to reason-giving experience, but in fact makes the adjustments without the relevant conceptual capacities being activated in his experience. McDowell argues that reasons must be reasons for the subject, making use only of their conceptual capacities and only those which are in fact activated. There can be no adoption of a sideways-on perspective which assesses rationality in the light of the subject’s place in the world. There can be no imposition of what ought to move the mind on to the subject, because the world experienced by the subject is not independent of the conceptual capacities of the subject.

McDowell’s semantic externalism with its realist overtones appeals to the first characterisation. Objects are explanatory prior to senses (and to facts, which are composed of senses). A substantial semantic externalism makes anything other than assessment from the point of view of rationality a form of ‘pernicious’ idealism. Assessment only from within the subject’s view point portrays the subject as imposing their world-view onto their experience. His presentation of object-dependence encourages such reasoning. For example, in *Mind and World*, he considers an objection based on the

⁶⁷ McDowell (1977) p185. My italics.

fear of idealism. He claims that “thought and reality meet in the realm of sense”⁶⁸, but reassures us there is no slighting of the independence of reality implied here. We are not left with only an indirect connection with the world because senses are object-*dependent*: they have the requisite directedness at objects already. In order for there to be no slighting of the independence of reality, the elements of the world to which senses are tied must be the objects that common-sense postulates. In crediting senses with dependence on objects in the world, assessment must take place from the point of view of rationality, because the world is not limited to that which can be conceived using the subject’s own conceptual resources.

Semantic Externalism and the Causal Connection

We can see most clearly the divergence between the current line of thought and that considered previously by looking at the amenability of the current picture to a causal interpretation. Recall from Chapter Two McDowell’s polemic against Rorty’s sideways-on version of Davidson’s philosophy of language. McDowell’s own picture is meant to avoid the possibility of such an account being framed. A proper appreciation of the scheme/content dualism and standing firm to the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding should preclude the radical interpreter’s perspective operating from outside the subject’s perspective. In the chain of thought which follows from proposition 1 this is achieved. However, the natural reading of his semantic externalism seems to allow the space, once again, from which to adopt Davidson’s particular sideways-on theory.

⁶⁸ McDowell (1994) p180

McDowell holds that *de re* senses are both intentional and object-dependent. The intentional nature of senses is supposed to undermine any plausibility that a causal account might have. He claims a causal connection is unmotivated because the denotation relation between world and objects is not the basic point at which language hooks onto the world. Instead, the theory is subject to a holistic constraint. However, holism about language does not preclude a causal account. It is easy to see from his earlier writings on semantic externalism that a holistic account such as his own can be read as a causal account. Consider:

“ascription of the belief that *p* to our speaker is constrained by a principle on the following lines: one cannot intelligibly regard a person as having a belief about a particular concrete object if one cannot see him as being exposed to the causal influence of that object, in ways suitable for the acquisition of information (or misinformation) about it.”⁶⁹

McDowell claims that a causal connection is not in place directly between word and object. Such a view amounts to the rejection of the Augustinian model that Wittgenstein argued convincingly against in the *Investigations*. However, a commitment to holism does not undermine the amenability of his semantic externalism to a causal construction. Davidson himself adheres to Frege’s context principle:

“If sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, and we understand the meaning of each item in the structure only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which it features, then we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language. Frege said that only in the context of a sentence did a word have meaning; in the same vein he might have added that only in the context of a language does a sentence (and therefore a word) have meaning”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ McDowell (1977) p197

⁷⁰ Davidson (1967) p22

The fact that McDowell disavows a causal account as a form of sideways-on account does not show that it is inconsistent with his own account of semantic externalism. However, his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding requires his account to be incompatible with the sideways-on view. Adopting object-dependence naturally leads to the common-sense realist conception of objects, which pictures such objects as spatio-temporal entities that are available independently of the subject's perspective. Such a fixed ontology provides a perfect environment from which to undertake radical interpretation. McDowell's semantic externalism, taken at face value, invokes the idea that our whole conceptual framework can be seen to relate to a mind-independent environment: one in which propositions about objects ground propositions about senses. (I noted earlier that McDowell expends a lot of effort forming his conception of objects in the Woodbridge lectures. Contrast the ease with which his early writings introduce a common-sense conception of objects, on which a causal account such as Davidson's might be based.)

Therapy Failure

The tension which results from McDowell's appeal to propositions 1 and 2 has been introduced. The result of trying to hold together these conflicting chains of reasoning leads to an unsuccessful therapeutic dissolution. Recall from Chapter Two the criteria for success:

- The therapy must acknowledge the truth in the background assumption whilst revealing how we can abandon the appearance of an insurmountable problem.

- The therapy must not embody anything revisionary or contentious.
- The therapy must not offer a constructive theory.

It seems that with the two chains of thought in play, McDowell cannot meet all of these criteria. In particular, he offers a revisionary account of objects. We shall see in the next chapter how his conception fails to meet some specific common-sense realist intuitions, and hence that his account fails the second principle. In addition, the tension introduced in this chapter makes it appear as though, without this weakened conception of objects, we face an “insurmountable problem”. As we shall see in Chapter Five, one cannot simply sever his account of objects because his account needs to offer some explanation of how propositions 1 and 2 can be made consistent.

The problem emerges thus: McDowell’s picture presents an account in which facts compose the world. The truth of minimal empiricism is upheld and fully conceptualised experience puts us in a position to have the world made manifest to us. Facts are identical with true possible thoughts, but there is no slighting the independence of reality because facts and true possible thoughts emerge together, according to the no-priority view. This line of thinking gets unsettled once the object-dependence of singular thought is considered. We seem to be being presented with a realm of reference which is more independent than his rejection of sideways-on views of understanding can allow.

Since there is no space in the picture for an independent realm of reference one is led to wonder whether he can maintain his commitment to minimal empiricism in his conception of world-directed thought. His definition of the world as one of facts not

things starts to look like a pernicious form of idealism, which cannot uphold the requirements of common-sense realism. In precisely the same way that coherentism leaves one unsatisfied and desiring for the Myth of the Given, McDowell's own picture re-awakens sceptical doubt and cannot provide a therapeutic dissolution of the oscillation he has detected.

The appearance of an insurmountable problem emerges in McDowell's account in a similar way as he suggests it appears in Kantian philosophy. The realm of the supersensible provides a conception of objects which makes the relation between mind and world problematic. In McDowell's picture the use of object-dependent senses conjures up a realm of reference meeting our common-sense realist conception of objects. But once this conception of objects is in view, the thought that the world is the product of spontaneity and receptivity appears once again to be a pernicious form of idealism.

Synopsis

In this chapter an intuitive line of thought has been introduced. McDowell's reliance on three key elements (the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, the object-dependence of singular thought, and the fully conceptual nature of experience) seems to lead to a conflict in his thought. Specially, the first proposition suggests a trivially object-dependent version of the modest identity theory and places objects within the conceptual realm, whilst the second proposition leads to a substantially object-dependent version of the modest identity theory and a common-sense realist notion of objects.

In Chapter Four, the conception of objects that McDowell advocates is considered in some detail, drawing on his Kantian work. We can see how the conception of objects he offers under the first proposition cannot underwrite our common-sense realist intuitions. In Chapter Five we will look at the sense/reference distinction. From the point of view of proposition 1, it is difficult to accept McDowell's rejection of senses without references for the reasons that he expressly advocates; from the point of view of proposition 2, it is difficult to see why senses should provide externally determined content transparently. Looking at the problem from both sides reveals the extent of the tension laid out in this chapter. This argument reveals that the conception of objects introduced in Chapter Four cannot be dismissed. It is vital as it reveals how we are to understand the manner in which semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding combine in his picture.

In Chapter Six, the therapeutic dissatisfaction that McDowell's account as it stands leaves us with will be investigated. This will be shown initially by restating and applying the criteria for a successful dissolution that we found, in the previous chapter, within his own writings. I shall also relate the diagnosis of the difficulties facing him to other criticisms that have been raised against the picture in *Mind and World*.

Chapter Four

Semantic Externalism and Common-Sense Realism

In this chapter, McDowell's conception of objects will be investigated. We will start with his understanding of this difficult topic, based on his reading of Kant and his approval of Brian McGuinness's reading of the *Tractatus*. A revisionary conception of objects emerges. This account (as it stands) cannot make good a common-sense commitment to realism. It is no small task to flesh out a commitment to realism. However some specific intuitions which he cannot accommodate will be identified. I shall look first at the direct comparison which can be drawn between Frege's account of mathematical objects and the account of empirical objects which McDowell offers. His notion of objects struggles to preserve the intuition that empirical objects are more independent of our thinking than mathematical objects. The only distinction between the two, on his account, appears to turn on the type of inferences in which the different types of object feature. Mathematical objects do not occur in inferences based on change, or those about spatial and temporal position. Utilising Sydney Shoemaker's notion of a 'shadow' object, the relevance of this distinction can be questioned. McDowell's conception of objects rests on the idea that the real objects (and not the shadow ones) are those to which we are responsive. His quietism justifies his adoption of this common-sense assumption without argument. As a result, however, his account is forced to reject the realist intuition that objects casually underpin our perception: the genuine objects have a causal impact upon us and it is for this reason that we are responsive to them. Recall from the last chapter that McDowell suggests that there is no-priority relation holding between objects themselves and objects as they appear to us. This no-priority thesis undermines the intuition that genuine objects cause us to be responsive to

them.

Even if McDowell cannot avail himself of the idea that real objects are causally responsible for our responsiveness to them, there is a deeply internal notion of causation which he might be able to utilize. This notion, elucidated by William Child, explains how we can be responsive to reality prior to our developing conceptual capacities, without being responsive to the real causal structure of the world. Causal phenomena are those which we, as sapient creatures, identify as operating in the world. The notion of deeply internal causation provides internalists about linguistic norms with a means to accommodate and explain our pre-cognitive sensuous awareness.

However, this account (whether or not McDowell might utilize it) cannot avoid further concerns about McDowell's metaphysics arising. Objects are derivative from facts. In the absence of spontaneity operating alongside receptivity facts (and hence objects) cannot be experienced. Animals that lack conceptual capacities cannot be responsive to reality: this results not simply because reality cannot be experienced by them as having a rational significance. This would be a purely epistemic limitation. On McDowell's fact-based picture of reality, the no-priority conception of objects means that there are no objects for them to encounter in the absence of conceptual capacities operating in experience. Objects are not independent self-standing entities in the world: "objects figure in the world by figuring in facts, which are true thinkables".¹ His account fails to allow that objects in our world are items to which animal can also be perceptually sensitive. In Chapter Six the explanatory challenge that this presents to McDowell's account will be assessed.

The Emergence of McDowell's Revisionary Conception of Objects: Reading Kant

As we saw in Chapter Three McDowell's assumption that experience is fully conceptual requires a modest identity theory. The nature of the identity theory depends on whether one joins this assumption with a substantial form of semantic externalism or with the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. Recall from the last chapter the two alternative elucidations of the modest identity theory. The identity between facts and true possible thoughts when conjoined with his metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding yields an account on which objects are derived from facts (and senses are only 'truistically' object-dependent). For, the rejection of sideways-on accounts suggests objects are subsumed within the conceptual realm. Objects are derived from facts, which are the basic units of the world: propositions about objects are grounded by propositions about facts. By contrast, when conjoined with a substantial form of semantic externalism, the modest identity theory provides for facts to be object-dependent. Since facts are identical to true possible thoughts they are composed of senses, and should therefore also be object-dependent. Propositions about objects ground propositions about senses. McDowell opts for the former account. It is the conception of objects available in this line of thinking which we shall now investigate. It was indicated in the last chapter that his claim that there can be no sense without a reference is based on a truistic semantic externalism not a substantial one.

In considering McDowell's view of objects, we need to look at the development of his thinking since *Mind and World*. His most notable writings in this area are the Woodbridge Lectures, and these will be the main focus of this chapter. Reference will be made to his 2009 collection of essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars in so far as these supplement his earlier material. In the anthology, he is explicit that he is offering a form of

¹ McDowell (1999a) p94

idealism. He defines idealism to be a commitment to the non-separable contribution made by spontaneity and receptivity. Such a theory is idealist because the objective and subjective have to be seen as balanced. McDowell terms this ‘a Hegelian equipoise’ between the objective and subjective. However, he maintains that his is not a ‘pernicious idealism’, which would see the subjective side dominating over the objective. He distinguishes his idealism from the pernicious form because he claims that his theory coincides with common-sense realism: “Any idealism with a chance of being credible must aspire to being such that, if thought through, it stands revealed as fully cohering with the realism of common-sense.”²

Sellars's Kant

In his second Woodbridge Lecture, McDowell offers a detailed discussion of Kantian thinking in this area and compares his own conception with that of Wilfred Sellars. In this section I shall detail his criticism of Sellars's handling of the Kantian model in the terminology that he himself uses: he talks of an upward and downward dependence holding between intuitions and our conceptual repertoire. In the next section I shall relate these comments (and his proposed solution) to the terminology used in Chapter Three: the modest identity theory of truth, the identification of objects in themselves with objects as they are given to our senses and the two attendant no-priority theses.

McDowell writes:

“An ostensible seeing that there is a red cube in front of one would be an actualization of the *same* conceptual capacities that would be exercised in judging that there is a red cube in front of one, with the *same* togetherness.”³

² McDowell (2006) p141. McDowell references Wittgenstein (1922) 5.64.

This ‘sameness’ explains how facts can be contained in experience. The logical togetherness of *red* and *cube* which is found in the content of conceptual experience is the same as that found in the content of thought and judgement. One might put the idea thus: a single function organizes the conceptual network such that concepts are connected in the act of judgement and this function is also responsible for the manner in which properties are distinguished in an object/location when perceived in experience. This reading suggests a Lockean idea of objects, a substratum on which properties are hung, for if the world is conceptually structured it would break down into smaller pieces than objects. In a later paper, McDowell more explicitly states that:

“Kant explains the objective purport of experience in terms of its exemplifying logical unities that are characteristic of judging.”⁴

He goes on to characterise his conception of a representation in visual experience as:

“immediate sensible representations of objects.”⁵

“[I]ntuitions... are representations of *thises* (or *thats*)”;⁶

“[v]isual intuitions of *objects* simply are seeings that”.⁷

This conception of a representation is supposed to undermine the threat of a pernicious idealism. It works in two different directions and offers a characterisation of the necessary conditions for genuinely reason-giving experience. (It is a transcendental requirement.) Sellars is clear about the upward dependence between receptivity and spontaneity (or intuitions and the Understanding) in his reading of Kant. In order for facts to be in play, experience must contain them and the Understanding must be dependent on

³ McDowell (1998f) p458

⁴ McDowell (2009c) p70

⁵ McDowell (1998f) p460

⁶ McDowell (1998f) p460

⁷ McDowell (1998f) p462. The sense in which objects are derived from facts is explicit here.

experience for its appreciation of them; spontaneity has a subject matter only because of the import of receptivity.

“the very idea of perceptual knowledge, and more generally the very idea that perceptual experiences, whether knowledge yielding or not, “contain” claims, so that they can be so much as putatively knowledge yielding, depend in this other logical dimension on the fact that the claims “contained” in perceptual experiences have their places in a world view.”⁸

However, McDowell contends that Sellars succumbs to the Myth of the Given by holding two different conceptions of intuitions.⁹ On one level Sellars holds that intuitions are already conceptually structured as a result of the non-separable contribution made to experience by the operations of spontaneity and receptivity. Intuitions are dependent for their identity on the operations of the Understanding. Yet on another, Sellars takes it that there would have to be basic intuitions which are unstructured and brute. According to McDowell, he thinks that this is required for his transcendental argument to go through. Specifically, the necessary conditions for reason-giving experience, in his mind, involve the separable contribution of receptivity.

The difficulties in Sellars’s thought is directly analogous to the ones McDowell sees in Kant’s. Kant sets up a metaphysical model of the world in which spontaneity and receptivity make non-separable contributions to experience. The world has no form, nor our thoughts empirical content, in the absence of this mutual contribution. However, Kant undermines this by making space for a noumenal realm. His account allows for objects-in-themselves and so fails to ensure that reality does not lie beyond the conceptual domain.

⁸ McDowell (1998f) p463-4

⁹ McDowell (1998f) at p113. He corrects this in his (2009c): he wrote in the Woodbridge lectures that there are two stages in the model and that Sellars gets the downward dependence wrong, he now thinks that Sellars failed to capture either upward or downward dependence. I have discussed his original objection because, though it might be less historically accurate as a reading of Sellars’s work, it brings out more clearly the common-sense intuition that an external constraint on the Understanding is necessary. McDowell accredits this intuition to Sellars in both the original and the qualified objection, and its pervasive nature is responsible for

According to McDowell, Kant should have identified objects themselves with objects as they are given to our senses. Without the latter move, the inclusion of a notion of the world which is independent of spontaneity (the noumenal realm) appears to be the true location of objectivity. In Sellars's work, his two alternative conceptions of intuitions mirror Kant's difficulty. Sellars ought to be satisfied with a notion of intuitions according to which they are already conceptually structured. But he succumbs to the urge for a reality outside the conceptual domain. He introduces a notion of basic unstructured intuitions. These intuitions play a role akin to that of objects-in-themselves in Kant's noumenal realm.

McDowell, by contrast, rejects the idea that intuitions might be given a characterisation 'below the line' at which episodes need the actualisation of conceptual capacities to be characterised. He thus supplements Sellars' picture with a downward dependence:

"Kant's view must be something like this: the very idea of a conceptual repertoire is the idea of a system of capacities that allows, as it were at the ground level, for actualisations in which objects are immediately present to the subject."¹⁰

It is only by the import of spontaneity that the products of receptivity have a part to play in the logical space of reasons; only because of the possibility of formulating a world-view can facts be contained in experience. This downward dependence is not simply a question of epistemic warrant but metaphysical in spirit. Recall from Chapter One that the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding in McDowell's account is to be read as a metaphysical claim about how the mind and the world relate. From this perspective, it would seem that in resisting the downward dependence, Sellars keeps in his picture a place for a world beyond the conceptual realm. For McDowell, by contrast, the possibility of facts being

the reason/nature dualism that McDowell sees operating in philosophical thinking since the time of Descartes.

contained in intuitions is directly dependent on the conceptual repertoire being actively used in the formation of a world-view.

McDowell's Kant

In McDowell's work, the upward and downward dependence between receptivity and spontaneity leads to the modest identity theory of truth and the no-priority thesis. Recall that the modest identity theory of truth identifies facts with true possible thoughts, and the no-priority thesis states that neither facts nor true possible thoughts are intelligible independently of the other:

“My claim is that we understand the idea of a thinkable and the idea of a fact – an element of the world, on the natural Tractarian conception – only together. It is not that we know anyway, independently of having the idea of a thought – which it would be for something to be the case, and work from there into a derivative understanding of what it would be for someone to think truly.”¹¹

The modest identity theory and the attendant no-priority theory are the bases of his idealist metaphysical picture. The rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding means that reality does not lie beyond the conceptual realm. This is achieved by the ‘Hegelian equipoise’ between spontaneity and receptivity that the modest identity theory and the no-priority theory establish. As discussed in the previous chapter, both elements are essential, but the identity theory is more basic because a no-priority thesis is plausible only in the presence of some form of mutual ontological dependence. The picture is idealist in the sense that there can be no holding apart of our minds and this fact-based conception of reality.

We also saw in the last chapter how the consistent application of the idealist balance

¹⁰ McDowell (1998f) p463

between objective and subjective leads McDowell to identify objects themselves with objects as they given to our senses. The motivation for this move was the thought that:

“the very idea of an object needs to be understood as part of a package with the idea of the kind of expression whose instances have objects as their semantic significance, *Eigennamen*... the very idea of an object needs to be understood along with the idea of talk, and thought, about objects.”¹²

McDowell also claims that a no-priority thesis holds between them. Objects and the appearance of objects are two sides of the same coin, in the same way as facts and true possible thoughts are. Objects are not intelligible independently of the appearance of objects to our senses. Objects and the appearance of objects to our senses emerge together as explanatorily linked items. Considering his conception of empirical objects, it is notable how similar to mathematical objects they appear: mathematical objects exist only formally, as entities whose existence is given by their definition within the mathematical system. This stands in contrast to a common-sense conception of empirical objects according to which they exist substantially, as entities independent of our beliefs about them. McDowell states that in *Mind and World*:

“I took it that 'object', in the Kantian idea that intuitions are of objects, just meant 'objective somewhat' (including, for instance, states of affairs). I now think it means something much closer to what 'object' means in the standard translations of Frege.”¹³

In the Woodbridge Lectures McDowell proposes a substantial two-way dependence between intuitions and the Understanding. He removes the possibility of basic unstructured intuitions providing the explanatory grounding of judgeable contents, which Sellars left open. He does this by stipulating that the conceptual system, which is the realm of

¹¹ McDowell (1999a) p96

¹² McDowell Private Correspondence (07/2007)

¹³ McDowell (1998f) p464 n15

spontaneity, makes possible the immediate experience of objects. The possibility of having an immediate experience of objects is conditional on the realm of spontaneity allowing such an experience. In order for objects to appear in experience it is required that the conceptual system has the space to incorporate the judgeable content which corresponds to the experience of that object. In the absence of the realm of spontaneity with the correct structure (having the space to incorporate the appropriate judgeable content), the object cannot be experienced. There can be no basic unstructured intuitions because objects have been identified with objects as they are given to our senses. The no-priority thesis which accompanies this identity theory ensures that we have no independently intelligible conception of an object on which to ground our thought and talk about objects:

“the very idea of a conceptual repertoire provides for conceptual states or episodes in which a subject matter for conceptual activity is sensibly present.”¹⁴

In *Mind and World* no characterization of objects is provided. It is only in the Woodbridge Lectures that we see McDowell giving any content to the notion of an object, beyond the common-sense conception. He does not define the notion of an ‘objective somewhat’ or explain why he has moved away from it. It seems plausible to interpret him as rejecting the notion of an ‘objective somewhat’ because it provides too much independence from the Understanding. For, the phrase aligns the domain of objects with the objective realm. He also mentions ‘states of affairs’. Historically, correspondence theorists have used this notion to refer to articulated entities which serve as a foundation for our judgements. States of affairs are closely connected with the Myth of the Given: they are entities which lie beyond the conceptual realm and they ground our judgements about the world. Given this close connection one would expect McDowell to reject such entities (as he does in the previous quotation).

In *Mind and World*, little time is spent explaining how the fact-based conception of the world allows for the object-dependence of singular thought. The location of the realm of reference is also passed over.¹⁵ He simply states that reality lies within the conceptual realm, and that our thoughts are object-dependent. It would seem therefore that in his 1994 work he sought to rely on the common-sense notion of an object and had yet to detect the difficulty in conjoining this with his rejection of sideways-on views of understanding. It is also worth noting, in support of my re-construction of McDowell's thinking that at the same time as the comment that he is now working with a conception of objects close to Frege's, he also makes the claim that objects are derived from facts. The Fregean notion of objects precludes the possibility of objects being explanatorily independent of the conceptual realm.

The idea of an 'objective somewhat', it appears, has to be rejected because it provides for a conception of objects which is too independent of the impact of spontaneity. An 'objective somewhat' does not obviously meet the requirement that the realm of spontaneity makes possible the immediate experience of objects. This requirement is a consequence of idealism: the objective must not make an isolatable contribution, it must not be in view independently of the subjective.

The similarities between McDowell's conception of objects and Frege's needs to be further investigated. In order to do this, however, we need to take a diversion into the work of Wittgenstein. This discussion sheds light on the notion of objects under discussion. We will return to Frege's conception of numbers afterwards. The relevance of Wittgenstein's

¹⁴ McDowell (1998b) p464

¹⁵ McDowell adds little with his claims that "thought and reality meet in the realm of sense" and that "[i]f the relevant [singular] senses are rightly understood, the role of sense... already ensures that there is no mystery about how it can be that the relevant thoughts bear on the relevant particulars, inhabitants of the realm of

work at this stage is that elsewhere McDowell directs the reader towards a paper by McGuinness on the Tractarian conception of objects.¹⁶ The reference predates *Mind and World*, but it is made in the course of his rejecting the correspondence intuition. As I noted above, the notion of 'states of affairs' is strongly associated with the correspondence tradition.

Wittgensteinian Simples

McGuinness attacks the traditional conception of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as a work in the correspondence tradition. Whatever the exegetical cogency of this reading,¹⁷ the fact that McDowell endorses it justifies our consideration of it. Wittgenstein's conception of the world and his views on the nature of language are certainly intimately connected. However, the relationship between the two is disputed. The traditional view has been informed by the fact that the *Tractatus* offers substantial metaphysical claims at the outset, apparently based on some general assumptions about language. Objects, or simples, were the basic atoms of reality for the early Wittgenstein. These objects are the only items to which names can be attached and, given their indescribable nature, they can only be named. They are not the objects of our mundane discourse for they are indestructible and immutable; all change in the world arises from their recombination. Wittgenstein does not cite any examples of objects, he instead relies on the arguments for his form of logical atomism as justification. In other words, the existence of these simples is logically, not empirically supported.

McGuinness questions the orthodox view that Wittgenstein's order of exposition

reference" [McDowell (1994) p180]

¹⁶ McDowell (1987b) p92 n16

¹⁷ Two commentators who attack the exegetical status, though not the coherence of, McGuinness' interpretation are Norman Malcolm [*Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden* (1986) Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd. pp28-35] and

reflects his true objective. He points to the conspicuous absence of any theory concerning ostensive definition and asserts that Wittgenstein “is doing logic and basing philosophy on it.”¹⁸ A reversed order reading would see Wittgenstein arguing to the claim that philosophy and logic have to do with the necessary features of any language. The argument would turn on the possibility of names, which would have content in either true or false propositions prior to inspection of the world.¹⁹ In other words, the possibility of utilising propositions requires bipolarity – that they can be true or false. In order to achieve this, McGuinness maintains that Wittgenstein held that it must be possible to use simple signs which can be comprehended independently of what is in fact the case. To allow for this, it must be the case that names refer to simples which, by the very nature, cannot fail to exist: “all questions of existence are questions about what configurations of objects actually obtain.”²⁰

McGuinness’s Account of Tractarian Objects

Recall our discussion in Chapter Three of two versions of Russell’s theory of descriptions. We considered a theory which adopts Frege’s syntactic priority principle: if a name functions as a singular term, no further questions can be raised as to whether or not there is an object in the world which is the reference of the name. We noted that McDowell’s account of objects is based on this thought: to be an object is to be the reference of name which is the subject of true predications. In a similar manner, McGuinness maintains that objects, the reference of Wittgenstein’s names, have no further existence beyond the potential combinatorial properties of their names.²¹ The fact that a term is a name results from its featuring in true inferences, rather than from there being an item outside the

David Pears (1989).

¹⁸ McGuinness (1981) p63

¹⁹ McGuinness (1981) p65

²⁰ McGuinness (1981) p62

conceptual system to which the name attaches. Objects are given existence, *Bestehen*, independently of correspondence to items in the world:

“An object in the *Tractatus* which is the reference of a name or simple sign can be viewed as simply the truth-value potential of a certain expression.”²²

In the initial Russellian account of names offered in Chapter Three reference is determined by investigating the world to see if anything matches the sense (a uniquely specifying description). The second Russellian account took the reference to be determined once the name is observed to function as a singular term. In the *Tractatus*, an object will not be ‘the thing which ensures the truth of the inferences it licenses’, for that conception would suggest the first Russellian account, in which the question of existence can be asked even after all the true inferences in which the object’s name appears have been detailed. Instead, the conception of names which McGuinness identifies is akin to our second Russellian account sketched above.

According to McGuinness the object exists if and only if its name features in true inferences, in a manner akin to Frege’s conception of numbers as objects. He gives the following mathematical examples of a name which cannot lack a bearer: “Let a be the centre of a circle...”.²³ Any discussion which follows cannot raise the question of a ’s existence. Given the necessary possibility of analysing our propositions into their basic constituents, each component will affect the truth-value of the proposition in which it figures, but it will not do so because of its existence. The possibilities for recombination are all the relevant features of simples which determine meaning. In this sense “[o]bjects form the substance of

²¹ McGuinness (1981) p65

²² McGuinness (1981) p65

²³ McGuinness (1981) p68. The example is borrowed from Ishiguro.

the world.”²⁴ A helpful way to conceive of this theory is provided by Hidé Ishiguro. She adverts²⁵ to one of Wittgenstein's imaginary languages in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

“The language serves to describe combinations of coloured squares on a surface. The squares form a complex like a chessboard. There are red, green, white and black squares. The words of the language are (correspondingly “R”, “G”, “W”, “B”, and a sentence is a series of these words... for instance the sentence “RRBGGGRWW””²⁶

The idea that it is the sense rather than any particular material object that is the content of the name is particularly vivid: each square is given the same name as their possible combinations are identical, thus there is only one object in question. Semantics dictates the ontological situation by prescribing identity or multiplicity. “A Name is a class of similar tokens expressions, each of which is used in propositions to refer to the *same* object.”²⁷ Since the existence of the reference (a simple) is irrelevant to the function of the name, the name takes us to the sense, not the reference: McGuinness cites Ishiguro’s account with approval and notes that for her “*Bedeutung* is an intensional notion in the *Tractatus*. In her view the existence of objects adds no extra content to the logical theory.”²⁸

In support of this contention, McGuinness cites Wittgenstein's use of the Fregean context principle that “[o]nly the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.”²⁹ He contends that were correspondence, ostensive definition or similar considerations in play in Wittgenstein's thought, it would be strange for him to have held that the reference of names cannot be ascertained independently of the proposition. One

²⁴ Wittgenstein (1953) 2.021

²⁵ Ishiguro (1969) p49. McGuinness concurs: “[a]ny sign which in the same combinations will produce exactly the same truth-values is the same sign or has the same reference.” [McGuinness (1981) p65]

²⁶ Wittgenstein (1953) §48

²⁷ Ishiguro (1969) p37

²⁸ McGuinness (1981) p65

²⁹ Wittgenstein (1953) 3.3. Both the context principle, and Frege’s syntactic priority principle, can be understood either epistemically or metaphysically. Only on the latter understanding does McGuinness’s attribution of this principle to Wittgenstein support the picture he is sketching of the *Tractatus*.

particular theoretical commitment which indicates that a traditional correspondence theory of language is not being invoked is noted by him: no meaning is attributed to bearer-less names. In other words, McGuinness's Wittgenstein propounds a view in which there can be no sense without reference.

This fact is significant, as it points to the idea that McGuinness's Wittgenstein offers a no-priority theory. A substantial form of semantic externalism is not being suggested. We cannot investigate the world to ascertain whether our names have references. For, simples are unknowable. They can only be named. Simples and thoughts stand in a no-priority relationship with each other: neither is independently intelligible. The possibility of thought requires names, with simples as references. Simples are guaranteed existents: once our language has been analysed fully, we know that our names have references. Following this reasoning McGuinness's Wittgenstein seems to be offering a no-priority view, rather than a view based on the primacy of language as he himself claims. Simples emerge with the possibility of names not after them. (Recall that McGuinness contends that his reading reverses the order of the traditional reading and instead sees the metaphysical claims Wittgenstein makes as following on from his philosophy of language.)

McDowell's Objects: Comparison

The claim that there can be no sense without reference arises for McGuinness's Wittgenstein in the same way as it does for McDowell. It is based on a truistic semantic externalism. It is not possible for there to be a name without a bearer because the bearer is given along with the possibility of the name:

“[i]t is inconceivable that anything which can function as a name at all should lack a bearer, just because *its bearer is given with its semantic role.*”³⁰

All names for simples have bearers. (Common-sense objects are particular combinations of simples.) McGuinness’s Wittgenstein clearly requires an account of how we come to understand propositions. For, we can no longer think of understanding propositions as a result of encounters with worldly objects. McGuinness takes Wittgenstein’s talk of the method of projection to yield the answer. When an individual comes to learn a language Wittgenstein’s account seems close to his claim in the *Investigations* that light dawns over the whole;³¹ elucidations are to be offered, but they can “only be understood when the meanings of these signs are already known.”³² It therefore becomes impossible to attain a perspective in which objects and the system are separated. A sideways-on view of understanding cannot be achieved. McDowell draws heavily on Wittgenstein and propounds the view that inculcation into a *Bildung* must take place via the mechanism of upbringing (or non-rational conversion) according to which ‘light dawns’ over the whole.

Simples are the reference of names which function as singular terms in true inferences. They are identified by the sum of the true inferences in which their name features and not by their position in a world external to the conceptual realm:

“what Wittgenstein is trying to convey is a point of view according to which what ...[propositions] are about is not *in* the world any more than it is *in* thought or *in* language. Objects are the form of all these realms, and our acquaintance with objects (our contact with them, to borrow a metaphor from Aristotle) is not an experience or knowledge of something over against which we stand.”³³

³⁰ McGuinness (1981) p68. My italics.

³¹ “When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)” [Wittgenstein (1969) §141]

³² Wittgenstein (1953) 3.263

³³ McGuinness (1981) p72-3

The use of 'form' connects directly with the Kantian account McDowell offers, which was considered previously. 'Form' is equivalent to his term 'logical togetherness'. The 'form' or logical unity which exists in both conceptual experience and thought is provided by the fact that experience contains conceptual claims which can also be the contents of a judgment. Objects do not exist independently of the appearance of facts in our experience and the location of judgeable contents in the conceptual system. Christopher Norris suggests that:

for McDowell the "Kantian notion of judgement [serves] as a primordial faculty in the nature of human understanding whose function is to bridge that otherwise problematic gap between concepts and sensuous (phenomenal) intuitions."³⁴

This thought makes sense of McDowell reference to upward and downward dependence cited earlier. Its "primordial" or inexplicable nature is due to the fact that his identity claims and the no-priority theses are part of a quietist account. No positive argument is offered for either the ontological or the explanatory claim, and McDowell maintains that they follow from the nature of the items they connect: "as far as I can see the mutual dependence I am envisaging does not require an external basis for the equipoise between the linked items."³⁵ McDowell does not take himself to need to argue for the non-separable contribution of receptivity and spontaneity. He offers only negative support: overcoming barriers to acceptance, rather than offering positive grounds for his viewpoint. The quietist contends that he can shrug our shoulders at the sceptic's protests so long as his position is 'the default'. In other words the quietist can only adopt common-sense beliefs, and he can only maintain them so long as the sceptic does not undermine our conviction that we do genuinely have world-involving thoughts. The purpose of conceiving of receptivity and spontaneity as making non-separable contributions to the content of experience is to make it

³⁴ Norris (2002) p16

the case that experience can be seen as rationally articulated (the impact of spontaneity) and also as a view on the world (the impact of receptivity). This purpose justifies the idealist ‘equipoise’ between spontaneity and receptivity.

With these similarities between McDowell’s Kantian conception of objects and McGuinness’s Wittgenstein’s notion of simples before us, we can now return to McDowell’s claim that his conception of objects is akin to the one Frege offers.

Fregean Numbers

We saw earlier that McDowell comments that his conception of objects in *Mind and World* is akin to standard readings of Frege. Frege’s view of objects, as traditionally offered, is uncontroversially a form of Platonism. This Platonism is not of the rampant kind that he derides, for it is connected strongly to our own language. Objects are elements of the formalism in the sense that they are given by the place they inhabit in it. Two theses of Frege’s guarantee this, both of which we have seen McDowell uphold. The context principle is the principle that only within a proposition does a word have meaning and is holistic in spirit. The syntactic priority principle arises from the fact that Frege’s investigation is fundamentally a linguistic one: it states that no further questions can be raised about the reference once the name attached to it is seen to function as a singular term. This principle can be understood epistemically or metaphysically. Quine adopted the epistemic claim. McDowell, however, adopts a fact-based conception of the world according to which objects are derived from facts. A metaphysical version of the syntactic priority principle is to be incorporated into his system. The world breaks down into bits more fine-grained than ordinary empirical objects and there is no privileged ontology. His replacement of the

³⁵ McDowell (1999a) p96

correspondence theory with a minimalist theory of truth makes it the case that we can adjust the terms of our language and thereby change the ontology of the world. Metaphysically, he accepts the Quinean point that: “What makes sense is to say not what the objects of a theory are absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable or reinterpretable in another.”³⁶ Any theory which preserves all the true inferences will be acceptable from an ontological point of view.

To appreciate this point, consider the metaphysical debate concerning the nature of properties. The grammar can provide alternative propositional forms under which the putative universals are treated either as objects or as predicates; the choice between the two thus appears arbitrary. In this case, the grammar does not lend any support towards a realist or nominalist thesis because we can rephrase our language to fit whichever theory we adopt. David Pears is a supporter of the realist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, although he concedes that: “[t]here really are cases in which the syntax of a name determines its reference, leaving nothing more to be contributed by a one-to-one correlation with the *nominatum*”.³⁷ Such cases abound in the realm of universals and abstract objects, because it is precisely in such cases that no further inquiry can yield greater information. Applying the syntactic priority principle to empirical objects leads to the thought that the domain of reference does not lie open to investigation in the manner which a substantial object-dependence suggests. To be an object is to be given by the sum of true inferences that one’s name appears in; or, as Quine put it “to be assured as an entity is purely and simply, to be reckoned the value of a variable.”³⁸ Quine concludes that our ontology is constrained only by which bound variables we assign. It is not constrained by the world because of a correspondence relation which

³⁶ Quine (1969) p50

³⁷ Pears (1989) p380

³⁸ Quine (1948) p13. Quine phrases his claim in epistemic terms because he maintains a sideways-on account of understanding in which the empirical world lies beyond the conceptual realm. For McDowell, his rejection of

holds between our language and empirical objects. We can re-jig our language and thereby re-jig our ontology:

“The use of alleged names is no criterion, for we can repudiate their namehood at the drop of a hat unless the assumption of a corresponding entity can be spotted in the things we affirm in terms of bound variables.”³⁹

Synopsis

So far in this chapter we have investigated what McDowell says about his conception of objects. We saw initially that his work on Kant (and Sellars’s reading of Kant) suggests to him the need for an idealism in which spontaneity and receptivity make non-separable contributions. He fleshes this out in *Mind and World* in terms of the modest identity theory of truth, which identifies facts and true possible thoughts, and a no-priority claim, which states that there is no explanatory priority holding between facts and true possible thoughts.

This line of thought is important. In following it, we saw that since *Mind and World* McDowell has further elucidated his conception of objects. He contends that his conception of objects is best expressed as akin to Frege’s conception of numbers. He also claims that objects are derived from facts. Investigating the conception of objects that this yields, we explored McGuinness’s reading of Wittgenstein’s account of simples. To be an object is to be the reference of a name which is the subject of true predications. The *de re* senses attached to this name are guaranteed to have a reference.

I shall now argue that McDowell’s revisionary conception of objects cannot sustain

such a conception of reality ensures that the claims carry metaphysical weight.

some important realist common-sense intuitions. I have arranged the discussion in the form of a dialogue. Once an objection to McDowell's account has been raised, his own response, or one which can be offered on his behalf, is then considered. The discussion will start by questioning McDowell's ability to distinguish empirical objects from mathematical objects. It is appropriate to begin with this topic, since his comments that his conception of objects is akin to Frege's immediately prompts the fear that such an account of objects can only be offered for formal, and not empirical, objects.

There are two benefits of adopting a dialogue format in this discussion. The first is that it allows the common-sense realist intuitions to emerge in an increasingly refined form. This more extensive discussion of McDowell's conception of objects reveals the difficulties his account faces from a common-sense perspective. My aim in this discussion is to avoid adopting a critique which simply refuses to accept his quietism. By the end of the discussion I aim to show that his conception of objects is revisionary. The second benefit of the form of the dialogue format is that it also allows the reader to appreciate the breadth of philosophers who subscribe to the intuitions considered. This should avoid any suspicion that these intuitions have limited appeal.

The First Objection: The Distinction Between Mathematical and Empirical Objects

It seems plausible that we have the intuition that any account of empirical objects will have to offer more independence than that which can be gleamed from an account of numerical objects. Bernard Williams gives philosophical content to this common-sense thought when he writes:

³⁹ Quine (1948) p12

“I should like to suggest, however, that inasmuch as there is a connection between our conception of reality and the idea of resistance to our will, what can be expected to present with the idea of independent reality is a state of affairs *to which there is a conceivable alternative.*”⁴⁰

He goes on to examine mathematical truths and concludes that they fail this test. Given that the identity of mathematical objects appears to be determined by the role they play within the formalism, it is impossible to conceive of, say, the number 2 as being other than to license the inferences it does (such as $2 + 2 = 4$). Numbers, as abstract entities, seem to have their identity determined by their combinatorial possibilities. Once the role of each has been defined, it is unclear what further question about the existence of the number can be raised afterwards. Mathematical objects are not set over from mathematical discourse though they are defined in such a way that we can discover unknown truths about them (some of their combinatorial possibilities preclude others). By contrast, empirical objects seem to have greater independence from the model we employ to discuss them. It seems that we are answerable to the world for our beliefs about physical objects in a more robust manner.⁴¹ A neat way of bringing out the distinction is available – the difference is between asking of Euclidean geometry whether it is true (in and of itself) and asking whether it describes the geometry of our universe. Only the latter has empirical connotations.

McDowell himself explicitly subscribes to the view that there is a distinction to be drawn between empirical and mathematical objects. He writes:

“There is nothing for linguistic competence to show itself in, in mathematics apart from responses to proofs and refutations. But any analogous claim about extra-mathematical

⁴⁰ Williams (2002) p137

⁴¹ McDowell’s deployment of minimal empiricism might be thought to undercut this. His claim is that constraint by the manifestation of facts in experience provides all the constraint we require for our beliefs. Objects need not enter the picture at all. However, he maintains the need for his idealism to overlap with a common-sense realism. The line of thought currently being considered questions his therapeutic success on this score.

linguistic practice is simply false. Linguistic competence outside mathematics actually embodies the idea of a realistically conceived reality”⁴²

His motivation is similar to that which Williams advances:

“[M]athematical reality – if we allow ourselves to talk like this – has no properties beyond those it can be proved to have.... mathematical objects, so to speak, are unlike empirical objects in having no solidity; no backs, as we might say.”⁴³

McDowell endorses the distinction between empirical and mathematical objects as a common-sense intuition. His account therefore needs uphold it. Given his comment that he conceives objects in line with the Fregean model, this may appear to be a problem for him. However, there are two ready responses which can be given on his behalf.

A Possible McDowellian Response: Distinctive Inference Patterns

The first possible response which McDowell could offer is that empirical objects, on his account, feature in distinctive kinds of inferences: for example those relating to spatial location and change over time. Mathematical objects, by contrast, cannot feature in such inferences. This response does not require any resources greater than McDowell has available.

To see if this McDowellian response is successful, we need to see whether there is anything more to the common-sense conception of empirical objects. A paper by Sydney Shoemaker is helpful in this connection. Shoemaker defines the notion of a ‘shadow’ object as follows:

⁴² McDowell (1989b) p354

“Consider the collection of spacetime points that constitute my spacetime path in the actual world, and the collections that constitute it in every other possible world in which I exist. And now consider, for each of these collections of spacetime points, another collection that has the same spatiotemporal “shape” as it, but is shifted slightly in spatiotemporal position... These will be values of a function from possible worlds to collections of spacetime points... this function determines an object which in each possible world has the corresponding collection of spacetime points as its spacetime path. Call this object a “shadow” of me.”⁴⁴

Shoemaker suggests that common-sense realism requires the rejection of “fishy”⁴⁵ constructs such as Goodman’s ‘grue’ and his ‘shadow objects’. Shadow objects have “at best a derivative status”.⁴⁶ Like the property ‘grue’, shadow objects are defined only relative to the genuine article. Shoemaker suggests that the common-sense realist position must distinguish genuine objects from their shadows and can do so on the basis of their causal significance. The genuine objects have a causal efficacy that their shadows lack. There is room for debate over whether or not one should recognize such shadow objects but I take it that from a common-sensical point of view (rather than a philosophical armchair), the intuition that Shoemaker expresses is correct.

It is at this point that the potential McDowellian response presently under consideration runs into difficulty. Such a response maintains that because the range of inferences we accept relating to empirical objects is distinct from those relating to mathematical objects, empirical and mathematical objects can be distinguished. However, it does not leave one with the resources to distinguish genuine empirical objects from their shadows: both will feature in the same type of distinctive inferences.

Shoemaker suggests that causal efficacy will provide the requisite mark by which we can distinguish genuine objects from their shadows. This points towards an interesting line

⁴³ McDowell (1989b) p360-1

⁴⁴ Shoemaker (1998) p211

⁴⁵ Shoemaker (1998) p202

of reasoning which we shall explore in detail a bit later. McDowell needs to have some account of causation in his picture. This is a fundamental element of our common-sense realist conception of the world. We will investigate what provisions he makes for this after we consider a second possible response.

A Second Possible McDowellian Response: Quietism

A second possible response available to McDowell would be that responding with positive argument to the objection is inappropriate. He is committed to quietism. This philosophical outlook allows that a purely negative argument can constitute a satisfactory response. In the light of this, an appropriate response might be that his account does not need to engage in constructive philosophy by showing how to distinguish genuine empirical objects from their shadows. Since the argument does not show that there is in principle any problem with our access to genuine empirical objects, it is not a conclusive objection to his picture. Our ability to respond to genuine empirical objects is a fact about us which is common-sensical and so (in the absence of an argument to show it is impossible or problematic) the McDowellian response can contend that assuming such ability is the 'default assumption' from which we must be unsettled.

This response saves the distinction between mathematical and empirical objects, but the realist intuitions can be re-iterated at a different level. In a critique of Shoemaker's position, John Campbell makes a point which needs to be considered in this context. He considers whether an anthropocentric conception of the distinction between genuine and shadow objects is sufficient. Such a response is based on the claim that the fact that we take a certain class of objects to be genuine is sufficient to distinguish them from shadow objects.

⁴⁶ Shoemaker (1998) p214

Campbell claims that this response gets the explanatory relations back to front. It is the fact that the objects are genuine which explains our distinguishing them from shadows, not vice versa:

“All there is to the contrast... is that certain sectors of space strike us as being objects, whereas other sectors of space do not... this seems to get things round the wrong way. It is because some sectors of space are occupied by physical things that they strike us as being occupied by physical things. The distinction is not merely an arbitrary projection by us.”⁴⁷

Campbell's argument is aimed against those who disavow the need for categorical objects and properties and instead propound a dispositional reduction of the categorical. He maintains that an account of non-conceptual experience explains how the references of our perceptual demonstratives are determined. His line of thought is based on the idea that common-sense suggests that our conception of objects incorporates the idea that our ability to respond only to genuine objects, rather than shadows, is due to the fact that the objects we respond to are the genuine ones. He maintains that the suggestion that instead the explanatory relation flows in the other directions is counter-intuitive.

McDowell's likely response at this point is not difficult to identify. He is not offering an anthropocentric response. That would amount to a form of 'pernicious idealism' in which the subjective dominates over the objective. Instead, his account is based on the no-priority relationship and the identity theory he discerns between objects and objects as they are given to our senses. The explanatory flow has not been reversed, instead it has been re-conceived as a no-priority relation. How satisfactory this response is will depend on how convinced one is by Campbell's claim that it is a common-sense intuition that the genuine objects cause our responses to them. While the no-priority view is not as extreme as an anthropocentric reading (which reverses the explanatory relations) it still rejects the

distinctively realist explanatory claim. If one thinks the latter is a common-sense intuition, one can stop the argument here. In the absence of a common-sense position, the quietist's right to assume that his reasoning provides the 'default position' is undermined.

However, it is uncharitable to the quietist position to simply accept the explanatory asymmetry at this stage: the position has not been properly undermined. Instead I shall investigate the significance, for the realist, of the explanatory asymmetry and bring out the importance of the intuition in another area of philosophy: pre-cognitive sensuous awareness as an explanation of concept-formation. This more refined objection is effective at revealing McDowell's position fails to satisfy common-sense realist intuitions. (It is in the response to this line of reasoning that the notion of an internalist conception of causation mentioned earlier will be considered.)

The Second Objection: Realist Intuitions Concerning Concept Acquisition

The first objection raised against McDowell focused on the need for a distinction between mathematical and empirical objects in any common-sense realist account (a point we saw that he himself advocates). Working through possible responses we saw that he cannot maintain the idea that we respond to genuine (as opposed to gerrymandered) objects because they are the genuine ones. This does mean his account of empirical objects cannot work, but it does raise questions about how we can have thoughts about a world conceived on common-sense realist lines. (McDowell's advocates a fact-based conception of the world and I do not mean to beg the question against that characterization. However, in order to coincide with common-sense realism there must be *some* truth to the thought that the world contains objects. As we saw above, McDowell dutifully provides for empirical objects in his

⁴⁷ Campbell (2002) p246

fact-based account. The discussion here questions the extent to which that account of objects overlaps with common-sense realism.)

The explanatory asymmetry which Campbell alludes to allows the realist a plausible model of how we acquire concepts: we are sensitive to the (entirely objective) structure of the world. The no-priority theorist, who claims that the structure of the world arises from the input of both subjective and objective, cannot utilize such a model. However, the quietist can rely on the default assumption that we do in fact acquire concepts. He can do this to the extent that his own position aligns with common-sense.

The objection will be framed around Crispin Wright's claim that the existence of truths in a given discourse does not guarantee a realist construal of the subject matter. His argument picks up an important aspect of the no-priority position: it rejects a traditionally realist correspondence conception of truth. Once the objection has been raised, I shall consider two possible McDowellian responses. Both raise the question of the role causation plays in pre-cognitive sensuous awareness. I aim to show that underlying the realist explanatory asymmetry which Campbell advocates, is a vital realist intuition about objects which McDowell's account has to reject. In so doing, he loses the quietist right to maintain that his position is the 'default'.

Wright and Harman's Test

In recent years Wright has offered a critique of realist attempts to show that a certain

subject matter has objective truth based on an inference to the best explanation of the convergence of opinion on the subject matter. He argues that this explanatory test ('Harman's test') is based on a failure to appreciate a distinction in the scope of the cosmological role of the subject matter:

“Let the *width of cosmological role* of the subject matter of a discourse be measured by the extent to which citing the kinds of states of affairs with which it deals is potentially contributive to the explanation of things *other than*, or *other than via*, our being in attitudinal states which take some states of affairs as object.”⁴⁸

Wright argues for a minimalist characterisation of the truth predicate (something which McDowell also favours). Such a characterisation accepts the deflationist's disquotational schema along with a few “platitudes” about truth, including the claim that anything recognisable as truth includes a normative constraint that goes beyond warranted assertability. Since this characterisation is sufficient for a predicate to be a truth-predicate it emerges that any area of discourse which has suitable syntactic features⁴⁹ can have a truth-predicate defined for it. Failure to discriminate between the width of the cosmological role of the subject matter can lead to acceptance of such minimal truth-predicates, rather than the more substantial characterisation necessary if one wants to maintain a realist account on which only one truth-predicate will be privileged.

Considering two facts (“the wetness of these rocks” and “the wrongness of that act”) Wright tries to show that moral truths are not sufficiently explanatory to pass Harman's test, in contrast to physical truths:

⁴⁸ Wright (1992) p196

⁴⁹ Specifically, “their statements being subject to acknowledged conditions of acceptance and their possessing the appropriate surface syntactic features: to wit, primarily, their availability for embedding within negation, the conditional, and other connectives..., and as objects of propositional attitudes”. [Wright (1992) p74]

“Reference to the wetness of the rocks can, uncontroversially, contribute towards explaining at least four kinds of thing:

- (1) My perceiving, and hence believing, that the rocks are wet.
- (2) A small (prelinguistic) child's interest in his hands after he has touched the rocks.
- (3) My slipping and falling.
- (4) The abundance of lichen growing on them.”⁵⁰

The wetness of the rock, therefore can explain not only propositional attitude ascriptions, but also precognitive-sensuousness, interactive behaviour and brute physical science. However, Wright maintains that the wrongness of that act can only plausibly explain the first of these types of thing and any subsequent consequences. Thus, moral facts have relatively small cosmological role relative to physical facts, and though they can have a truth-predicate defined over them adopting realism towards moral facts is dubious.

The realist intuition that Wright is basing his argument on is similar to the idea that Campbell raises. We instinctively think that the world is independent of our thoughts: we can distinguish between the real nature of the world (the facts with large cosmological role) and those which are projections of our nature (the facts with small cosmological role).

A McDowellian Response: An Aristotelian Account of Pre-Cognitive Sensual Awareness

Stephen Everson utilizes the work of David Charles and argues against Wright's conclusions. Their work draws on Aristotelian resources and therefore *prima facie* would seem to be compatible with McDowell's project. I shall lay out Charles' account before exploring the use to which Everson puts it.

Charles offers an Aristotelian account of the truth of morality based on the idea of

pre-cognitive sensual awareness. He starts by considering the differences between Aristotle's realism and the Modern Moral Realist (MMR).⁵¹ Charles credits to the MMR the following theses:

- “A – Moral properties play a role in rational explanation of behaviour
- B – The objectivity of our moral judgements is secured by their withstanding internal criticism
- C – There is no reaction-independent theory of human good
- D – There is no non-moral basis for, or ingredient in, the theory of human good
- E – There can be no general theory of the human good; case specific reactions are central to the theory of the human good
- F – Belief is central to action explanation
- G – There can be no external validation of our moral judgements”⁵²

The theses pertaining to the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding are B, C, E and G. B is the Neurathian metaphor which is necessary because of G, the absence of an Archimedean viewpoint. Recall from Chapter One that the Neurathian metaphor is the claim that since internal justification is all that is available change to the evolving conceptual system must be piecemeal. E follows from Wittgenstein's claim that the rules governing language-use are uncodifiable, and justifies the claim that moral reasons are perceptually appreciated (to avoid the risk of our needing epistemic access to a Platonic heaven). C is the reason for thinking that internal justification should be preferred to sideways-on accounts of understanding.

Charles' paper distinguishes Aristotle's position from that of the MMR by focusing on the differences in their moral psychology and in their accounts of moral objectivity. On the latter, Charles suggests that whilst the MMR is committed to an account of objectivity which

⁵⁰ Wright (1992) p197

⁵¹ The MMR, for Charles, is closely identified with McDowell: “My understanding of this viewpoint has been gained mainly from a series of illuminating and justly influential articles by John McDowell on Aristotle and moral realism.” [Charles (1995) p141]

⁵² Charles (1995) paraphrase from pp138-141

rejects sideways-on accounts of understanding, Aristotle has two further aspects to his account. For Aristotle, his account of ethical education (the denial of G, and the denial of our qualified reading of D) and the explanatory connections that his account of ethics shares with his account of medicine (the denial of C) both ground his moral objectivity. On the first, Charles considers the pre-conceptual stage of development and contends that our moral judgments reflect features present in the environment. Ethical education constitutes an objective mode of concept acquisition because it amounts to training with a pre-conceptual perceptual ability. Discrimination is already present and the training merely adds ranking to the features' moral importance. Charles account of Aristotelian teaching also includes a causal role for pleasure and pain in virtue acquisition:

“since natural and trained virtue are both said to be teachers of virtue, the pleasure they essentially involve appears to have an additional justificatory role in sustaining our commitment to the noble and in ensuring that we see its point. For the latter may depend on our keeping faith with our earlier cognitive detections and similarities *and* our non-cognitive reactions to them.”⁵³

Charles' second grounding for moral objectivity is the idea that moral reasons play a role in explanation which is broader than that which is expected of concepts, such as yummy, that call for a purely projectivist account. Working on the analogy between theoretical knowledge (for example medicine) and practical knowledge such as ethics, it is clear that in both cases the edifice of the subject matter hangs together in a coherent manner around some overarching explanatory core:

“In Aristotle's view, to secure the objectivity of discourse about a particular natural kind is to establish that it does in fact fit with other kinds in a type of appropriate explanation, and that the kind itself is an organized unity... In this reality presses in on us, we begin to construct our reaction-independent theory of objects or properties involved, as (e.g.) those that stand in a given place in an objective efficient causal order.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Charles (1995) p153

⁵⁴ Charles (1995) 161

Everson launches an argument which appears to allow McDowell a response to the difficulty Wright raises. He claims that Harman's test for cosmological width has been misapplied. Specifically two assumptions undermine Wright's claim that moral facts explain nothing more than propositional attitude ascriptions. The assumptions are the denial of functionalism about mental events and acceptance of 'the Principle of Causal Interaction'. McDowell accepts both these principles. The latter allows mental and physical causes to interact. The former arises from a naturalistic fallacy, in which the space of reasons is taken to be reducible to the physical.

As noted, the two assumptions which Everson highlights (the denial of functionalism and the acceptance of the principle of causal interaction) when combined suggest that explanations of propositional attitude ascriptions, which Wright allows moral facts to be part of, are necessary to explain physical explanations. The principle of causal interaction allows mental events to cause physical events and the rejection of functionalism ensures that mental events cannot be reduced to physical events. Wright maintained that the wrongness of that act can only explain propositional attitude ascriptions and not precognitive-sensuousness, interactive behaviour and brute physical science. Once it is accepted that mental events can cause physical events the idea that moral truths cannot be explanatory outside the domain of propositional attitude ascriptions appears contentious.

Everson's suggestion would seem to be in the spirit of McDowell's rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, whilst offering an additional element of objectivity. Unfortunately, it seems unsuccessfully grounded without reliance on the idea of pre-cognitive learning. Although Everson's account looks to be an extension of Charles' claims

about explanation, his points are a result of “focusing on the acquisition of evaluative concepts”.⁵⁵ For Everson queries the analogy that Charles highlights between bodily excellences (medical) and excellences of the soul (ethical): the match in their theoretical structure is insufficient as it stands, because we independently test medical truths. The fact that ethical truths seem similar in their organisation around a conception of *eudaimonia* does not prove that ethical truths are in fact substantially real.

Whatever the truth of this contention, it seems that McDowell cannot adopt either version of the explanatory suggestion. Everson's rejection of Wright's scope of cosmological role criterion is not based on claiming that Wright is wrong to think that some truth-predicate with a normative status can be defined over any discourse meeting the syntactic and assertoric stipulations he articulates. Thus a further step is required to show that moral truth meets these additional criteria. Everson's response is based on the idea that pre-conceptual teaching of ethical concepts reflects an appreciation of real properties. It is an inference to the best explanation of their existence as such – their having been acquired rather than existing as a result of the convergence of opinion on their truth – which makes it the case that the truth-predicate defined over them is the realist's one:

“The realist has a ready explanation for the acquisition of evaluative concepts... [h]e can say that what one acquires in acquiring such as concept is precisely a sensitivity to the way things are.”⁵⁶

This inference is a specific application of the explanatory point which we saw Campbell raise earlier. This externalist account of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness that Charles and Everson pursue is an anathema to the no-priority theorist. McDowell's account (even allowing the similarity between ethical and medical explanation) cannot take the

⁵⁵ Everson (1995) p188

additional step and appeal to pre-conceptual discrimination. In several places McDowell expresses mistrust of any attempt to ground the truth of our beliefs on our awareness prior to inculcation into a *Bildung* of the reality around us. For example, he argues against such biological grounding of Aristotelian ethics:

“Modern readers often credit Aristotle with aiming to construct the requirements of ethics out of independent facts about human nature... But I think this kind of reading is a historical monstrosity... [It is] to resist the extrusion [of reason from nature] in the manner of bald naturalism, leaving the conception of nature unquestioned but insisting that after all the putative rational requirements that we want to defend can be founded on, or constructed out of independent facts of nature.”⁵⁷

Whilst considering Wittgenstein's aphorism on language-learning that 'Light dawns gradually over the whole'⁵⁸, McDowell writes that “For light to dawn is for one's dealings with language to cease to be blind responses to stimuli: one comes to hear utterances as expressive of thoughts, and to make one's own utterances as expressive of thoughts.”⁵⁹ In the transformation of experience from first nature (where we are mere animals) to second nature (where conceptual capacities are actualized in our experience) there can be no underlying rational implications – the *sui generis* nature of the two realms and the inability of non-conceptually structured items to stand in rational relations preclude this. Pre-cognitive sensuous responsiveness cannot ground anything within the realm of reasons because it lies outside that space. In his account of our *Bildung* and second nature McDowell states unequivocally that “[h]uman infants are mere animals, distinctive only in their potential”.⁶⁰

The idea of pre-conceptual discrimination relies on a notion of the world which goes beyond that which his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding allows. In

⁵⁶ Everson (1995) p198

⁵⁷ McDowell (1994) p79-80

⁵⁸ Wittgenstein (1969) §141

⁵⁹ McDowell (1981) p333

particular, pre-conceptual discrimination relies on a notion of the world which allows it to be composed of objects and properties that can be in view independently of our *Bildung* and pre-date initiation into the space of reasons. Therefore, he cannot accept Charles's suggestions about pre-conceptual appreciation of reality.

At this point in the dialectic, then, we have seen that McDowell cannot avail himself of an externalist account of causation: it is forbidden by his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. He may, however, be able to avail himself of an internalist one. William Child has offered such an account as a means of reconciling Wittgenstein's internalism with the idea of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness.

A Second Possible McDowellian Response: A Wittgensteinian Account of Pre-Cognitive Sensual Awareness

Child suggests that the underlying notion of causation may be taken to be already deeply internal. He argues against the thought that an account which postulates pre-cognitive sensuous awareness must be a sideways-on account of understanding. Pre-linguistic sensitivities appear to entail a sideways-on account because such sensitivities seem to be reactions to a world outside the conceptual realm. The account therefore provides the requisite external position from which the content of our thoughts could be determined independently of our perspective on the world. Child makes two points against this.⁶¹ Firstly, whilst the immediate biological imperatives that shape our pre-linguistic responses may make the claim that we are sensitive to the real causal structure of the world appear plausible, in linguistic responses we go far beyond the pre-linguistic categorisation system:

⁶⁰ McDowell (1994) p123

⁶¹ Child (2001) p102

“The point of linguistic categories is to classify things together in ways that answer to our interests; and we may be interested in classifying things in ways that have nothing to do with their causal properties... classifications effected by concepts like these are not subject to correction in the light of facts about the real similarities and differences between things’ underlying causal powers.”

The thought is that even were it true that in pre-linguistic responses we were sensitive to the real causal structure, that framework could not possibly provide sufficient detail against which to measure an entire world-view. Our world-views are too complex and are driven by interests that go well beyond salencies that could be appreciated at the pre-cognitive level.

Secondly, though, Child questions the legitimacy of the thought that in pre-linguistic responses we are sensitive to the real causal structure of the world. He argues that only a Platonic conception of causation validates this account of pre-linguistic responses:

“Applying the anti-Platonist argument, the answer will be that what counts as relevant causal similarity in this case must ultimately depend on our shared sense of what is relevantly causally similar. So standards of correctness for causal concepts depend on us in the same way and for the same reasons, as standard of correctness for other concepts... when we use concepts that are answerable to causal similarities between things, the standard of correctness is internal in the deep sense of being constituted by our own shared sense of what counts, case by case, as relevant causal similarity.”⁶²

It is difficult to ascertain whether McDowell would be amenable to the kind of account that Child suggests. At some points he writes as though some forms of the notion of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness could be made consistent with his account:

“we have to understand the acquisition of conceptual capacities as a matter of acquiring, together, capacities to build world-views and capacities to have bits of the world perceptually manifest to one as material for world-views. This would be merely another

⁶² Child (2001) p106-7

mystery if we could not take the second component of this package to be a transformation, in the presence of the first component, of a prior responsiveness to objective reality.”⁶³

The idea of ‘a prior responsiveness to objective reality’ clearly indicates a conception of the world that would be available in pre-cognitive sensuous awareness. In addition, one might reason that McDowell should welcome Child’s deeply internal notion of causation given his own causal pluralism.⁶⁴ Whilst accepting that the Humean nomological account of causation is appropriate for the scientific domain he denies that this is the only form of causation at work in the world. Reason-explanations, he claims, can also be causal. His commitment to causal pluralism therefore suggests that he does not believe causation has to be viewed as an underlying sensitivity to the real causal structure of the world. McDowell can therefore be read as accepting the antecedent of Child’s suggestion that if causation can be seen as deeply internal then there is no conflict between pre-cognitive sensuous awareness and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. Since the reason for insisting on the non-separable contributions made to experience by spontaneity and receptivity was to avoid a sideways-on account, one might think that there is no theoretical difficulty adding the deeply internal notion of causation to the McDowellian picture.

However, there are times when McDowell rejects the idea that there could be a connection between our pre-cognitive awareness and our mature perceptual awareness. We noted some of these in our discussion of the Aristotelian account offered by Charles. Another example would be:

“A difficulty in saying anything satisfying about the phenomena of understanding is thus that working one’s way into a language - or better, being cajoled into it – is, simultaneously, working one’s way into a conception of the world, including a conception of one’s self as a person among others. This idea would be enormously hard to elaborate further; but we

⁶³ McDowell (1998b) p412

⁶⁴ See McDowell (1985).

cannot even recognise the difficulty... if we accept the assumption that learning a language leaves the content of our perceptions unaltered.”⁶⁵

This line of reasoning is supported by the thought that if the world is one of facts and not things and if facts can be made manifest in experience only as a result of the non-separable contributions of spontaneity and receptivity, then there is simply no possibility of perceptual awareness of the world prior to fully conceptual experience. This point is important. For, we can leave the question of whether or not McDowell would be amenable to Child’s account open and still conclude that such an account will not provide the common-sense realist account which he needs. The notion of deeply internal causation relies on the thought that the causal similarities we detect prior to cognition are not something which stand over against our *Bildung* and fix it to a reality beyond the conceptual domain. Anything discernible at that stage is already infected by the fact that we are human beings and our appreciation of causal similarities is deeply internal. Deeply internal causation is an anthropocentric conception of causation.

The significance of this emerges in McDowell’s comments on sapient and sentient perception to appreciate the significance of this.⁶⁶ He propounds a stark division between sapient and sentient experience. In particular, he borrows from Gadamer the distinction between the ‘world’ inhabited by humans and the ‘environment’ in which other animals live:

“what we share with dumb animals is perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment. We can say there are two species of that, one permeated by spontaneity and another independent of it. This accommodates the combination of likeness and difference between us

⁶⁵ McDowell (1981) p333

⁶⁶ Other commentators have questioned McDowell’s ability to explain the distinction between sentient and sapient perception, for example Collins (1998). Such discussions are taken, by McDowell, either to beg the question against his fact-based conception of the world, or to raise an explanatory problem which he, as a quietist, can reject [McDowell (1986b)]. It should be clear that my introduction of the distinction between sentient and sapient perception avoids both charges. Examining common-sense realist intuitions which his account of empirical objects cannot provide for is justified by his own contention that his idealism must overlap with common-sense realism.

and dumb animals, but not... by factorizing the truth about us into independent components corresponding to the respects of likeness and difference.”⁶⁷

McDowell claims that although we share perceptual sensitivity to the environment with animals, only humans have experience in which conceptual capacities are in play and thus have a world-view. This seems to be a common-sense position. Animals do not have thoughts or talk about objects, but they are perceptually sensitive to them. This position is clearly consistent with the Aristotelian account of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness that we considered previously. The objects we interact with prior to maturation are those which merely sentient creatures interact with throughout their lives. McDowell is committed to rejection this account because it amounts to a sideways-on account of understanding. However, he could adopt the deeply internalist account consistently with his philosophy. The internalist account, though, is limited in its explanation: it only explains how concept acquisition is possible for sapient creatures.

There is an obvious deficiency in McDowell’s conception of objects: a no-priority account of *objects* cannot coincide with realism because, unlike the case of facts (or norms governing our language-use), it is fundamental to our common-sense conception of them that they are independent of our thought and talk about them. The common-sense position is that there is an ontology common to the environments of both sapient and sentient creatures, but McDowell’s conception of objects rejects this thought. Considering concept-acquisition brings out this facet of his account of objects because concept acquisition on the traditional realist model makes use of the externalist version of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness. Explaining how this allows for concept acquisition allows us to note the parallels between the perception of immature sapient creatures and other merely sentient creatures. The deeply internalist account cannot allow this similarity because its account is limited to sapient

⁶⁷ McDowell (1994) p69

appreciation of causal similarities, indeed, this is the point. The internalist is trying to avoid the idea that in pre-cognitive sensuous awareness we might be in touch with the underlying real causal structure of the world. Child is clear that the deeply internal account of causation allows us to how sapient responses to the world in pre-cognitive sensuous awareness are infected by the fact that we are human beings. It says nothing about merely sentient responses to the world.

The no-priority theorist must maintain the fact-based conception of the world in order to succeed. Facts can be understood to be reliant in part on the subjective alongside the objective because they are conceptual entities (on McDowell's account) and not items about which we hold the strong intuition that they are independent on us. Other creatures do not have facts made manifest to them in perceptual experience and so there is no problem with distinguishing sapient and sentient perception. Such an account is perfectly in line with common-sense intuitions about facts. Objects, on the other hand, are conceived as common to sapient and sentient environments. The no-priority account precludes this. Objects stand in a no-priority relation with objects as they are given to our senses. Since objects are given to our senses only mediately, via their role in facts, there is no possibility of a purely sentient creature encountering an object which exists in the sapient world in its environment. It cannot be perceptually sensitive to such an object in the same way that it cannot be perceptually sensitive to facts.

Animals whose experience is by its very nature non-conceptual cannot be in a position to respond to objects which are defined along the lines of McDowell's no-priority account. For such objects are to be understood as derivative from facts. The non-separable contribution made by spontaneity and receptivity to experience is a pre-requisite for

experience of these objects. This point has metaphysical significance, as we have seen in investigation of McDowell's conception of objects. It is not open for him to respond, therefore, that whilst animals cannot experience objects as elements out of which to build a world-view (because they are not cognitively sophisticated enough), they are still able to respond to them blindly.

Objects are grounded by propositions about facts and true possible thoughts. Objects can not be identified outside of the world-view of a sapient creature that has experience in which conceptual capacities are actualized. The animal's perceptual sensitivity cannot be seen as relating to the very same objects which feature in our conceptual experience. The identification of objects themselves with objects as they appear to us and the attendant no-priority thesis ensures that objects are dependent (albeit mutually) on the exercise of our conceptual capacities. As we saw, above, with respect to McGuinness's reading of Wittgenstein, the type of objects that such an account creates is not independent of the formalism in which they feature. On such an account, animals whose perceptual sensitivity to their environment which is, by definition, non-conceptual cannot be sensitive to objects who rely in part for their existence on conceptual capacities.

The dialogue has run its course. McDowellian resources do not allow us to construct any further response to this point. His account, therefore, cannot uphold the common-sense realist intuition that there is an ontology common to both sapient and sentient environments.

Synopsis

In this chapter we have seen that McDowell's work on the notion of objects draws

heavily off Kant and Hegel, but remains obscure. In considering his later, clearer formulations of his conception of objects, we looked at McGuinness's Wittgensteinian account and also the Fregean account of numbers. Frege's syntactic priority principle helps to bring out clearly the type of account McDowell offers. In Chapter Three we saw that the truistic version of semantic externalism encapsulated this principle, whilst a substantial form of semantic externalism retains the dependence of senses on objects.

Further investigation was conducted to ascertain whether McDowell's account could retain our common-sense realist intuitions. Firstly, we looked at how McDowell might distinguish empirical objects from formal or abstract objects, such as mathematical ones. We saw that he is forced to reject the realist intuition that it is a result of the objects we experience being the genuine ones (rather than gerrymandered ones) that we experience them. His no-priority account claims that objects and our thoughts about them emerge together. This absence of this intuition, however, did not prevent McDowell maintaining that it is a common-sense truism that we are responsive to the genuine objects and so the objection has not revealed the quietist position to be untenable.

The notion of causation at work in McDowell's thinking was then investigated. We found that he cannot appeal to an externalist Aristotelian-based account according to which our pre-cognitive sensuous awareness grounds our thought. Such an account conflicts with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. We considered next whether McDowell might adopt the deeply internal Wittgensteinian account proposed by Child. I did not reach a solid conclusion on this issue. However, even were he to adopt Child's deeply internal account of causation McDowell's conception of objects will not yield an ontology common to sapient and sentient environments. The notion of causation which Child

considers is still particular to sapient experience. Sentient creatures are still precluded from responding to the objects which feature in our world view via non-conceptual experience. This clearly offends against common-sense realism. It seems fair to conclude that the account of objects he espouses is revisionary.

In the next chapter we will step back from the specifics of McDowell's conception of objects. I shall argue that he needs the conception of objects we have investigated in this chapter in order to show how the tension laid out in Chapter Three is to be resolved. His conception of objects is therefore not a peripheral error that can be dropped from his account. It was suggested in Chapter Three that if his semantic externalism were of a substantial form it would stand in tension with his metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. In Chapter Five we will look at why this is the case and the philosophical disputes that the appearance of a substantial semantic externalism causes him to become involved in. To reiterate, Chapter Five reveals that one cannot simply discount the Kantian conception of objects considered in this chapter as aberrant. McDowell's recently developed conception of objects is vital as it explains how the non-separable contribution of spontaneity and receptivity can be made consistent with his semantic externalism.

Chapter Five

The Sense/Reference Distinction

McDowell's philosophy of language is the subject of this chapter. He advocates an account of proper names based on the distinction between sense and reference. Any plausible theory of language must allow the subject to be seen as responding to objects in the world. According to McDowell two common alternatives cannot provide a satisfactory account of intentionality. A purely referential account of meaning, whilst satisfying this condition, cannot explain how the meanings it ascribes connect with the subject's beliefs and their evolving world-view. In particular, taking the meaning of a proper name to be the object referred to does not account for the role of names in inferences and judgements which the subject makes. At the other extreme, a purely inferential account of meaning leaves the subject's mind out of touch with the world because it cannot exploit the referential relations which hold between our words and objects in the world.¹ In order to avoid these difficulties he adopts an account which makes space for both the referential nature of singular thought and its connection to beliefs. Along with a reference, proper names also have a sense, which is the mode of presentation of that reference to the subject.

This chapter fits in to the overall argument of this thesis as follows. In Chapter Three we noted that there is a *prima facie* tension in McDowell's account arising from his commitment to a substantial semantic externalism and his rejection of sideways-on accounts

¹ McDowell writes: "The representationalist error is to suppose concepts of representational directedness can be intelligible independently of inferential relations. So let us not suppose that. Concepts of representational directedness are intelligible, then, only in a context that includes inferential relations. This is not yet to embrace the distinctive thesis of... inferentialism: that conceptual content can be brought perspicuously into view, by exploiting the idea of inferential properties, before we even consider the representational dimension." [McDowell (1997a) p158]

of understanding. In the previous chapter we examined his conception of objects and the truistic form of semantic externalism his account in fact offers. We saw how McDowell eradicates the appearance of the tension, but we found his conception of objects to be revisionary. It fails to uphold some important intuitions about empirical objects and as a result his idealist account does not overlap with common-sense realism. In this chapter it will be argued that the tension identified in Chapter Three is a genuine one. Some means of bridging the gap between a substantial semantic externalism and his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is required for the therapy to be successful. The account of objects discussed in Chapter Four is not a peripheral error, as McDowell needs to avoid the appearance of an insurmountable tension in his account.

The first half of the chapter considers aspects of his philosophy of language, whilst the second half examines two critiques which have been directed against his views. Both halves begin from the perspective of his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, before considering how a substantial commitment to semantic externalism stands in tension with it. As a result, the chapter falls into four main sections.

On McDowell's account, senses are individuated according to Frege's principle. His notion of sense is best seen as emerging from a negative argument: he highlights the faults affecting description theories, causal theories and dual-component theories.² Individuation according to Frege's principle is presented as the only option that fulfills the following criteria: it sustains the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding; and it provides a

² It was noted in Chapter One that we are considering McDowell's thinking over the last forty years, and whilst they form an impressively unified account, there are (understandably) discontinuities. In this area, his thinking in *Mind and World* builds on his earlier work on the sense/reference distinction. His earlier work offers only negative arguments for his own view of language and is therefore consonant with the quietism found in *Mind and World*. We will see later, in this chapter, though, that in his early work he presents his semantic externalism as a substantial claim. This clearly conflicts with the conception of objects he now offers.

view of intentionality which ensures that the speaker's perspective is a view on the world. Despite this affinity between his account of meaning and his rejection of sideways-on account of understanding, other elements of his philosophy of language originate from his adherence to semantic externalism. His commitment to this theory is presented as substantial: the claim that there can be no senses without references is based on the dependence of singular senses on their references. On the one hand, McDowell's emphasis on the subject's rationality (encapsulated in Frege's principle) fits with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding and a fact-based conception of the world. On the other, his work on truth-principles and his claim that they state references fits with common-sense realism about the objects which make up the domain of reference. Akeel Bilgrami attacks McDowell's theory for employing a bifurcated notion of content and thus highlights the conflicting notions of the world to which McDowell alternately appeals in his work on the sense/reference distinction.

After setting out McDowell's account, we will consider two other commentators who detect a tension in McDowell's theoretical commitments in this area of his philosophy. Mark Sainsbury and Ruth Millikan differ from Bilgrami in arguing against one of the opposing assumptions. Sainsbury's internalist work on the sense/reference distinction leads him to challenge McDowell's justification (apparently based on a substantial form of object-dependence) for denying the possibility of senses without references. Millikan argues, from the other direction, that a substantial semantic externalist (which she takes McDowell to be) should be highly sceptical of the idea of senses can transparently display semantic content.

Sideways-on Accounts of Understanding: Frege's Distinction

Frege's consideration of the co-referring names 'the Morning Star' and 'the Evening Star' initially prompted the introduction of the sense/reference distinction. Consider the following identity statements:

'the Morning Star = the Morning Star'
'the Morning Star = the Evening Star'

According to Frege, the first is a tautology and offers no information content; the second, however, appears to be an empirical discovery and an informative statement. Given the singularity of the object in question, namely Venus, Frege contended that “[a] difference can arise only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation of that which is designated.”³ A theory of sense would recognise a difference in the mode of presentation of the reference attached to each of the co-referential names. Frege's principle individuates senses in such a way that when speakers may, without failure of rationality, take opposing views towards sentences containing co-referential names, the senses attaching to each name will not be identical.

Frege's theory of sense has been taken to be one in which the sense of a name is a way of recognising the object named. This 'way' may take the form of a description or a method. However, the postulation of some form of identification mechanism, McDowell contends, manifests an implicit commitment to a psychologism that Frege explicitly rejects. The mechanism need only be known implicitly, since one can speak of an object in the absence of any explicit knowledge of how one has managed to identify it. According to McDowell, the appeal of a 'richer' conception is two-fold. Firstly, it appears to offer an

explanation of how a speaker latches onto the right object in thought: knowledge of an identification mechanism is supposed to explain how world-directed thought is possible. Secondly, the 'rich' conception embodies the intuition that "a person who knows the sense of a name must have some beliefs about its bearer."⁴ However, McDowell argues that both these apparent advantages are illusory. With regard to the latter, the intuition that the speaker must have some beliefs about the reference does not require knowledge of any particular truths on the part of the subject. Moreover, the 'explanation' offered by some form of psychological mechanism that reflects implicit knowledge is a chimera. The mechanism yields no actual explanation of the speaker's ability to identify the reference of the term, the sense of which he has grasped. The postulated mechanism is not a properly introduced theoretical term; it offers no new predictions and so the explanation it claims to offer is vacuous.⁵

In McDowell's philosophy a theory of sense is part of a larger attempt to understand language users. When one fails to realize that two names are co-referential, one can still be seen as operating rationally but on a basis which reflects incorrect or insufficient information. As noted in the introduction, formulating a theory of meaning based solely on reference would preclude this:

"We have not properly made sense of forms of words in a language if we have not, thereby, got some way towards making sense of its speakers."⁶

In order to locate the speaker's behaviour, beliefs and intentions within the space of reasons, a theory of meaning has to take into account the possibility of behaviour that would

³ Frege (1892) p24

⁴ McDowell (1977) p183

⁵ McDowell writes: "Postulation of implicit knowledge for such allegedly explanatory purposes sheds not scientific light but philosophical darkness." [McDowell (1977) p183]

not be adequately captured by identifying the reference of the subject's terms with the meaning. We saw in Chapter One that there are various ways of placing the speaker within the space of reasons. McDowell's rejects sideways-on accounts not only from those who try to construct the dictates of rationality from resources available in natural scientific description but also from those who try to impose a standard of rationality onto the subject from a position remote from the subject's own conceptual capacities and rationality standards. Frege's principle as originally introduced does not distinguish between such accounts. It is only in McDowell's hands that a ban on the 'point of view of rationality' emerges.

The details of a theory of sense turn, McDowell claims, on a theory of truth. Embedding the theory of sense in a theory of understanding obviates the need to provide anything other than disquotational truisms concerning the notion of truth. The theory of sense focuses on the common element of sentences before a theory of force explains the different uses to which sentences can be put. Since this common element is the content of indicative sentences, truth-conditions and a theory of sense are closely tied. Paraphrasing him, Mark Platts notes that reversing the priority of explanation between a theory of truth and a theory of sense dissolves the complications associated with providing an independent theory of truth:

“general reflection upon the connection between *s*[entences] and *p*[ropositions] required by the broader framework of explanation of behaviour ensures, granted the thin disquotational thesis, that whatever the filling between *s* and *p*, it will either *be* the construction 'is true if and only if' or will be justifiably replaceable by it.”⁷

McDowell suggests that to give a Tarskian theory of truth meeting a number of

⁶ McDowell (1977) p172

⁷ Platts (1979) p62

sufficient conditions is to give a theory of meaning. It offers a clear and realistic target for theoretical explanation with no commitment to some underlying psychological mechanism. As we noted above, his version of Frege's principle for the individuation of senses is tied to his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding by its invocation of our *Bildung*-specific notion of rationality. The Fregean theory of sense, so understood, provides a theory focused on a specific perspective, as Hans-Georg Gadamer advocated:

“Language is not just one of men's possessions in the world, rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all. The world exists for man as for no other creature that is in the world.”⁸

As we noted in Chapter One, Gadamer's metaphor of 'openness' to the world is entrenched in McDowell's philosophy in two ways: facts are made manifest through conceptual experience, and senses are object-dependent. With respect to his introduction of Frege's principle, he draws heavily on the former manner of securing openness to the world. He contends that Frege's principle must be assessed by a standard of rationality that is not remote from the subject. Indeed, such a perspective would make the account a version of sideways-on account. The requirements for intentionality at work in *Mind and World* are demanding: each individual subject must be seen as having a view on the world. This can be seen clearly by looking at the arguments which McDowell employs to undermine alternative accounts.

McDowell's Negative Argument

The best way to understand McDowell's various comments on theories of meaning is to interpret him as arguing for his own position by eliminating alternative accounts. There

⁸ Gadamer (1989) p443

are, however, limitations to this form of presentation. McDowell does not explicitly present his various arguments as unified and, what is more, his comments on the theory of meaning appear in several papers. Despite this, it is difficult to see any positive argument for his own view arising independently of his criticisms of other theories. This reflects the remarkable consistency underlying his earlier arguments and the picture in *Mind and World*. Because his earlier works only offer negative arguments for his view they can be utilized in support of his later picture without undermining its quietist standpoint. Quietism is premised around the idea that common-sense truisms do not need to be supported. They are the position we must be argued out of and, so long as common-sense is not made to seem impossible, we are entitled to take their truth as the 'default' position.

A second point of consistency between McDowell's earlier and later work which I shall bring out in my presentation of his negative arguments turns on his understanding of the link between intentionality and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. In the introduction to this chapter it was noted that he attacks inferentialists for failing to provide for world-directed thought, whilst at the same time attacking referentialists for failing to appreciate the subject's perspective. In his own philosophy of language, McDowell means to find middle ground by providing an account which can be seen as both world-directed (rather than essentially remote from the realm of reference) and framed from the subject's perspective (rather than relying on a sideways-on account). In most of his criticisms he connects the failure to provide an adequate account of intentionality with the adoption of a sideways-on view: the subject's thought appear remote from the world because the world and the thoughts are necessarily separated. In other words, once reality can be surveyed independently of the subject's thoughts and beliefs (a sideways-on view), those thoughts and beliefs automatically lack world-directedness (intentionality).

Three general types of theory can be distinguished, each of which McDowell attacks. They are grouped together according to the proposed source of the sense-content: descriptive, causal and dual-component. Sainsbury characterises them respectively as information-based, source-based and referent-based.⁹ These bases provide the principles that individuate thoughts, in contrast to McDowell's adherence to Frege's principle.

Description Theories

Saul Kripke developed a scathing attack on description theories.¹⁰ He used two types of example to show that the description theory (both the single description theory he credits to Frege and Russell, and the cluster theory propounded by John Searle and PF Strawson) is untenable as a theory of meaning. His example of a man on the street trying to provide a unique description of Richard Feynman that would differentiate him from Gell-Mann shows that “the properties believed by the speaker need not be uniquely specifying”.¹¹ Contemplating the related possibility that Kurt Gödel got hold of the manuscripts containing the incompleteness theorems from a man named Schmidt who was their real author reveals further that “even in the case where they are [uniquely specifying descriptions], they may not be uniquely true of the actual reference of the speaker's use but of something else or of nothing.”¹² The technical problems associated with trying to identify references based on a purely general description prevent a description theory serving as a plausible alternative to McDowell's own conception of sense.

⁹ Sainsbury (2002) p211

¹⁰ McDowell utilises Kripke's critique in maintaining an argument with the description theorist John Searle. [McDowell (1991)]

¹¹ Kripke (1972) p106

McDowell has criticized causal-based accounts. Such theories in various ways take a causal chain to serve the role of giving the content of singular terms (for example Kripke's account in *Naming and Necessity*). McDowell argues that since words have meaning only by being a part of whole sentences, to explicate the notion of denotation and introduce meaning at the level of words gets the explanation the wrong way round. For it relies, he claims, on the misguided intuition that an account of denotation can be given prior to the overall theory of understanding for the language. In his thinking two different considerations support the idea that this intuition is misguided. In both earlier and later works he appeals to Frege's context principle. Frege's context principle states that a word can only have a meaning as part of a sentence. This principle can be understood epistemically, as pointing to the widely shared interpretative constraint of holism. It can also be understood metaphysically, as a statement of the non-separable contributions made by spontaneity and receptivity to the content of experience.

Epistemically understood, holism about language points to an evidential difficulty. We cannot determine the denotation of a term in isolation because our theory must take account of the overall coherence of the language, not simply the immediate causal relations seen to operate at any given time. As noted in a couple of places, however, there is no need for a causal theorist to reject Frege's holistic view of language: Davidson accepts Frege's context principle (which requires denotation relations to arise only within the theory of understanding rather than prior to it), despite offering a causal-based account. Recall from Chapter Three the alternative elucidations of the modest identity theory. According to elucidation 2, facts are true possible thoughts and facts are also object-dependent, because

¹² Kripke (1972) p106

they are composed of object dependent senses. Such a theory is consistent with the holistic constraint imposed by Frege's context principle.

The second, metaphysical deployment of Frege's principle in McDowell's work is part of his idealist picture. The idea that denotation relations cannot be prior to a theory of understanding is drawn from McDowell's fact-based conception of the world. If this conception is maintained, denotation relations cannot exist in isolation because the objects which stand in denotation relations are 'in view' only from within the language game. The world does not lie beyond the conceptual realm. This reading of Frege's context principle is consistent only with the first elucidation of the modest identity theory discussed in Chapter Three. Objects are derived from facts: denotation relations hold only between singular senses which feature in true possible thoughts and their references. Since there is no privileged ontology any system of facts which licenses the same true inferences will have equal standing. Our conceptual freedom to select among these accounts precludes denotation relations being taken as prior to the overall theory of understanding.

This last point can be brought out by recalling our discussion of Timothy Williamson's criticism of McDowell cited in Chapter Three. Williamson takes McDowell to err in adopting a modest identity theory of truth because facts need to be individuated more coarsely than senses: "what one thinks is individuated at the level of sense while what is the case is individuated at the level of reference."¹³ However, McDowell rejects the idea that objects and properties are the basic units of reality: facts are composed of senses. Denotation relations are not prior to a theory of understanding because the world is not one of coarsely individuated facts to which the subject's beliefs can be related (individually or as a whole). Against Williamson, McDowell would maintain that the interpreter cannot relate the

subject's beliefs to a world which is independently intelligible. The subject's perspective has to be adopted such that the world is as fine-grained as the world of sense:

“To avoid a sideways-on picture of a given thought, we need to individuate it from the perspective of someone who thinks it. We do this when we say what it is that someone thinks in thinking it.”¹⁴

This metaphysical understanding of Frege's context principle flows from McDowell's metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. It will be recalled that it is the latter which causes McDowell to maintain that Frege's principle for the individuation of senses must be assessed only from within the subject's perspective. The assessment must not take place from the 'point of view of rationality' because the resources available must be confined to those conceptual resources with which the subject is endowed and those he or she actually employs. Recall from Chapter One that we cannot impose conceptual content onto a subject who does not have the resources to appreciate such content, nor can we impose conceptual content onto a subject who does not in fact employ the resources to provide them with reason-giving experience (as in the case of the cyclist who adjusts his course).

A further point which McDowell makes against causal theories appears in connection with the dual-component view. He claims that both theories embody a suspect notion of intentionality.

Dual-Component Theories

One can introduce the dual-component view by considering Gareth Evans's influence

¹³ Williamson (2007) p16

on McDowell's thinking.¹⁵ In his book *The Varieties of Reference*, Evans provides an account of the variety of ways that a language-user can come into contact with objects in order to have Russellian thoughts about them. Following Russell's conviction that acquaintance with an object is necessary to have a singular thought about it, Evans analyses three means by which we can come into contact with objects in thought – descriptive identification, demonstrative identification and recognition-based identification. Only the last two provide for the possibility of expressing Russellian thoughts and they are united by the fact that “in order to understand an utterance containing a referring expression used in this way, the hearer must link up the utterance with some information in his possession.”¹⁶

Sense enters the picture in a limited way: “understanding the remarks we are concerned with requires not just that the hearer think of the referent, but that he think of it in the *right way*.”¹⁷ However, Evans does not require that the interlocutors think of the reference under the same mode of presentation. So long as the reference of each interlocutor's sense is identical, communication can be effected. Allowance for a role for Fregean sense at the level of the speaker's thought, combined with its denial at the level of the unit of communication – in which the conventional reference is used – leaves Evans's account looking very much like a dual-component theory.¹⁸ However, McDowell describes Evans's account as challenging the assumption that shared thoughts are required for effective communication. All that is required for communication is that the same object is being thought about by each subject:

“there is no obvious reason why he [Frege] could not have held, instead, that in linguistic

¹⁴ McDowell (1998b) p420

¹⁵ McDowell (1994) p107

¹⁶ Evans (1982) p305

¹⁷ Evans (1982) p315

¹⁸ Sainsbury (2002) puts forward this line of thought.

interchange of the appropriate kind, mutual understanding – which is what successful communication achieves – requires not shared thoughts but different thoughts that, however, stand and are mutually known to stand in a suitable relation of correspondence.”¹⁹

McDowell’s suggestion is that an intrinsic connection (“a suitable relation of correspondence”) exists between reference and sense. This would make it the case that whilst the senses may differ between thinkers (and hence the thoughts would also differ), shared understanding would occur because the reference would be the same. In the light of this reading of Evans’s work, McDowell argues against a dual-component interpretation of Evans’s thinking.²⁰ It is clear that Evans himself does not mean to be expounding a dual-component view of language, in which sense is composed of the ordered pair of a general predicative thought of the object and the object itself, because he claims that senses are object-dependent. Considering two differently placed persons, he writes:

“That I am differentially disposed to a particular place in the universe... is due to the fact that I am at that place. This is a fact about me upon which my disposition, and hence my mental state, depend. Now this place-specific disposition no doubt results from my having a general disposition, one which I share with my Doppelgänger. And this more general disposition I have because of my brain state. But what arguments are there for holding that mental states must be identified with, or individuated in terms of, dispositions of the general sort rather than dispositions of the specific sort?”²¹

Directly preceding this quote, Evans argues that Russellian thoughts are a necessary part of the framework because only singular thoughts can explain actions where the behaviour requires different explicandum because of the different explicanda. McDowell’s own objection to this approach is based on its conception of intentionality:

¹⁹ McDowell (1984) p222

²⁰ McDowell sees Evans’s philosophical achievement as being to reveal that: “[i]f we want to identify the conceptual realm with the realm of thought, the right gloss on “conceptual” is not “predicative” but “belonging to the realm of Fregean sense”. (The stupid idea that those come to the same thing is unfortunately still widespread.)” [McDowell (1994) p107]

²¹ Evans (1982) p204

“as long as this “external” aspect is taken to come into sight only when we step outside the subject's own point of view... this “double aspect” kind of position is vulnerable to a form of Searle's objection: it does not accommodate, but indeed simply flouts, the connection Searle implicitly insists on between content and subjectivity.”²²

This criticism can be phrased in terms of sideways-on accounts of understanding: in making space for the ‘external aspect’ the account embodies a sideways-on view. The content of the subject’s thought is described in general terms (there is no prohibition on senses without references). By contrast, the ‘external aspect’ is object-involving. The fact that the dual component theorist insists on the separation between the two means that the subject and their thoughts can never be seen as truly world-involving. The account will necessarily be a sideways-on picture. The account offends against McDowell’s conception of intentionality because it purports to account for something (the subject’s thought) which is not actually in view at all: “Of course a sideways-on perspective on thought and the world has – or purports to have – both thought and the world in view. The question is whether the world is in view from the standpoint of the relevant thought”.²³ Framing an account in which the world and the contents of the thought are separate as the dual-component theorist tries to do offends against the idea that spontaneity and receptivity make non-separable contributions to the content of experience which McDowell’s picture incorporates.

McDowell’s own account of meaning emerges from these considerations. The faults he finds in descriptions-based theories, causal theories and dual-component theories require him to adopt his own particular view of the sense/reference distinction. Senses are not to be individuated according to descriptive content, causal origin or the dual combination of their reference and something else. Senses must be individuated by Frege’s principle from within

²² McDowell (1991) p271. Searle’s objection is that “[d]irectness to particulars, he insists, is an aspect of the *contents* of some *mental* states; and if giving an account of something requires... stepping outside the subject’s point of view then whatever it is that is being explained, it cannot be the contents of mental states.” [McDowell (1991) p270]

the perspective of the subject's own conception of rationality.

Semantic Externalism: Other Aspects of McDowell's Philosophy of Language

We have considered, at several points, McDowell's motivation for adopting a narrow reading of Frege's principle²⁴: his rejection of sideways-on accounts requires that neither the subject's world nor the contents of their thoughts can be in view independently. Senses cannot be individuated from a perspective which is remote from the subject. We should now consider those elements of McDowell's philosophy of language which appear to emerge from his commitment to a substantial form of semantic externalism. In Chapter Three it was suggested that there is tension in his account which will arise if he adopts a substantial semantic externalism: one in which the prohibition on senses without references arises from the dependence of senses for their identity on objects in the world. Some of his comments strongly suggest that he is advocating a substantial semantic externalism, and we will look at these first.

In his early work, McDowell seems committed to a theory of meaning with robust notions of reference and realism. He presents his semantic externalism as a substantial claim about the content of our thoughts. It has been noted that McDowell's writings span a lengthy forty year career in philosophy. Its consistency is impressive, but it is unreasonable to expect there to be a unified theory underlying all of his work. The point of introducing earlier materials at this stage is not to show (understandable) inconsistencies in his presentation of ideas which he was developing prior to *Mind and World*. Rather, I use them to point to the

²³ McDowell (1998b) p420

²⁴ Recall that this Frege's principle individuates senses in such a way that when speakers may, without failure of rationality, take opposing views towards sentences containing co-referential names, the senses attaching to each name will not be identical.

common-sense robust semantic realism which his earlier work took for granted. Whether or not he was drawn to a causal theory of belief in the later 1970s, the fact that McDowell relied upon a realist account of objects in his thinking reveals the naturalness of such an intuitively common-sense position. The intuitions he appeals to in his early work must be accounted for his account is to maintain its quietist credentials. (It is also interesting to contrast the effortless manner in which the common-sense conception of empirical objects is used in these earlier papers, with the extensive discussion of Kantian metaphysics which we saw he finds necessary to introduce the conception of objects with which he is currently working.)

McDowell's Work on Tarskian Truth-Conditions

In his 1978 paper, McDowell continues an argument with Hartry Field on the work of Tarski. Field is clearly motivated by a robustly realist conception of objects: he is a physicalist. Throughout the discussion McDowell critiques Field's argument but, significantly, at no point does he distinguish Field's conception of objects and the world from his own: "I do not claim, on behalf of the position which Field opposes, that there are no physical connections between words and things (which would certainly be surprising)."²⁵

McDowell argues against Hartry Field views on the commitments involved in Tarski's definition of truth, which connects semantic and physical facts. Field maintains that being a physicalist and adhering to Tarski's definition of truth requires a further reduction: Tarski's theory eliminates the semantic notion of truth, but a proper reduction of the other semantic terms employed in that theory is also required. In particular, Field suggests that an

²⁵ McDowell (1978b) p151

account of primitive denotation²⁶ is needed. Field's preference for a truth-characterisation, titled T1, is an extensionally correct characterisation that contains the semantic notion of primitive denotation. By contrast, Tarski's original exposition, T2, provides a scheme in which primitive denotation has been reduced. On the basis of an analogy with the chemical property of valency, Field maintains that T1 supplemented with an account of primitive denotation, such as Saul Kripke's causal account of naming, is what is needed:

“We are told nothing interesting... by T2 about what it is for a simple expression to have one of the appropriate semantic properties, any more than we are told, by a list of the valences of elements, what it is for an element to have a particular valence.”²⁷

McDowell's objection to Field's diagnosis is his presumptive re-phrasing of Convention T, Tarski's condition of material adequacy for a truth-characterisation:

“Convention T, as is well known, requires a truth-characterization to entail, for each object-language sentence, an instance of the schema “*s* is true iff *p*”, where “*s*” is replaced by a designation of the object-language sentence and “*p*” by that very sentence, if the object language is included in the metalanguage; otherwise a translation thereof.”²⁸

In contrast, Field offers Convention M:

“(M) Any condition of the form

(2) (*e*)(*e* is true iff *B*(*e*))

should be accepted as an adequate definition of truth if and only if it is correct and '*B*(*e*)' is a well-formed formula containing no semantic terms.”²⁹

The striking difference, McDowell asserts, between Conventions T and M is that the latter states a condition on formal correctness, a more stringent condition than material

²⁶ Field (1972) p350: “every name *primitively denotes* when it denotes; every predicate and every function symbol *primitively denotes* what it applies to or is fulfilled by; and no complex expression primitively denotes anything.”

²⁷ McDowell (1978b) p141

²⁸ McDowell (1978b) p142

adequacy. Field offers nothing to replace Convention T, which provides a general restriction - it determines only whether truth-characterisations are extensionally correct, not whether they are theoretically desirable - thus Convention M cannot replace Convention T. In the absence of this general condition, he suggests that a reversal of Field's thinking will allow us to generate Convention T and an alternative conception of the link between language and the world. Considering interpretation of a foreign language:

“[a] sufficient condition of correctness, then, in a truth characterization for the language in question, would be the possibility of putting it to interpretative use... treating it as if its theorems were of the form “*s* can be used to say that *p*”.”³⁰

The physical facts and the truth-characterisation would be checked for fit on the basis of two practical points: firstly, the theory would have to allow for the systematic generation of translations between the foreign language and the metalanguage; and secondly a condition of 'psychological adequacy' required by the need to make sense of the interpretee as having a view on the world and being subject to rational constraint by the world would determine that the interpretee could be accredited with intentional states – beliefs and so on. Thus:

“The hard physical facts, then, that constrain the construction of a truth-characterization for a language actually spoken are (i) the structural properties of physical utterance – events that permit the language to be given a syntactic description; and (ii) the complex relations between behaviour and the environment that permit (some of) the behaviour to be described and understood in intentional terms.”³¹

The constraint of psychological adequacy is neutral between accounts based on either conception-based or causal-based accounts of content. In other words, psychological adequacy does not determine whether the interpreter's perspective is that of a sideways-on view of understanding. This might be thought to undermine my claim that McDowell's

²⁹ Field (1972) p360-1, quoted in McDowell (1978b) p142

³⁰ McDowell (1978b) p144-5

work here points towards a substantial semantic externalism, since the position could be compatible with the line of thinking which comes down from his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. However, the terminology employed by McDowell conjures up common-sense realism, certainly in the absence of any more qualifying claims: the relations between an interpretee and the environment they inhabit are in view as “hard physical facts”. As such, the interpretee naturally appears to be occupying a mind-independent world which is in view even before the interpretation has been completed. Emphasizing the structural approach out of which one can build up a theory also works against the Wittgensteinian aphorism that “light dawns” and seems to preclude the subject’s contribution to the conceptually structured world being vital to its content. This realist rhetoric is something which he must handle with extreme care: in conjuring up realist expectations, the conception of objects which he ultimately delivers cannot avoid imposing a limitation on our interaction with the outside world.

In McDowell’s paper, the relation between mind and world in this picture has inverted Field’s demands: the connection occurs at the level of theorems and works out to axioms, rather than primitive denotation occurring at the axiomatic point and derivatively affecting the theorems. The overarching holistic impact of interpretation makes it the case that whilst theoretically it is still at the level of axioms that denotation occurs, there is no need to mention the semantic term of primitive denotation in the truth characterisation.

“from its being at the level of primitive denotation that relations between the words and the world are set up *within* a semantic theory, it does not follow – nor, according to the inverted picture is it true – that it is at that level that the primary connection should be sought between the semantic theory *itself* and the physical facts on which its acceptability depends.”³²

³¹ McDowell (1978b) p146

Establishing the connection at the level of theorems rather than axioms does not preclude a sideways-on account of understanding according to which the mind and the world can be held apart. This is an application of the purely epistemic limitation imposed by Frege's context principle: it ensures that any externalism is not of a crude Augustinian form.³³ It does not preclude externalism in its entirety, however. It is still perfectly plausible that our language can be seen to relate to world beyond the conceptual realm. We are being offered an account which is compatible with the second elucidation of the modest identity theory considered in Chapter Three (and earlier in this chapter). Denotation relations are not in place prior to the theory of understanding because of the evidential constraint of holism. The metaphysical interpretation of the context principle according to which denotation relations are not in place prior to the complete theory because of the derivative nature of objects from facts is nowhere to be seen. McDowell's thinking as presented in this paper allows for a clear connection between true thoughts and realistically conceived objects. The realm of reference has not been subsumed within the conceptual domain:

"The relation between language and extra-linguistic reality that a truth-characterization describes hold in the first instance between simple expressions and things, and only mediately, via the laws of semantic combination set out in the truth characterization, between complex expressions and the world."³⁴

Object-dependent singular terms can be seen as impacting on the subject; primitive denotation is in play because, holistically conceived, the theory is a theory of understanding

³² McDowell (1987b) p147

³³ It will be recalled from Wittgenstein's (1953) that an Augustinian conception of language pictures mind-world connections operating at the simple level of individual names and objects, introduced individually by ostension. A more complicated conception would be something like Quine's or Davidson's according to which mind-world relations are introduced holistically, but still rely on causal connections between the environment and the speaker's use of language.

³⁴ McDowell (1978b) p147. McDowell notes that: "This is a very important fact about Tarskian truth-conditions. We are potentially liberated from much bad philosophy about truth by seeing that sentences need no special extra-linguistic items of their own (states or affairs, facts, or whatever) to be related." [McDowell (1978b) p147 n16]] Clearly his own (1994) proposal stands convicted of this – an identity theory of truth takes the relation to be one of identity between facts and possible true thinkables.

for our language. With the truth theory playing its role in the specification of sense this suggestion allows that the connections between intentional content and objects can be derived from the specification of content. McDowell enrolls Davidson as an ally on this score:

“As I understand the holism Davidson accepts it is this thesis: attributions of content to sentences in a community’s language, to their linguistic acts, and to their psychological states are systematically interlocked, in such a way that – to put it in our present terms – there is not explaining, “as from outside” the entire system, what it means to ascribe some specific content to an appropriate item.”³⁵

He also follows Davidson’s terminology: talking of interpretation in a manner that suggests that radical interpretation requires the imposition of content onto the subject from a perspective which is not their own. Recall from Chapter One that an ‘imperialist’ form of radical interpretation embodies the primacy of the third-person perspective. McDowell later rejects such imperialism as incompatible with his metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. In this early paper, however, he employs terminology which suggests that content *is* introduced from a point of view remote from the subject:

“Interpretation can be pictured as the superimposition, on all that is available in physical terms about language use, of the content-specifying mode of discourse: ascriptions of sayings, beliefs, and desires.”³⁶

The use of the verb ‘superimposing’ seems at odds with McDowell’s subsequent claims that in interpreting a subject we come to share a position with them within the space

³⁵ McDowell (1987b) p103

³⁶ McDowell (1978b) p149. This is not a one-off slip: “We can picture the failures of substitution and differences in sense as, jointly and inseparably products of our attempts at principled imposition of descriptions in terms of speech acts, and explanations in terms of propositional attitudes, on the hard behavioural facts about linguistic and other behaviour, with the point of the imposition being to see how sense can be made of speakers by way of sense being made of their speech.” [McDowell (1977) p191]

of reasons, rather than filling in the content from a sideways-on perspective.³⁷ The existence of the empirical world outside the conceptual realm of the subject is a pre-condition for this type of radical interpretation. The interpreter is not coming to share a viewpoint within the subject's conceptual domain, they are imposing content on the subject in the light of a causal environment which is fully in view before interpretation.

The clear and important connections between McDowell's semantic externalism and Davidson's account, in addition to the realist tone of McDowell's own phraseology, makes it highly plausible that the Tarskian truth-conditions are presented in this paper as expressing a substantial commitment to semantic externalism. Bilgrami is one commentator who reads McDowell in this way. As a result, he accuses McDowell of offering a bifurcated account of the content of the truth-conditions. We shall consider Bilgrami's criticism in the next section, before concluding the elucidation of McDowell's philosophy of language. Though adversarial in nature, Bilgrami's reading of McDowell is useful as an expository device because it reveals the important gap in McDowell account which his later conception of objects fills. In the absence of the latter theory, it is natural to wonder how the tension between a substantial form of semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is to be resolved. Bilgrami's objection is a call for explanation. He does not argue that the bifurcation he spots can only be resolved by dropping one or other of McDowell's the two fundamental theoretical commitments which generate the tension detailed in Chapter Three.

³⁷ McDowell writes: "I... mean to rule out...that, when we work at making someone else intelligible, we exploit relations we can already discern between the world and something already in view as a system of concepts within which the other person thinks...These supposed concepts could be bound up with impacts of the world only causally, not rationally". [(1994) p34-5]

Bilgrami's Criticism: A Tension Emerges

Tarskian truth conditions are neutral as between a sideways-on account of understanding and a rejection of such accounts. They can be understood in different ways. Typically the truth conditions are taken to state references. The used right hand side of the clause takes us to the object in the realm of reference mentioned by the clause on the left hand side. An alternative way of understanding the truth conditions is to take the right hand side clause as referring to the subject's conception of the reference: the sum total of the subject's beliefs about the object. This is the reading of the truth-conditions that Bilgrami proposes.³⁸ He argues that it is required by a proper respect for the subject's perspective on the world. He is also an externalist. Working from general considerations he maintains that the content of thought must be dependent on the subject's environment, and suggests that it is concepts rather than objects which are externally grounded.

Bilgrami places his own view at some distance from both McDowell's and Davidson's views of language.³⁹ He claims that both philosophers treat their truth-principles as stating references, but that there is a need for the speaker's perspective to be captured by the truth-principles which both philosophers miss. McDowell asserts that he intends to capture the subject's perspective, but, Bilgrami contends, it is unclear how his account can achieve this. Bilgrami's understanding of McDowell's work revolves around the idea that the truth-principles state references (conceived along common-sense lines). This is something which, from our own investigation of McDowell's 1978 paper, is understandable.

³⁸ Bilgrami writes: "I do not think that the "reference"- clauses of a truth-theory of meaning do anything else but summarize certain beliefs of agents". [(1992) p154] He concedes that his understanding of the Tarskian clauses does not relate to "truth-theories in any official sense" [(1992) p155].

³⁹ "In fact, the differences between Davidson and McDowell are minor compared to the differences between either of them and me. McDowell himself explicitly presents his own views of truth-theorems as a way of elaborating the Davidsonian conception of them, an elaboration of it which brings it explicitly into line with the Fregean ideal of understanding the notion of *sense* in terms of *truth*-conditions." [Bilgrami (1992) p180]

Bilgrami also notes that McDowell aims to capture sensitivity to the speaker's perspective using the notion of sense. McDowell's position is premised around the central importance of Frege's principle. This is achieved by seeing how the speaker is an agent, he is moved to form beliefs and make inferences according to the reason-giving status of his experience:

"We might say Frege's introduction of *Sinn* reflects an idea on these lines: the very idea of a configuration in a mind needs to be seen in the context of the concept of rationality."⁴⁰

The role of senses is instead to distinguish between various true theories which are not all equally as effective interpretatively: "[t]o reject the notion of sense would be, for instance, to claim that a meaning-theory would never need to differentiate what it says about a pair of proper names for the same object."⁴¹

Bilgrami registers the impact of these considerations at the interpretative stage, which gives rise to the truth-principles. However, he questions how sensitivity to the subject can be formulated within a theory based purely on referentially understood truth-conditions. The interpreter might aspire to be sensitive to the subject's beliefs in forming a truth theory for his language, but if that theory is framed in purely referential terms, then any sensitivity is lost. Recall, McDowell himself takes truth-conditions to state references, but as a result of the mirroring of the subject's own words in the interpreter's language, he claims that the entire collection will serve as a theory of sense. Bilgrami queries the justification for mirroring the subject's words mentioned on the left hand side in the used clause on the right hand side. His own account can justify this symmetry because the right hand side of his truth-conditions refers to the subject's own conceptions of the reference. In an account in which the right hand side takes us to the object of reference, however, there seems no

⁴⁰ McDowell (2005) p169

⁴¹ McDowell (1987b) p123

obvious justification for mirroring the subject's words.

Bilgrami sees McDowell's commitments to a referential account of the truth-conditions and his aim to be sensitive to the subject's beliefs as coming apart:

"He does not deny that an agent's beliefs are relevant to the project of making a truth-theory sensitive to agents' conceptions... He does not however, want to allow my idea that the clauses themselves summarize the beliefs. When then, do the beliefs of the agent enter into his picture, if not as what the clauses summarize? I have no clear answer to this question. Beliefs are somewhere in the offing providing for the conception-sensitive work... But they are not what the clauses themselves implicitly convey."⁴²

McDowell's commitment to semantic externalism motivates his claim that the used right hand side of the truth-conditions state references, rather than the subject's conceptions. Bilgrami questions how the requisite sensitivity to the speaker can be achieved in such an account. Assuming that the object of reference meets our common-sense realist conception, the reference employed in the truth-theory appears to be in view from a perspective that is not necessarily the speaker's own. Bilgrami cites some private correspondence in response to this difficulty. McDowell writes:

"the context [of interpretation] has the point of enabling us to use the truth-theories *as if* they specified content... in a way that is sensitive to agents' conceptions and to the fineness of grain necessary for the psychological efficacy of content."⁴³

As Bilgrami notes, the 'as if' is elusive here. Motivating McDowell's account, Bilgrami suggests, are anti-Cartesian concerns which lead him to postulate semantic externalism in the form of object-dependence:

"The advantage of his view it would seem is that despite the fact that it is *conceptions* of

⁴² Bilgrami (1992) p172

⁴³ McDowell cited in Bilgrami (1992) p156 – Bilgrami's emphasis.

things that are specified, despite the fact that reference is mediated by *descriptions* as Frege demanded, it is really the *things* that we are taken to in the clauses of theory and it is really *reference* that the clauses specify.”⁴⁴

Since Bilgrami cannot see how McDowell can hold together the referential reading of the truth-conditions and deference to the subject’s perspective, he contends that there is a bifurcation of content in McDowell’s account. Both the object and the subject’s conceptions provide the content of utterances.

Assessment

It is easy to sympathize with the difficulties that Bilgrami’s experiences in considering McDowell’s account. It is hard to see how McDowell intends to reconcile object-dependence with a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding (in the absence of the account of objects offered in the last chapter). Bilgrami focuses on McDowell’s use of Tarskian truth-conditions, but it is clear that his concerns are simply an example of the general tension identified in Chapter Three. His objection, in essence, is the one which we saw McDowell launch against the referentialist account. If one reads McDowell as offering a referential reading of the truth-principles, his own objection based on the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding should apply to the theory he himself propounds.

Bilgrami presumes that McDowell means to introduce a substantial semantic externalism in which senses are object-dependent on a realm of reference which meets our common-sense realist conception. How else, one might wonder is McDowell to ensure we are in direct contact with the world? However, as we noted at a couple of places in Chapter Three, this is a misreading of McDowell’s picture. Recall Julian Dodd’s (initial) reading of

⁴⁴ Bilgrami (1992) p175

McDowell which sees him equivocating between the modest and the robust identity theory of truth or Tim Williamson's objection based on the coarse grained nature of objects relative to senses. All these objections miss the strength of McDowell's fact-based conception of the world. McDowell sidesteps the tension by creating a realm of reference derivative from the realm of facts. In his view, no substantial semantic externalism of the type which would engender the bifurcation of content which Bilgrami detects is on offer. For, objects cannot be identified independently of the subject's thoughts. *Were* McDowell to be offering a substantial semantic externalism, Bilgrami would be correct that it is difficult (if not impossible) to see how his picture avoids invoking a sideways-on account of understanding. If the truth-conditions state references and these references are to be conceived along common-sense realist lines, it appears that the realm of reference is remote from the subject. The realm of reference on the one hand, and the subject's location within it on the other, seem to be open to survey by the radical interpreter from a perspective which is not the subject's own.

Synopsis

Bilgrami's accusation that McDowell offers a bifurcated notion of content in his account of Tarskian truth-conditions brings out effectively the *prima facie* tension detailed in Chapter Three. Though we have seen, in the last chapter, that McDowell is not in fact offering a substantial semantic externalism, it is easy to see why other commentators have taken his version of object-dependence to be a substantial one. His own presentation of it, as evidenced in his paper on Field, utilizes rhetoric which conjures up a sideways-on account. The fact that McDowell himself was drawn towards a substantial form of semantic externalism points to a powerful intuition which it is therapeutically hard to overcome. A

substantial form of semantic realism allows for a common-sense realist account of objects. It cannot be abandoned, therefore, without finding another way to preserve the common-sense realist intuitions.

We shall turn, in the second half of this chapter, to two further discussions of McDowell's work which relate to the contention of this thesis. Recall the tension identified in Chapter Three. It was maintained that a substantial form of object-dependence stands in tension with the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. We have seen that Bilgrami highlights one particular difficulty that this tension creates. Two other commentators have also noted this tension, focusing more generally on McDowell's philosophy of language. In the light of my diagnosis in Chapter Three, their work can be seen as reinforcing the claim that McDowell cannot maintain a substantial semantic externalism together with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding in a successful therapy without further explanation of how these two commitments can be reconciled. The tension noted in Chapter Three points to a difficulty in accepting his account of world-directed thoughts which needs to be dissolved. Sainsbury argues that the motivations behind a substantial form of semantic externalism conflict with a principled application of the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. Millikan argues that the motivations behind adoption of the sense/reference distinction conflict with a substantial form of semantic externalism.

All three writers reinforce the tension identified in Chapter Three. This is important because it reveals that the revisionary account of objects which we saw McDowell offer in the last chapter is not something he can do without. He needs it because he must offer an explanation of how the elements of his picture fit together.

Sideways-on Accounts of Understanding: Sainsbury's Causal Account

Sainsbury's causal account is specifically developed to undercut the force of the objections to traditional causal accounts. He is firmly committed to respecting the subject's perspective as a view on the world. He proposes an account based on the idea of a baptism which credits the name with meaning. No particular object need be baptized, because he suggests that knowledge of a name amounts to knowledge of what it would be for the name to refer rather than knowledge of the reference itself. These considerations allow him to sidestep McDowell's general criticism, cited earlier. Traditional causal accounts take knowledge of the meaning of a name to amount to knowledge of the reference, but this conception of meaning predetermines the conceptual connections between the contents of thoughts. The causal theorist is working back to front by assuming we can have the object before the conceptual connections are established. By contrast, on Sainsbury's account, knowledge of the meaning of a name amounts to knowledge of the reference conditions, and this already invokes the idea of conceptual connections in the specification of reference.

The appreciation of the subject's perspective is captured in Sainsbury's account by the initial baptism which the language-users take to convey meaning. This theory leads him to an account in which bearerless names can have a sense attached to them. It is only from the perspective of an interpreter that a name may lack a bearer. From the point of view of the subject, the term has a reference. Since the subjects have given content to their name, the perspective from which a reference is lacking is irrelevant to the term's functioning as a name. He explicitly accepts the implications of his suggestion:

“Given that a Fregean view is committed to typical serious uses of empty names being one's which involve false belief, it would not be surprising if false beliefs are among those that bind users together into a common name-using practice. These practices resemble other social practices in this respect: it is enough for the relevant people to believe that something is so for it to be so.”⁴⁵

Sainsbury claims that the rejection of bearerless names based on a sideways-on view must itself be discarded: for, it relies on adopting an outsider's perspective. Any interpreter who is in a position to identify bearerless names used by the subject is necessarily occupying an outsider's perspective. The adoption of an account which determines the content of a subject's thought from a perspective which is not their own stands in tension with a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. The speaker thinks they have got hold of a determinate thought about a particular object, despite the reference failure. Where a substantial form of semantic externalism motivates the thought that in such cases no determinate thought is entertained, a sideways-on view is being entertained. Sainsbury notes that to deny bearerless names for this reason involves a shift in perspective from the language-user's to the theorist's:

A theorist, “is required to make an explicit affirmation of the existence of *a*. Since the theorist should affirm only what he knows, he is required to have knowledge that outstrips that of the speakers whose knowledge he is trying to describe. Moreover, in attributing to the speakers implicit knowledge of the semantic theory, he is attributing to them knowledge which, by hypothesis, they lack.”⁴⁶

Sainsbury's account has no scope to deal with a distinction between bearerless names and those with bearers. In name-using practices, baptisms are not necessarily connected with objects conceived along common-sense realist lines. Sainsbury takes such objects to be identifiable in the environment independently of the subject's perspective and therefore available from the perspective of a radical interpreter. Sensitivity to the subject's perspective

⁴⁵ Sainsbury (2002) p218

⁴⁶ Sainsbury (2002) p210

is lost on such an account (as McDowell's objection runs).

Assessment

Sainsbury and McDowell come into conflict at the point where McDowell appears to adopt a substantial form of semantic externalism. McDowell, in his early writing about object-dependence, specifically suggests that his prohibition on senses without references is a result of a substantial form of externalist commitment. For example, we find him writing:

“An interpreter's ascription of propositional attitudes to his subjects is in general constrained by the facts... the point of ascribing propositional attitudes is to bring out the reasonableness, from a strategic standpoint constituted by possession of the attitudes, of the subject's dealings with the environment.”⁴⁷

In appealing to ‘the strategic standpoint’, McDowell is invoking the ‘point of view of rationality’. Recall from Chapter One that any account according to which Frege's principle is applied from the point of view of rationality is a sideways-on account. For, it suggests that the interpreter places the subject in the domain of reasons by ascribing conceptual content to their behavior. Robert Brandom suggests such a model to McDowell, and he rejects it as sideways-on:

“it is someone other than the individual he hopes to be entitled to see as an observer who is supposed to place what Brandom hopes to be entitled to see as observational judgements or reports in a rational context along with the facts they concern.”⁴⁸

Sainsbury is correct, therefore, in maintaining that an appeal to a substantial version of semantic externalism as a justification for prohibiting senses without references requires adopting what (by McDowell's lights) is a sideways-on account of understanding. Where the

⁴⁷ McDowell (1977) p185

interpreter gives content to the subject's names based on knowledge which the interpreter knows the subject lacks (as in the case of bearerless names), he is assessing the subject from the point of view of rationality and not from within the subject's own perspective. Sainsbury's reasoning provides strong evidence that the tension identified in Chapter Three is a genuine one. McDowell cannot combine a substantial form of semantic externalism with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding without spelling out how the two are to be reconciled. Sainsbury highlights the conflicting motivations involved with these two disparate theoretical commitments. A substantial form of semantic externalism seems to require the possibility of adopting a perspective on the subject which is precluded by the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding.

Sainsbury's objection is based on highlighting these conflicting motivations and so does not touch the truistic form of semantic externalism which McDowell in fact offers. Clearly a truistic form of semantic externalism does not require an outsider's perspective on the subject. The account of objects we looked at in the last chapter does not present a domain of references which are capable of being surveyed by the radical interpreter from a perspective which is not the subject's own. A truistic form of semantic externalism does not stand in tension with the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. The objects on which senses depend are not the common-sense realist ones Sainsbury invokes in his objection.

We shall turn next to Millikan's argument which provides corroboration for this line of argument. She also takes McDowell at his word and assumes that he is offering a substantial form of semantic externalism. Overall, Millikan and Sainsbury argue to the same conclusion: there are conflicting motivations between the idea that a philosophy of language

⁴⁸ McDowell (1998b) p408

should be based on a substantial form of semantic externalism and the idea that we must not separate the world from the contents of thought.

Semantic Externalism: Millikan and Meaning Rationalism

Millikan is a strong advocate of semantic externalism and she argues that this assumption conflicts with the motivations which sustain the Fregean sense/reference distinction. Once her argument form is laid out, the significance it has for McDowell's work and his own response to her objection will be evaluated.

Millikan identifies the notion of sense with a commitment to meaning rationalism. She defines meaning rationalism as a combination of three epistemological theses about meaning:

- “1. The epistemic givenness of meaning identity and difference...
2. The epistemic givenness of univocity...
3. the epistemic givenness of meaningfulness...”⁴⁹

So defined, the notion of sense is an ‘outcropping of Givenness’. It is parasitic on what she terms ‘a rarification intuition’. Such an intuition is historically embodied in sense-data theories, and emerges when sense-data are objectified. In the theory of meaning, it is the sense that is objectified such that it provides the mechanism whereby semantic rationality is interiorized: senses move the mind to certain thought transitions which, because senses are individuated by Frege's principle,⁵⁰ are the rational transitions to make. Commitment to a theory of sense assumes that senses are given, they fulfill the mediating role between mind

⁴⁹ Millikan (1993) p287

⁵⁰ Millikan presumes that Frege's principle will be assessed from the point of view of rationality. We shall come back to this assumption in her reasoning later.

and reference. Meaning rationalism emerges from thinking that senses, as the vehicles of meaning, will always be transparent emissaries.

McDowell is clearly committed to assumption 1 and 2. A substantial version of semantic externalism would see him rejecting assumption 3. Meaningfulness is not given because the speaker may believe themselves to be entertaining a thought about an object which does not, in fact, exist. In such instances they appear to be having a singular thought but in fact they are not. A truistic version of semantic externalism would see him distinguishing two different readings of assumption 3. Recall from Chapter Three our discussion of Tim Thornton's claim that according to McDowell there is no "genuine contrast" between sense and reference. On a local level, assumption 3 is to be rejected: there can be instances where the subject believes themselves to be entertaining a singular thought about 'Mumbo Jumbo' where in fact there is no such object. However, on a global level, content is not determined from a position remote from the subject and there is no privileged ontology towards which our thoughts are directed. At this level, assumption 3 is taken to be true.

Millikan argues against assumptions 1-3 and draws the conclusion that "[a]n intact thinker need not recognise that the semantic contents of two of her own thoughts is the same, even when this content is presented through an identical semantic mode of presentation."⁵¹ (An intact thinker is one who is physically and mentally normal.)

Millikan's Objection to McDowell

Millikan's argument, in broad outline, is that since a substantial commitment to

externalism undermines the epistemic givenness of the identity, univocity and meaningfulness of senses, the Fregean notion of sense cannot perform the role pictured for it. Specifically, there is no basis for thinking that semantic differences will give rise to psychological differences. This presumption has been used to generate principles of rationality; these can be seen as constitutive of rationality in two ways. They can do so in the form of a ‘straight-up’ meaning rationalism in which “the meaning of a person’s thought is taken to have a source or nature that is entirely independent of its effectiveness in *actually* moving the mind”⁵², where the claim that we are rational is empirical; or, on the other hand, as part of an ‘inverted’ meaning rationalism, on which “part of what constitutes a thought’s having a certain content is it actually following... the logical patterns that would be appropriate to that content.”⁵³ ‘Straight-up’ forms of meaning rationalism emphasize the psychological efficacy of senses rather than their semantic rationality. The senses will be defined in terms of their effect on the thinker. Whether those effects are appropriate from the perspective of rationality will be open to question. ‘Inverted’ meaning rationalism defines our thought processes on the basis of rationality principles, but leaves it open whether we in fact ever have any thoughts at all. A thinker knows from the appearance in their mind of a singular thought that such a thought is available – the content is tied to the world and is not transparent.

In ‘White Queen Psychology; or The Last Myth of the Given’ Millikan presents a very detailed argument against epistemic givenness. However, for present purposes, the more programmatic sketch of the argument offered in ‘Perceptual Content and the Fregean Myth’ will serve. Since it is assumption 3 which determines whether McDowell’s picture involves a substantial or truistic form of semantic externalism, the discussion will be focused

⁵¹ Millikan (1993) p280

⁵² Millikan (1993) p291

on epistemic givenness. According to Millikan epistemic givenness is an error which arises from a “mingling of the intentional contents of representation with attributes of the vehicle of representation.”⁵⁴ The vehicle of content is taken to have the properties that the content represents the world as possessing; a combination of objectification of senses and a particular conception of the representation relation are responsible for this.

In Frege’s theory the representation relation that holds between senses and *Bedeutung* is conceived along a linguistic model rather than a picturing model. Thus senses are not taken to possess colours or shapes but they are taken to possess the samenesses and differences that hold between contents. Millikan terms this ‘content internalising’. Another feature of the Fregean model is ‘content externalising’, whereby properties of the sense (the vehicle of content) are taken to be an aspect of the content carried. This mistaken attribution of samenesses and differences in content to the sense gives rise to epistemic givenness.

Four combinations of sameness/difference can be distinguished in the Fregean theory of sense. Grasping the same sense ensures a unique *Bedeutung*; the presence of the same *Bedeutung*, however, does not ensure that a unique sense is grasped; grasping a difference in sense does not ensure a difference in *Bedeutung*; a difference in *Bedeutung* does ensure the thinker will grasp a difference in sense. A final distinction also needs to be noted: in some cases the Fregean contends that we cannot take differing attitudes to two expressions containing co-referring names. Schematically:

⁵³ Millikan (1993) p292

⁵⁴ Millikan (1991) p439

	Content Externalising	Content Internalising
Differences	different sense $\neq$ different reference	different reference = different sense
Samenesses	same sense = same reference	same reference $\neq$ same sense
Necessary Samenesses		necessarily same reference= necessarily same sense

Millikan contends that if one accepts a substantial version of semantic externalism neither externalising of sameness (where the sameness of sense leads to the sameness of reference) nor internalising of necessary sameness (where the sameness of reference leads to the sameness of sense) are legitimate moves. No reason has been given for thinking that semantic differences correspond to difference in mechanical impact on the mind. In other words, modes of presentation are defined *either* by their psychological powers *or* by their semantic powers. Indeed the whole point of introducing senses as intermediaries is to allow for slippage between what moves the mind and what ought to move the mind. To be consistent Frege ought to eradicate the externalising of sameness and the internalising of necessary sameness, thereby allowing senses to operate freely without the Givenness of their content’s identity. Having undermined the assumption of epistemic givenness, Millikan concludes that obeying the rules of psychological rationality in our thinking is a matter of a lucky correspondence between our thoughts and the state of the surrounding environment.

Using this line of thinking, in the light of a commitment to a substantial version of semantic externalism, Frege’s sense/reference distinction is shown to be unmotivated. An

argument explaining why we should think that semantic powers will be reflected in psychological powers has yet to be given. In a later paper, Millikan suggests that a commitment to semantic externalism goes further in revealing why such an argument will be very difficult to give. Taking it to be the case that the determinants of content include aspects of the environmental layout and often also historical context, reveals the implausibility of meaning rationalism:

“isn’t it reasonable to suppose that two different thought vehicles might have, say, the same cause, and hence content, without the thinker’s grasping that?... Similarly, isn’t it reasonable that different tokens of the same thought vehicle might have different causes, and hence contents, without the thinker’s grasping that?”⁵⁵

With a substantial form of semantic externalism, the relations that determine content flow from the world to the mind. Thus content is provided by the world, and yet may not be recognized to be that specific content by the subject. There is a genuine possibility of mistaking the contents of the sense and hence of the subject failing to recognize the same sense again, or distinguishing senses when necessary.

McDowell’s Response

McDowell takes issue with the thrust of Millikan’s argument. He accepts the soundness of the dialectic, but questions the supposition that sense can be conceived as a vehicle of content independently of its embodying semantic rationality. He rejects the assumption that senses are to be objectified. Senses do not have to be understood as akin to sense-data, as forms of Cartesian “para-mechanisms”⁵⁶ Their psychological efficacy cannot be held apart from their semantic powers.

⁵⁵ Millikan (1993) p283

⁵⁶ McDowell (1999c) p99

Senses are linked to their references (because there can be no sense without reference), but they are separate from them. They are not separate *objects*, however, as McDowell's point about the grammatical distinction, quoted in Chapter Three, brings out:

"The grammatical distinction between knowledge of things and knowledge of truths guarantees a difference of role for 'sense' and 'reference'... This grammatical way of distinguishing sense and reference promises to free us from any need to worry about the ontological states of senses. As far as names are concerned, the ontology of a theory of sense, on the suggestion I am making, need not exceed the names and their bearers."⁵⁷

The significance of this move can be seen brought out in considering one of Millikan's objections. Separating senses from references as distinct objects, she claims, leads to worries about the connection between the two: if senses are supposed to be intervening entities between meanings and their references in reality (in the same way as sense data are intervening entities between experiences and reality), it is difficult to account for the slippage between the two; intermediaries are not always truthful. McDowell seeks to overcome this gap between thought and reality in his account by claiming that sense and reference are intimately linked and by rejecting the model of objectified senses: "thought and reality meet in the realm of sense".⁵⁸

McDowell argues that Millikan's argument is successful only if she is correct in assuming that we can have a purely physical identification of mental concepts, provided from outside the space of reasons. Only if a mind's intactness can be characterised purely physically, can she question why an intact mind should be taken to track semantic rationality. However:

⁵⁷ McDowell (1977) p175

“Millikan’s conception of “the intact mind” is psychologicistic in the generalized sense, it purports to have the mind’s states and operations as its topic even though the topic is not conceived as framed within a *sui generis* space of reasons.”⁵⁹ McDowell concludes that “to have an intact mind *is* to be semantically rational.”⁶⁰

McDowell rejects Millikan’s assumption that ‘an intact mind’ can be characterized purely physically, and instead insists that the subject matter (the mind) cannot be characterized in concepts other than mental concepts. In this way, he maintains his conviction that a mental characterization of an intact mind will coincide with a mind which embodies semantic rationality.

Millikan’s point, however, does not depend on the purely physical identification of mental states. (It can be conceded that such a move would legitimately beg the question against McDowell.) Rather, the objection is that his account of sense is supposed to uphold the subject’s point of view whilst at the same time embodying a substantial commitment to semantic externalism. This is problematic because there seem to be two sources of content for each sense. On the one hand, the sense is given meaning because of its connection with the external environment in which the thinker operates; whilst on the other, the sense is given its content by the role it plays within the speaker’s own linguistic psychology. Senses cannot be individuated both by principles of externalism and considerations based on understanding the speaker. There is no reason to think the principles of individuation will coincide.

Millikan’s argument can be seen as pointing towards the tension first detailed in Chapter Three. In a substantial semantic externalism the relation between reference and sense runs in one direction only. Externalism ensures there is no guarantee that a speaker has

⁵⁸ McDowell (1994) p180

⁵⁹ McDowell (1999c) p102

got hold of a determinate thought, and this is reflected by the fact that the speaker can go wrong in their identification of content. If there is an independent exterior world which plays a part in determining the content of thoughts, then the relevant notion of sense is what ought to move the mind (in the light of the actual environment) not what actually moves the mind (from the subject's perspective of rationality).

The deployment of the narrow (subject-specific) version of Frege's principle, which maintains the conception of rationality in play must be the subject's own, is undermined in accounts which adopt a robust commitment to externalism about content. It is akin to trying to maintain an overriding commitment to the subject's perspective in the face of a commitment to the Davidsonian principle of charity. Sensitivity to the subject's perspective (their individual openness to the world) is undermined in such an account because the truthfulness of their beliefs is guaranteed without reference to them (as McDowell's own objection notes). A substantial commitment to semantic externalism requires senses to be individuated from the perspective of rationality, with due deference to the actual source of content (not the perceived content which the subject has hold of).

Upholding a substantial version of semantic externalism involves supposing that the rationality of the subject is not guaranteed. What ought to move the mind is assessed from the 'point of view of rationality' because the subject can fail to attain perfect rationality. What in fact moves the mind may be entirely rational from the subject's perspective. Millikan's argument assumes this distinction to be in place. Once only a truistic version of semantic externalism is upheld, however, the distinction breaks down. In the absence of a commitment to a substantial version of semantic externalism Millikan's argument does not cause problems for McDowell.

⁶⁰ McDowell (1999c) p102

Synopsis

We have seen in the first half of this chapter that McDowell argues for his philosophy of language on the basis of elimination: his account is the only one which preserves an acceptable account of intentionality. His introduction of his specific version of Frege's principle for the individuation of senses is motivated by his commitment to a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. However, his claim that senses are object-dependent is presented, as we saw in his early work on Field, as a substantial commitment. We noted, in Chapter Three that concerns can be raised about how these two theoretical commitments fit together. Bilgrami voices these concerns in terms of the conception of Tarskian truth-conditions with which McDowell is operating. McDowell offers a referential reading of the truth-conditions, but maintains that this does not undermine our ability to "use the truth-theories *as if* they specified content".⁶¹ Bilgrami seeks clarification of exactly how this is possible: this request is answered, in McDowell's later work, by the weakened notion of objects and the truisitic semantic externalism that we considered in the last chapter.

The claim that the tension between a substantial form of semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding cannot be ignored was further reinforced by considering the arguments put forward by Sainsbury and Millikan. Each takes McDowell to be offering a substantial semantic externalism and each questions his ability to hold this theory consistently with his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. Neither reveals the task to be impossible, but both suggest that it is hard to see how the conflicting motivations can be held together. We saw in Chapter Four the resources which McDowell in fact employs to overcome the tension. This work post-dates the work of Bilgrami, Sainsbury and Millikan considered here. It seems likely, though, that Bilgrami and

Millikan at least would be unsatisfied with the truisitic semantic externalism McDowell subsequently offers.

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that McDowell's work on Kant provides a vital supplement to his picture. Without it, the tension remains in his picture. In the final chapter, we will return to the therapeutic characterization of McDowell's work offered in Chapter Two and relate it to the arguments that have been presented in this thesis.

⁶¹ McDowell cited in Bilgrami (1992) p156 – Bilgrami's emphasis.

Chapter Six

Therapeutic Dissolution: An End to the Oscillation?

The argument of this thesis will now be concluded. The present chapter is structured as follows. Initially, I shall bring together some material from the previous chapters. The tension presented in Chapter Three will be restated and the arguments of Chapters Four and Five shown to support the contention that McDowell's account fails to meet the requirements of a successful therapeutic dissolution, as detailed in Chapter Two. A *prima facie* tension is present in his account because he appears to combine a substantial form of semantic externalism with his rejection of sideways-on account of understanding. It is resolved in his account by adopting only a truistic form of semantic externalism. However, this brings with it a revisionary conception of objects which fails to sustain our common-sense realist intuitions. The revisionary nature of this account of objects undermines McDowell's right to claim that his position is the 'default' position from which the sceptic must unsettle us. Such an approach offends against quietism, a principle which he means to uphold. He needs, therefore, to avoid the revisionary conception of objects and overcome the tension in some other way. It has not been shown that an alternative resolution is impossible, though no obvious resources on which to frame an alternative account present themselves.

My critique has been launched from within McDowell's own theory. It relies on the criteria which he presents for the success of a therapeutic dissolution. If my argument is persuasive it unsettles his quietist position: if he fails to give an account which coincides with common-sense, his right to maintain his position without positive argument is undermined. In this respect my critique is stronger than a number of other objections raised

against him. Where such objections rely on demanding a positive argument from the quietist, they can simply be shrugged off by the devoted quietist. In order to be conclusive, an objection must reveal that his quietism cannot be maintained.

In the second half of this chapter I shall locate the discussion of this thesis in a wider philosophical context. The critique I offer can be seen as adding further and more powerful support to those who oppose a position which has been termed ‘moderate Platonism’. William Child has maintained against McDowellian philosophers that they owe us an explanation of their accounts. This is required because they try to retain an element of realism (our common-sense intuitions) without the traditional underpinning claim (the belief in a mind-independent objectively structured world which idealism rejects). The conclusion of my argument is more forceful than Child’s own if it unsettles the quietist position. Whilst his demand for explanation may be ignored (if the quietist approach is not undermined), my own places the onus on the moderate Platonist as it aims to show that the position is not simply relying on common-sense truisms.

The criticisms of Robert Brandom and Crispin Wright are also based on the lack of positive argument given in support of the picture in *Mind and World*. As a result their arguments are also supported by my own. If my argument is successful, their observations reveal the difficulty of the task ahead for McDowell. Both Brandom and Wright challenge the resources which McDowell can utilize to re-work his picture and provide an alternative account in which the tension is resolved without a revisionary conception of objects. Before concluding, I shall make a few (tentative) observations about the historical significance of McDowell’s picture and the aspects of it which I have criticized in this thesis.

The Tension Restated

In Chapter Three the overall structure of my objection was sketched: it was noted that there is a *prima facie* tension between a substantial semantic externalism and a rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. They appeal to different motivational pictures, which entail conflicting explanatory relations. Kit Fine's asymmetric notion of 'grounding' highlights the latter point. McDowell develops his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding in terms of a fact-based conception of the world. In particular, he advocates a modest identity theory of truth (facts are identical to true possible thoughts) and a no-priority theory (neither facts nor true possible thoughts are independently intelligible). He claims that objects are derived from facts, that objects are to be identified with objects as they are given to our senses and that a no-priority relationship holds between objects and our thoughts of objects. This metaphysical picture suggests that propositions about objects are grounded by propositions about facts. It also suggests that senses will be object-dependent in only a truistic manner. There can be no sense without reference but this is a result of the fact that to be an object is to be the reference of a name which is the subject of true predications, not because objects in the world determine the identity of *de re* senses. This is a truistic or trivial version of externalism: there can be no sense without reference because no further questions about reference can be asked once the *de re* sense is seen to feature in a true possible thought.

McDowell, however, presents his semantic externalism as a substantial thesis. Senses are object-dependent: the absence in the world of the reference will rob the speaker of a thought they believe themselves to be entertaining. The existence of the object in the world determines the possible thoughts that can be conceived. A substantial semantic externalist

account intuitively appeals to a common-sense realist conception of objects. It suggests that propositions about objects ground propositions about sense. In addition, since facts are true possible thoughts and are composed of senses, a substantial semantic externalism suggests that facts will also be object-dependent.

The *prima facie* tension between these opposing lines of reasoning needs to be resolved. In the absence of a resolution, the tension presents an insurmountable problem in McDowell's account which undermines the possibility of world-directed thought. He avoids the tension by adopting only a truistic form of semantic externalism. This resolution, whilst perfectly consistent, is not therapeutically satisfying.

The Evidence: Chapter Four and Five

In support of the line of thought developed in Chapter Three, we looked in more detail at McDowell's Kantian writings in Chapter Four and at more general aspects of his overall picture in Chapter Five. In Chapter Five we investigated McDowell's philosophy of language. It was shown that the tension between a substantial semantic externalism (with its common-sense conception of objects) and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding is problematic for McDowell. The extent of the difficulty was supported by considering the work of Mark Sainsbury and Ruth Millikan. They both argue (although in different ways) that he cannot maintain a substantial semantic externalism alongside his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding. The *prima facie* tension in his account, introduced in Chapter Three, is a real one. The introduction of the revisionary conception of objects that we examined in Chapter Four is vital to his project, since the tension between a substantial form of semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of

understanding remains. The truistic form of semantic externalism allows him to avoid the tension, but it brings with it a particular conception of objects which he spends considerable time and effort elucidating.

In Chapter Four we focused on this account of objects by examining his Kantian writings, his comments that his conception of objects is Fregean, and the work of Brian McGuinness on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. With that conception of objects in mind we then considered whether it could sustain our realist common-sense intuitions. His quietism makes it the case that one cannot simply demand a positive justification for the philosophical position he offers. So long as his position maintains common-sense it is the default position.

I found that his no-priority position has to reject the realist claim which John Campbell voices: the reason we are perceptually sensitive to genuine (as opposed to gerrymandered) objects is that they are the genuine ones. Instead, the no-priority position sees our thoughts about objects emerging with the objects themselves. This position is inconsistent with an externalist conception of causation offered by Aristotelian thinkers. Such a position characterizes pre-cognitive sensuous awareness as an appreciation of the real underlying causal structure of the world which is entirely objective: the world contains objects and properties which can be perceptually appreciated prior to the interaction between spontaneity and receptivity in conceptual experience.

A deeply internalist account of causation may, however, be available to McDowell. Such a position takes the idea of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness in sapient creatures to be a result of the fact that our perception is already infected by our subjectivity. In immature, non-conceptual experience we are sensitive to causal similarities only because of our human

nature. Such an account may be amenable to McDowell, though the question was left open as he writes equivocally on the subject. Whether or not he adopts this account, however, I highlighted the fact that the stark division between sapient and sentient experience creates a problem for his account of objects and its aspiration to overlap with common-sense. The deeply internalist account cannot license the thought that animals are perceptually sensitive to the objects which we encounter in mature conceptual perception. These objects, for McDowell, are derivative from facts. They cannot be perceptually appreciated independently of the operation of spontaneity and receptivity in experience in which facts are made manifest. There is no possibility of sentient experience putting animals in perceptual contact with objects. This is clearly counter-intuitive and a rejection of our common-sense realist conception of objects. I concluded that his conception of objects is revisionary.

Therapeutic Difficulties: Chapter Two

In Chapter Two the following criteria for a successful dissolution of a philosophical problem were attributed to McDowell:

- The therapy must acknowledge the truth in the background assumption whilst revealing how we can abandon the appearance of an insurmountable problem.
- The therapy must not embody anything revisionary or contentious.
- The therapy must not offer a constructive theory.

It has been suggested that McDowell's account cannot satisfy these criteria. The

prima facie tension identified in Chapter Three (and argued for in Chapter Five) points to the appearance of an insurmountable problem in his account. Were it the case that he offered a substantial form of semantic externalism alongside his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding, he would fail the first criteria. In fact, though, his account avoids the tension by adopting a truistic form of semantic externalism and so it meets the first criteria. However, the conception of objects which follows from the truistic form of semantic externalism is revisionary. Thus his account, as it stands fails the second criteria. Let me expand upon this reasoning.

With respect to the first criterion, McDowell's account appears to embody a tension which prevents it from providing a satisfying therapeutic dissolution. We saw in Chapter Five that a substantial form of semantic externalism and the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding appeal to conflicting metaphysical pictures. This creates the appearance of an insurmountable problem. In the absence of the detail which we looked at in Chapter Four, his picture would fail his first criterion.

With respect to the second criterion, revisionary philosophy offers more than common-sense platitudes. It takes a topic about which we have intuitions (in this case objects) and tries to explain them away by offering an altered account of the subject. His conception of objects makes us doubt whether there are empirical objects of the type common-sense postulates. His account is, therefore, a revisionary one and so cannot meet his second criterion. McDowell is committed to quietism and claims that if one provides only reminders of truisms there is no need to offer positive arguments for one's picture. A quietist needs to undermine the sceptical arguments only to the extent that they reveal our common-

sense beliefs to be impossible. No positive arguments need to be offered in favour of common-sense because that is the 'default' position. The conception of objects which he elucidates means that this line of thought is no longer available to him. He cannot maintain that his account is the 'default' position.

It is worth commenting on the final criterion, though my remarks are offered only tentatively and do not form part of the line of argument defended in this thesis. Constructive philosophy sees itself as answering sceptical doubt rather than dispelling the appearance of a problem. Although it is clear that McDowell's intention is not to offer a constructive account, there is some plausibility in the claim that his revisionary conception of objects amounts to a piece of constructive philosophy. He takes a great deal of time and effort expounding this Kantian conception of objects. The need for this amount of theory suggests that we are being given an account which aims to answer scepticism rather than dispel it.

McDowell's Picture and Common-Sense Realism

In this section, the argument presented will be located within broader aspects of the current philosophical landscape. I shall start by looking at the work of Child. In particular, the varieties of Platonism which he identifies will be considered and McDowell's place within that classification system marked out. After that we will address Child's objection to McDowell's moderate Platonism. I shall locate my own objection within this framework.

Child considers various forms of Platonism. Drawing on the work of David Pears, Child credits two doctrines to a Platonistic conception: "the idea that the world has an

objective, mind-independent structure”¹ and the idea that “standard of correctness for applications of our words are investigation-independent.”² He then distinguishes three positions, relating to these doctrines. Firstly, there is full-blooded Platonism which accepts both doctrines. Secondly, there is moderate Platonism. This position rejects the first Platonist doctrine but accepts the second. Child places McDowell’s account within this category.³ Finally, there is constructivism, which rejects both doctrines. Let us examine the full-blooded Platonist conception in some detail before turning to compare this robustly realist conception with the moderate Platonist.

Common-Sense Realism

Child characterises a common-sense realist conception of the world as embodying both Platonist doctrines. He claims that the common-sense realist conception includes the idea that the world has a structure, namely it is made up of objects and properties. We can apply a number of alternative conceptual schemes to this structure. However, once a particular system is applied it is the world which determines whether or not the concepts we have selected have application. In other words, some conceptual systems are better than others at capturing truths about the world. Some concepts group together items in ways which capture the underlying causal structure of the world, whilst others do not. One useful way of spelling this thought out is in terms of the metaphor of a net, which can be found in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein depicts the alternative conceptual schemes available to us as nets of different shapes:

¹ Child (2001) p83

² Child (2001) p84. Italics removed.

³ McDowell accepts the second Platonist doctrine: “The standards of correctness embodied in a grasped meaning are... ratification-independent.” [McDowell (1993) p274] His ‘idealist equipoise’ between objectivity and subjectivity is a rejection of the first Platonist doctrine. Since the structure of the world is the result of the joint contributions of spontaneity and receptivity, the world does not have a mind-independent structure.

“This form is arbitrary, since I could have applied with equal success a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh. It can happen that the description would have been simpler with the aid of a triangular mesh; that is to say we might have described the surface more accurately with a triangular, and coarser, than with the finer square mesh, or vice versa, and so on.”⁴

The idea expressed here is that whilst we have the freedom to determine the ‘net’ or conceptual system to employ, the world then provides an independent measure by determining whether or not anything satisfies the concepts we bring to bear on experience. Consider the work of David Wiggins, who utilizes the Wittgensteinian metaphor in his *Sameness and Substance*. Wiggins maintains a realist conception of the world which allows for independent determination of the application of our concepts. He advocates a moderate essentialism according to which the essence of natural kind terms control our concept application in stark contrast to the manner in which our concept application controls the essence of artifact kinds:

“if (as I claim) there is nothing to prevent [the conceptual scheme]... from being regulated and corrected constantly *by reality itself*, then there is a way for an overwhelming importance to reside in the distinction [between natural kind terms and artifact kinds]... [S]urely human understanding does come ever closer to finding features of the world whose articulation is sensitive to the practical or provincial explanatory interests with which thought first addressed itself to the world.... The condition of acceptance [“the causal cum explanatory interests”] that we do impose on the sortal notions we continue to employ is not an empty one.”⁵

Wiggins utilizes the argument form of inference to the best explanation to justify his conviction in the objective nature of the “conditions of acceptance”. On this account the fact that the world has a particular structure provides that some concepts are more natural or some similarities more objectively correct. Although our freedom to choose concepts has an

⁴ Wittgenstein (1922) 6.341. David Wiggins makes the same point very succinctly: “what sortal concepts we bring to bear upon experience determines what we can find there – just as the size and mesh of a net determine, not what fish are in the sea, but which ones we shall catch.” [(1980b) p136]

⁵ Wiggins (1980b) p142-4

effect on which fish our net catches, it does not prejudice whether fish will or will not be caught. Tying our language to a mind-independent objective world (as a traditional semantic externalism does) allows Wiggins to ground the distinction between natural and artifact concepts. The idealist point that the net affects which fish we catch can be accepted, without giving up on realism: the net is still designed to capture the fish which exist in the sea.

Moderate Platonism

Whilst the full-bloodied Platonist accepts both Platonistic doctrines, the moderate realist accepts only the second. Child questions the coherence of this moderate Platonist position, arguing that the two doctrines must be jointly rejected or accepted. Essentially his argument is based on an intuition about explanation: the first doctrine (the mind-independent structure of the world) provides the explanation for the state of affairs detailed in the second doctrine (the existence of investigation-independent norms). Child queries how one can maintain that the world does not have an objective, mind-independent structure which determines the rules we follow in applying our words, whilst at the same time taking the standard of correctness we apply to extend beyond the cases we have considered:

“If it is our natural tendency to continue the series [generated by repeatedly applying a mathematical operation] in a particular way that fixes what counts as a correct continuation of the series, how can the standard of correctness thereby determined extend to cases that our natural tendency does not reach?”⁶

McDowell’s position relies on rejecting the idea that our natural tendencies can be understood without reference to norms. If our own nature includes an ability to respond to norms then it is not difficult to see how a finite series of operations could supply us with a norm that extends beyond our actual pattern of usage. Our standards of correctness are

dependent on our nature for their existence and not (as the first Platonist doctrine maintains) on the existence of a mind-independent, objectively structured world. But this fact does not make it the case that the norms equate to our own actual pattern of usage, so our standards of correctness are investigation independent and are not limited to cases we have considered. Child queries the legitimacy of the moderate Platonist's assumption about our natural tendencies:

“he [the moderate Platonist] thinks we can simply take for granted what he takes to be our ordinary understanding of ourselves, as having the natural capacity to grasp investigation-independent standards of correctness.”⁷

The quietist strategy is evident in Child's description of the moderate Platonist's position. So long as “our ordinary understanding of ourselves” common-sensically includes the idea that we have “the natural capacity to grasp investigation-independent standards of correctness”, nothing more than negative arguments are required. The quietist needs to undermine any apparent difficulties in our common-sense conception, but he does not take himself to need to argue positively for common-sense.

The quietist has assumed that we have ‘the natural capacity to grasp investigation-independent standards of correctness’. Child outlines three points which are designed to encourage the quietist to provide some positive justification for this assumption. Firstly, the assumption is no less mysterious than the Platonist's assumption that we can gain knowledge of realistically conceived norms governing the use of our words. Neither position provides any explanation of why we are entitled to their account of our responsiveness to norms. Both assumptions create additional explanatory difficulties. Secondly, constructivists claim that it is not part of our common-sense conception that our standards of correctness are

⁶ Child (2001) p95

investigation-independent norms. The moderate Platonist owes them an argument to show that their intuitions are wrong. Thirdly, Child suggests that one can hope for an account of why grasping investigation-independent norms is part of our human nature without being a constructivist. The moderate Platonist assumes that the only alternative explanation for the existence of investigation-independent norms is reductionism. This assumption, Child notes, is not warranted.

Locating My Objection

Child frames his account in terms of the norms governing our use of descriptive words, but clearly similar considerations can be raised for terms that refer to objects (such as names, demonstratives and so on).⁸ The full-bloodied Platonist is one who accepts a substantial semantic externalism about singular thought: there is a mind-independent objectively structured world and our words have investigation-independent norms governing their use because of the dependence of our thoughts on the world. Semantic externalism provides the mechanism by which worldly content is captured in thought: our singular thoughts are tied to objects in the world which determine the standards of correctness for the application of words referring to them. In the absence of the reference, there can be no sense and the absence of the reference in the world will rob a speaker of the thought they took themselves to be entertaining. The moderate Platonist claims that there is no mind-independent objectively structured world (the first Platonist doctrine). However, he is still committed to the idea that there are investigation-independent norms governing our word usage (the second Platonist doctrine). Finally, the constructivist position rejects both Platonist doctrines. He would claim that there are no investigation-independent norms

⁷ Child (2001) p98

⁸ Child (2001) p83n2 acknowledges this.

governing our word usage and seek to explain away the appearance of such norms. Thus for example a constructivist account might reduce the norms to innocuous social phenomena.

In this thesis our investigation of McDowell's account shows his semantic externalism is not substantial and so not based on the idea that our senses are object-dependent in a full-blooded Platonistic manner. Given Child's characterization of moderate Platonism this was to be expected: McDowell does not subscribe to the first Platonist doctrine. The idea that there is a mind-independent objectively structured world is not part of McDowell's position. Recall our characterization of substantial and truistic forms of semantic externalism in Chapter Three. The latter takes objects to be the reference of names which are the subject of true extensional predications. The position is based on the syntactic priority principle, which claims that once the grammatical situation has been analysed no further questions can be raised about the reference of a singular term. The claim that the world has no mind-independent, objective structured is consistent with this thought because the truth of the facts in which *de re* senses feature does not prejudice a particular ontological situation.

McDowell seeks to maintain the second Platonist doctrine: investigation-independent norms govern our use of words. My claim that his conception of objects does not meet our common-sense realist conception of them highlights a difficulty with his attempt to do so. His account of objects is revisionary. My argument, in effect, adds a further consideration to support Child's objections to the moderate Platonist's (un-argued) assumption that our natural tendency is to grasp investigation-independent norms.

My argument is, nevertheless, distinct from those which Child considers. It carries

more force because it unsettles the quietist's right to maintain that his position is the 'default' one. Child concedes that his own reasoning can be taken by the moderate Platonist as question-begging.⁹ So long as the quietist consistently maintains that he has the right to assume anything which is unproblematically common-sensical, he will be immune to Child's arguments. For, Child has not undermined the quietist's contention that he is offering a common-sense position. Unless this is shown, the quietist will maintain that his is the 'default' position for which no positive argument is required. In effect, Child tries to persuade the quietist to give up his disavowal of the need for explanation.

Let us consider each of Child's points in turn. Recall that the quietist takes it to be a common-sense conviction that we have "the natural capacity to grasp investigation-independent standards of correctness."¹⁰ Child's first point is to claim that the assumption is no less mysterious than the Platonist's assumption that we can gain knowledge of realistically conceived norms governing the use of our words. The quietist will maintain that this is a problem for Platonism because his account has to explain how we gain such knowledge. The quietist simply wishes to maintain that we do and that this is a common-sense platitude.

Secondly, constructivists claim that it is not part of our common-sense conception that our standards of correctness are investigation-independent norms. The quietist is likely to respond that the constructivist has reasoned to the conclusion that the intuition must be false, whereas the initial intuition is common-sensical and correct. If pushed further, he might reason that: "The real question is whether it is philosophically worthwhile to isolate

⁹ "It is not easy to refute a radical anti-reductionist of this kind who holds their ground with sufficient determination." [Child (2001) p97]

¹⁰ Child (2001) p98

and relieve the specific philosophical discomfort that is my concern.”¹¹ Clearly, the constructivist’s complaint offers nothing which impacts on this further question. Thirdly, Child maintains that the moderate Platonist wrongly presumes that the only alternative explanation for the existence of investigation-independent norms is reductionism. The quietist is likely to respond that “I need not pretend to have an argument that the... [alternative] *cannot* be executed. The point is just that the availability of my alternative... more satisfying exorcism undercuts a philosophical motivation... for supposing... [the alternative] *must* be feasible.”¹²

Whilst I am sympathetic to Child’s points, it is clear that the moderate Platonist can reject them in line with the quietist approach. My argument, by contrast, aims to show that McDowell cannot maintain quietism because he has gone beyond its bounds: his account offers more than platitudes and instead forces us to give up common-sense intuitions. To illustrate this, recall our discussions from Chapter Four. I began by questioning his ability to provide for the distinction between mathematical and empirical objects. It is true that they feature in different inference patterns, but the objection can be re-phrased in terms of how the account distinguishes between genuine empirical objects and gerrymandered ‘shadow’ objects. Essentially, I queried how McDowell’s account of empirical objects avoids the appearance that such objects are merely formal ones. His account can utilise the quietist strategy in response to this question: our unproblematic access to the genuine empirical objects is a common-sense platitude. Whilst this response was accepted, it was noted that the common-sense realist intuition that John Campbell voiced is lost: our responsiveness to the genuine empirical objects is not a result of their being the genuine objects on McDowell’s no-priority account.

¹¹ McDowell (1998b) p404

¹² McDowell (1994) pxxiii

The next line of reasoning employed against McDowell utilised the same realist intuition but was more focused in its attack: Wright's argument against a realist view of moral truths turns on the idea that a range of discourse concerning formal objects can have a truth-predicate defined over it without a realist account of such objects being appropriate. It was shown how the realist has a plausible explanation of the distinction between those areas of discourse which deserve a realist treatment and those which do not. This explanation is based on pre-cognitive sensuous awareness. In immature sapient perception (and all sentient perception) the creature is sensitive to the real underlying causal structure of the world. We are able to acquire concepts as a result of this sensitivity and those objects and properties we are sensitive to distinguish the areas of discourse which have a realist subject matter and those which do not. Such a response is not open to McDowell because he disavows the first Platonist doctrine that the world has a mind-independent, objective structure. His derivative conception of objects means that we cannot be perceptually sensitive to them prior to having facts made manifest in experience.

A deeply internalist conception of pre-cognitive sensuous awareness may, as I noted, be open to McDowell. However, such an account only explains how in sapient pre-cognitive experience the fact that we are human beings infects the relevant causal similarities we can detect. It does not reach across into the non-cognitive sensuous awareness we detect in other sentient creatures. The no-priority conception of objects has no scope to maintain that the objects we interact with in our world are also the same objects we observe animals to interact with in their environment. There is no common ontology. This conclusion is highly counter-intuitive and is a key common-sense realist intuition which McDowell cannot capture.

Following through my argument, the quietist position is unsettled because it goes beyond common-sense. This point is stronger than the objections which Child has framed. One reason for this, I believe, is the slightly different focus we have each adopted. Child focuses on norms governing our language. Such items are, in some way, essentially human and so the idea that these items are governed by no-priority relations is more plausible. In addition, norms are not entities about which we have strong common-sense realist intuitions. By contrast, I have focused on McDowell's conception of empirical objects. We have a large number of realist expectations about such entities - one of which is the fact that both sapient and sentient creatures respond to objects as a result of perceptual experience of them.

My argument is designed to undermine moderate Platonism from 'within'. I adopted a discursive format for the discussion of our common-sense realist intuitions in order to reveal that McDowell's account is not faithful to our linguistic practices. Employing such a format allowed the way in which our common-sense conception of objects is based on strong intuitions to emerge. It also allowed a number of other philosophers to be cited in favour of the intuitions. My argument is meant to appeal to the Wittgensteinian influences which are so marked in McDowell's own writings.

I have argued that given his therapeutic aims, McDowell's account does not meet the criteria for a successful dissolution. If the argument of this thesis is correct, I have shown that McDowell's position is not consistent with common-sense realism. As a result, the quietist strategy has been undermined. My argument lays down a stronger ground on which to challenge the moderate Platonist's refusal to justify the belief that he is entitled to assume that we have unproblematic access to investigation-independent norms built into our natural

tendencies.

Synopsis

It should be clear by this stage how the structure of the thesis overall forms a coherent whole. In addition, the distinctive style of the objection I have offered against McDowell's picture should also be apparent. At no point have I argued that he cannot fulfill his therapeutic aspirations in some alternative manner. It is to this question that I shall now turn. Considering two objections to McDowell based on the absence of any positive justification for his picture reveals that there are no obvious resources he might employ to alter his conception of objects. In addition there are no obvious resources which he might employ to resolve the tension between a substantial form of semantic externalism and his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding in another way.

McDowell's Unmotivated Metaphysical Picture

Brandom and Wright raise objections against McDowell of a type that he, as a quietist, is not prepared to countenance. Instead of unsettling his therapy (as I have tried to do) or questioning its internal consistency, they raise issues of justification based on external standards. In particular, they question the motivation for offering an idealist position rather than a realist one. Both criticisms were made during a symposium on McDowell's work, and his own responses to them rely on reiterating that his common-sense position is the 'default' one. He himself highlights the fact that there is nothing further in his philosophy which he might rely on, once the quietist strategy has been undermined. This is important. Consideration of their objections and his replies shows that he has no further resources to fall

back on.

Brandom and Wright place a common-sense realism at the heart of their understanding of McDowell's work and his philosophy of language. In so doing they focus on the idea that he is offering a substantial semantic externalism. They then argue that McDowell's extension of the claim that experience is fully conceptual to the claim that the world is fully conceptual (and the revisionary notion of objects we identified in Chapter Four) is unmotivated. In effect, they maintain that a substantial semantic externalism, along with the claim that experience is fully conceptual, does not obviously pair up with his metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding and idealism.

Brandom and Wright both draw a direct comparison between the picture that emerges from McDowell's adherence to semantic externalism in the light of the fully conceptualized nature of experience, and the work of Donald Davidson. The coherence of our beliefs, according to Davidson, guarantees their truth because the principle of charity ensures we cannot be wholly wrong about everything we believe. McDowell's theory, it is claimed, works on the basis that coherence with conceptualized experience guarantees the truth of our beliefs, because semantic externalism ensures that our singular thoughts are dependent on the state of the world. Based on this conception of his theory, both Brandom and Wright challenge the justification he offers for moving from this realist coherence account into idealism.

Robert Brandom

Brandom targets McDowell's commitment to the metaphysical impossibility of a

sideways-on account of understanding. He suggests that McDowell's argument is based around a 'rational constraint constraint'.¹³ The constraint is a combination of three claims: that a normative constraint is necessary, that the norm be conceptual and that it be representational. The constraint is motivated by Kantian considerations, and ensures roles for both receptivity and spontaneity in experience. After this characterization, Brandom goes on to suggest that a Davidsonian coherentist account can equally pass the condition. The interpreter is in a position to both attribute beliefs and rationally criticize them:

“[f]rom the point of view of the *interpreter*... 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.”¹⁴

“This is precisely an account of how *in* experience (perception) the world exerts a rational (criticizable) influence on our thinking.”¹⁵

Brandom's objection is that McDowell requires conceptual constraint but he has not ruled out the idea that the constraint may come from the detailing of content from the perspective of a radical interpreter. Brandom contends that only if one makes the illicit move from the idea that the world constrains our beliefs to the idea that the individual's experience constrains their beliefs is this idea ruled out. In other words, the common-sense realist should not find the radical interpreter's work uncomfortable, because there is after all only one world (which meets our realist intuitions) in which the thinker and the interpreter operate. McDowell's rejection of any reality existing beyond the conceptual realm is unmotivated by his use of the 'rational constraint constraint'.

McDowell responds that the experience itself is not in view from the radical

¹³ This constraint was briefly mentioned in Chapter Two.

¹⁴ Brandom (1998) p371-2

¹⁵ Brandom (1998) p372

interpreter's perspective: he emphasizes the importance of ruling out sideways-on accounts of understanding. The idea that reasons be withheld from the subject cannot be allowed in his picture. Recall the discussion from Chapter One of the cyclist who makes adjustments to his riding whilst he covers a course: he can be seen as acting for reasons, but in fact his behaviour is not motivated by appreciating reasons. For McDowell, the radical interpreter's imposition of content undermines the connections between reasons and discourse in the same way: neither the interpretee nor the cyclist would cite the reasons which the interpreter has imposed on them to explain their own behaviour. The reasons must be the subject's own because of the need for spontaneity and receptivity to make non-separable contributions to experience. In the absence of spontaneity, reasons do not arise. Thus, articulatability is intimately linked with the Kantian notion of freedom:

“what makes it intelligible that a subject has a reason is not just that the content of a state attributable to it, with the idea of content used in that undemanding way, has a suitable position in a rational network; in addition, the subject's being in such a state must be an actualization of conceptual capacities it possesses.”¹⁶

Without the demand that reasons are perceptually appreciated by the subject, the idea that the conceptual capacities of spontaneity are drawn on in experience looks suspicious and the standing obligation to reflect cannot be implemented. Having rationality imputed from outside robs the subject of their perceptual experience.

McDowell's response to Brandom, therefore, is to stress that his rejection of sideways-on has to be understood in an idealist manner in order to avoid his rejection being simply epistemic. If the world can be in view independently of the content of each subject's thoughts then the possibility of a sideways-on view has not been metaphysically excluded. He does not argue against Brandom's thought that if this move is illegitimate then his

position would be unmotivated. Relying on the quietist refusal to offer positive arguments is effective here because Brandom has not shown that there is anything problematic with McDowell's idealism. However, once my argument has been used to undermine his refusal to provide positive arguments for his philosophy. Brandom's objection will be successful. Brandom finds no resource which McDowell might use to justify his account and McDowell offers him none in his response.

Crispin Wright

Wright's objection also restricts itself to semantic externalism and its apparently substantial nature in McDowell's account. His argument goes further than Brandom's, however, and suggests that McDowell has not even effectively ruled out the possibility of constraint from outside the conceptual realm. Wright contends that this can be made consonant with a substantial semantic externalism and the assumption that experience is fully conceptual.

As we saw in Chapter Two, McDowell rejects Rorty's reading of Davidson's account which celebrates the division between causal relations and rational relation. Wright claims that McDowell's argument against the idea that an unstructured Given could stand in appropriate relations to our beliefs is enthymematic: the argument allows only that experience be conceptually structured and allowed to stand in rational relations to our beliefs. (Recall from Chapter Three our two elucidations of the modest identity theory. The theory states only that facts and true possible thoughts are identical. McDowell's metaphysical rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding sits with an elucidation of

¹⁶ McDowell (1998b) p418

the theory according to which objects are derivative from facts and there is nothing beyond the realm of the conceptual. By contrast, a substantial semantic externalism would fit with an elucidation of the modest identity theory according to which facts are themselves object-dependent. They are composed of object-dependent senses and, as a result, the realm of reference stands outside the domain of the conceptualized facts. Wright's claim that an unstructured Given could stand in appropriate relations to our beliefs is based on the latter elucidation.) Wright accuses McDowell of the unmotivated further step of introducing a modest identity theory of truth to command that the world itself stands not merely in causal relations with our experience but in rational ones. Wright therefore breaks the argument into two steps. The initial move he characterises as a brand of coherence:

“Before, we thought of coherence as essentially a relation on beliefs. Now, for basic empirical beliefs, we impose an additional requirement: coherence with *experience*, with the latter conceived as content-bearing after McDowell. But the relation between experience itself and the outer world need still not be conceived as a rational relation. *That* relation can still be a matter of brute causality.”¹⁷

Trying to second guess McDowell's response, Wright argues that the claim that coherence is a “frictionless spinning in a void”¹⁸ is fallacious because the coherentist' system is highly restricted by principles of rationality. In addition, Wright takes the coherentist to be able to avoid the claims of idealism. On the first:

“Experience on this view is indeed not a justifier: it is the *source* not the *arbiter* of our empirical beliefs. Justification can only have to do with how such beliefs bed down in the system of belief as a whole.”¹⁹

With regards to idealism, whilst Davidson does have an argument to the effect that

¹⁷ Wright (1998) p397

¹⁸ McDowell (1994) p11

¹⁹ Wright (1998) p398

most of our beliefs are true (something which, as we saw in Chapter Two, McDowell's use of the principle of fusion mirrors), Wright doubts that it should cause a coherentist any concern. The correspondence intuition on which it is based has already been dismissed.²⁰ Wright has delineated two steps: the move from non-conceptual to conceptual experience (which is compatible with second elucidation of the modest identity theory) and the move from conceptual experience to a conception of reality as conceptual. In the absence of any other explanation of the transition from the first step to the second, he accuses McDowell's account of illegitimately invoking a "*quasi-inferential* conception of empirical justification".²¹ Such a theory treats perceptual justification as akin to inferential justification.

Wright suggests that the second step to the conceptualized nature of reality (and the first elucidation of the modest identity theory we considered in Chapter Three) could be avoided if this quasi-inferential conception were dropped in place of a conception on which the normal functioning of perception and the other faculties of memory and testimony could be taken as sufficient justification. Wright takes it that the most natural starting point is common-sense realism and that McDowell's incorporation of the domain of objects within the conceptual realm should be avoided at all costs. Tellingly, Wright suggests that McDowell's picture as it stands (with reality located within the conceptual realm) cannot be right because: "it will certainly need qualification to accommodate even a modest degree of externalism about content."²² For Wright the presumption is that McDowell is offering an account based on a substantial object-dependence (in which semantic externalism ties our thoughts to common-sensical conceived objects), and he sees this as supplementing a purely epistemic denial of the possibility of our obtaining a sideways-on account of understanding.

²⁰ Wright (1998) p398

²¹ Wright (1998) p400

This possibility would be some variation on a Davidsonian coherentism with the radical interpreter detailing the objects to which a substantial semantic externalism pertains.

McDowell's quietist stance is effective against Wright. For Wright has not shown that he must offer positive arguments for his position. Wright's argument in effect challenges McDowell to provide positive reasons for his conclusion, without showing him that he must do so. Only once he has been shown to fail to meet our common-sense realist intuitions will Wright's argument be successful. This step is provided by the argument of this thesis. As with his response to Brandom, McDowell offers nothing by way of additional resources to justify his position over and above the idealist explication of his rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding.

The Historical Context

In this last section, I would like to offer a few observations about the historical context in which McDowell's work figures. This is appropriate because he sees himself as offering a dissolution of philosophical problem that has its origins in the work of Descartes. The sceptical scenario which he describes, McDowell claims, has dominated Western philosophy ever since. In particular, it leads to the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism. If this diagnosis is correct, there are two distinct approaches to the possibility of world-directed thought. On the one hand there is a foundationalist theory: our individual thoughts are about the world because there is a direct relationship between them and the world. On the other, a coherentist theory suggests that our thoughts cannot be looked at individually. Our worldview must be assessed in the light of the relations which hold between our thoughts.

²² Wright (1998) p399

McDowell aims to still the oscillation between the foundationalism (exemplified in the Myth of the Given) and coherentism by introducing a form of idealism. His theory acknowledges the motivations behind foundationalism and coherentism but denies the primacy of either outlook. Foundationalism is incorporated by the claim that truistically, our singular thoughts are object-dependent. But this facet of his philosophy does not justify the traditional view that the objects about which we think are independent of mental operations. Coherentism is incorporated in the picture because the non-separable contribution of spontaneity is a pre-requisite in world directed thought.

I believe that McDowell is correct in his diagnosis of philosophical history.²³ As a result, if my critique of his view is correct, he has failed to accomplish a merging of the two views. In refuting the existence of a mind-independent objectively structured world he has given too much ground to the coherentist. But in so doing he has had to give up basic tenets of common-sense realism which sustain the attraction and effectiveness of foundationalism. We are left once again caught between the opposing poles of foundationalism and coherentism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the argument of this thesis has been completed. Bringing together the work of the previous chapters it has been argued that McDowell's picture fails to meet its

²³ Work is currently being undertaken by other philosophers on this issue. It manifests itself in the form of discussions about the appropriate starting point for dealing with world-directed thought. Some advocate a Fregean approach according to which whole thoughts are taken as the fundamental unit of meaning. This approach suggests that we should make sense of objects and properties as abstractions from whole thoughts. Opposition to this position emerges from those who think the starting point ought to be *de re* thoughts: our whole thoughts have meaning because meaning can be attributed to the elements out of which they are composed.

own therapeutic aspirations. I have also located my objection within the wider philosophical context by showing how it can be seen as providing the missing step needed for the arguments of Child, Brandom and Wright to be effective against quietist, moderate Platonist.

In this thesis it has been argued that McDowell's picture appeals to two intuitive lines of thought which conflict. His rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding leads to a fact-based conception of the world, according to which objects are subsumed within the conceptual realm. He endorses this reasoning and propounds a revisionary conception of empirical objects: objects are derived from facts (which are true possible thoughts). His adoption of semantic externalism, however, is presented as a commitment to common-sense realism. The traditional claim of externalism is that the world determines the content of our thoughts. McDowell's account of singular thought states that there can be no sense without reference and this suggests a theory on which objects are intelligible independently of our thoughts. Trying to hold these two elements together in his account leads to an account which fails to meet the criteria McDowell lays down for successful therapeutic dissolution.

The supporting points of the argument are gained from McDowell's text. McDowell provides the criteria of assessment for a successful therapeutic dissolution. He also connects the rejection of sideways-on accounts of understanding with the fact-based conception of the world he proposes and the derivative nature of objects which that entails. On the other hand, though, he presents the object-dependence of singular thought as embodying common-sense realism and deploys it to overcome the Cartesian problematic and put us back in touch with the world.

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