

## RESENHAS *REVIEWS*

MCDOWELL, John *Mind and World* Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England Harvard University Press, 1994 x + 191p ISBN 0-674-57609-8

There has always been a certain indifference — if not antipathy — among many analytical philosophers towards the history of philosophy. This is worth saying because analytical philosophy itself is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition. Furthermore, philosophers inside as well as outside the analytical tradition can still learn a lot by going back to classical authors. Kant is one of the authors worth to be read again and again. Even though many analytical philosophers would consider themselves to be rather anti-Kantian than Kantian, there has been a major impact of Kantian questions, concepts and topics on analytical philosophy — whether analytical philosophers acknowledge this or not.

To take just one example. Kant was one of the first who clearly realized that thought presupposes two fundamentally different kinds of mental representations, — two kinds differing fundamentally in their respective logical and semantical roles: concepts and intuitions<sup>1</sup>. According to Kant, to each of them corresponds a cognitive capacity: understanding and sensibility. In contrast to, e.g., empiricists like Locke or Hume<sup>2</sup>, Kant is thus able to develop a complex and more adequate conception of knowledge: we do not just have ideas but fundamentally different sorts of ideas combined in complex judgments. This Kantian distinction is echoed in Frege's distinction between concepts

© *Principia*, 2(1) (1998) pp. 135–44. Published by Editora da UFSC, and NEL — Epistemology and Logic Research Group, Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil.

and objects, or in Strawson's distinction between referring and predicating as two basic aspects of thought and language<sup>3</sup>

Hence, it is to be applauded if one the most well-known contemporary analytical philosophers, John McDowell, writes a book on a broad philosophical topic with explicit systematic reference to Kant. The main topic of John McDowell's book *Mind and World*<sup>4</sup> concerns — according to its opening sentence — “the relation between minds and the world” (3). Of crucial importance for McDowell is Kant's central thesis that thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind<sup>5</sup>. The cooperation of concepts and intuitions — “bits of experiential intake”, as McDowell also calls them — is essential here (cf. 4, 50f, 66, *passim*). Without intuitions we would lack the empirical information that is necessary for thinking about *something*, without concepts we could not fulfill the predicative functions which are necessary for *thinking* about something. Let me call this McDowell's “Kantian thesis”. Much of McDowell's project can be seen as inspired by Kant's philosophy.

In the following I want to discuss two related ideas of McDowell that are somehow “Kantian” and both related to his Kantian thesis. On the one hand, McDowell, again and again, and like Kant<sup>6</sup>, characterizes our cognitive abilities as “active” or “passive”. In using concepts and thinking about the world we are essentially active, in being open to and taking in of empirical information we are essentially passive (I). Furthermore, especially our conceptual capacities are supposed to express “freedom”, — which elaborates on the active aspect of experience (II). I have many problems with both of McDowell's claims and with the way he uses Kantian ideas. I will argue first that McDowell's conception of the passivity of experience is not coherent in it-

self (and, as we can add here, not compatible with the Kantian background it is supposed to be derived from) Second, I will try to show that McDowell's ideas about the relation between freedom and rational thought are very much in need of clarification and justification Let me start with considering McDowell's thesis that the use of concepts is active and the reception of information from the outside world is passive<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Active Thinking and Passive Experience

The cooperation of concepts and intuitions is of particular importance in the case of experiences, i.e., of those thoughts that stand (epistemically) closest to the empirical world McDowell programatically states that the "view I am recommending is that even though experience is passive, it draws into operation capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity" (13)<sup>8</sup> What does this mean?

The starting point is the idea that experience is passive But if that would be the whole story experience would only involve intuitions (the products of passive and receptive sensibility) Hence, there would be no conceptual element involved in experience But that is exactly a position McDowell wishes to avoid (cf 46ff) Therefore, he adds that spontaneous conceptual capacities are involved, too This leads to problems and fortunately McDowell concedes that it "need not be a mere superficial oversight if someone fails to see a possibility here" (13) What are the problems?

Given that conceptual capacities are involved in experience — why, then, say that experience is passive? Why not say that experience is as much passive as active, as much based on intuitions as on concepts? McDowell rather seems to hold that concepts are of only secondary, derivatory importance in experience (compared to intuitions)

The way he expresses himself ("drawn into operation", "genuinely belong to") points into this direction

McDowell adds that in experience conceptual capacities are not exercised "It sounds off key in this connection to speak of exercising conceptual capacities at all That would suit an activity, whereas experience is passive" (10) Conceptual capacities are not actively exercised in experience but rather passively "drawn on in receptivity" (10, 9) If conceptual capacities are not exercised in experience they cannot play any role in experience, at least, it is very hard to see how they could do so This, however, contradicts McDowell's central Kantian thesis (see above) Thus, one should rather interpret him as saying that there are two aspects of conceptual capacities an active and a passive one (cf, e g, 62) Experience would only involve the passive side of conceptual capacities But this poses problems, too What is the passive side of a capacity, especially if this capacity is characterized as active<sup>9</sup>? But even if we would not see much of a problem here, there would remain questions if a capacity has active as well as passive dimensions, then we cannot characterize it as essentially active any more We could only say that in some contexts (not experience) it is active whereas in other contexts (experience) it is passive Conceptual capacities would not *per se* be active but be neutral with regard to the distinction between spontaneity and receptivity This, however, is not what McDowell wishes to say

In some passages McDowell even seems to deny that there is any difference in experience between receptivity (intuitions) and spontaneity (concepts) "We must not suppose that receptivity makes an even notionally separable contribution to its co-operation with spontaneity" (41, cf 9 and, with the same words, 51) This bullet is hard to bite If, in the context of experience, there is not even a notional

difference between conceptual and non-conceptual capacities, then it is hard to imagine what kind of difference there could be at all. It seems incoherent to talk about different capacities at all. Why should we do so if there is no difference?<sup>10</sup>

There are different passages in the text: "We would not be able to suppose that the capacities that are in play in experience are conceptual if they were manifested only in experience, only in operations of receptivity" (11). Conceptual capacities are also manifested in "active thinking" or in other contexts (11, cf. 9).<sup>11</sup> The point here is not that there is no difference between conceptual and non-conceptual capacities but that we cannot distinguish between them in the context of experience. Why, then, should one insist that experience involves the exercise of two different cognitive capacities? And why should the fact that conceptual capacities are exercised in other contexts be a reason to suppose that they are also exercised in experience, given that we cannot recognize them in experience? How could we possibly know that those conceptual capacities are also involved in experience? It is hard to figure out what the answer to these questions could be. And McDowell does not attempt to answer them.

The main conclusion to draw from all this is that there are two incompatible tendencies in McDowell. On the one hand, he wants to keep his Kantian thesis. On the other hand, he puts too much emphasis on the passive character of experience and thus undermines the Kantian thesis. He tries to balance these two tendencies by giving conceptual capacities a kind of secondary status in experience. But that, too, does not work: it simply leads to new incoherences.

The best way out of these problems would be to give up the idea that experience is passive. Why talk about

“passivity” and “activity” at all in this context? This does not do much argumentative work, it is rather like a wheel spinning in the void. The second best way out of the difficulty would be to skip the Kantian thesis. The worst thing is trying to keep both ideas, that is, to try to keep the cake and eat it, too.

## 2. Freedom, Rationality, and Having the Choice

McDowell not only puts much emphasis on the spontaneous character of conceptual capacities but also identifies spontaneity with freedom (cf. 5, 10). As is well known, Kant distinguishes between an epistemological conception of spontaneity — the so-called “spontaneity of the understanding”<sup>12</sup> — and a practical conception of freedom of the will<sup>13</sup>. There is nothing like such a distinction in McDowell. Hence, the question arises whether he confuses a theoretical and a practical conception of freedom. It can be extremely misleading to “import” concepts of action theory into epistemology without any restrictions. What does “freedom” mean in theoretical philosophy? McDowell even talks about “responsible freedom” in this context (cf. 43) and says: “The idea of a faculty of spontaneity is the idea of something that empowers us to take charge of our lives” (43). Is this really true? Is applying concepts the same as taking charge of one’s life? It does not seem so.

Let us take a closer look at this point. McDowell’s use of the word “freedom” is ambiguous: on the one hand, “freedom” means something like “rationality”, on the other hand, it means something like “having the choice”<sup>14</sup>. Let us consider the freedom-as-rationality-thesis first.

McDowell not only sees a connection between concepts and freedom but also between concepts and rationality (cf. 5). We might just take for granted here that we already understand what concepts have to do with rational-

ity The main point is that McDowell explains freedom as rationality This is good old Kantian tradition but still in need of explanation And McDowell gives none Further questions arise if conceptual capacities express freedom what does receptivity express? Irrationality? This does not make much sense but an alternative answer is not in sight

Let us now consider the freedom-as-having-a-choice-thesis Does McDowell offer more arguments for this thesis? According to him, "passivity of experience" means that we have no choice as to what we experience, our experiences are not product of a decision, thus, our freedom is limited (cf 10) The first two remarks are fine given a standard situation of perception, our perceptual experiences are not voluntary This does, of course, not mean that they are coerced or involuntary Rather, it does not make sense to say about perceptual experiences that they are "coerced" or not But exactly this is implied by the third remark McDowell holds that some thoughts express freedom and some not (experiences) But again, what could "freedom" mean in the realm of epistemology?

Maybe something along these general lines If I am free with regard to my thoughts, then I can have the thoughts that I want to have I might have non-epistemic, e.g., prudential reasons for wanting to have this or that thought In that case, however, I risk being epistemically irrational<sup>15</sup> which would not, according to McDowell (see above), be compatible with freedom What if I have this or that thought because I want to have it for epistemic reasons? That is not epistemically irrational But in which sense am I "free" if my having good epistemic reason for a certain thought leads to my having it? It is hard to see a connection with freedom here McDowell, however, is at least a partial belief voluntarist we do not have a choice as to our experiences but we have a choice as to our judg-

ments, as to whether to trust the appearances (cf 11) McDowell does not say enough to make such an epistemic voluntarism plausible. Finally, a suggestion: Why not simply skip the whole theory of freedom? It rather disturbs the argument. McDowell does not succeed in developing a reliable conception of doxastic freedom in a Kantian vein.

### 3 Conclusion

McDowell has a very good and promising Kantian starting point, i.e., the Kantian thesis. It is a good and very promising idea to try to bring Kant back into the center of the contemporary philosophical discussion: he belongs there. The way, however, McDowell makes use of and builds upon Kantian ideas is rather unfortunate. Neither is his conception of experience as passive coherent in itself nor does it fit with the Kantian thesis in the background. Moreover, McDowell's theses about freedom and rational thought rather disturb than support his project. The alternative is not to give up Kantian ideas but to try to build on them in a different way. I think this is still worth trying.

PETER BAUMANN  
UNIVERSITY OF GOTTINGEN

### References

- Bird, Graham 1996 "McDowell's Kant: Mind and World" *Philosophy* 71: 219–43
- Evans, Gareth 1982 "The Varieties of Reference" (ed John McDowell) Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Frege, Gottlob 1980 "Über Begriff und Gegenstand" In Frege, Gottlob *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung: Fünf logische Studien* (ed Gunther Patzig) Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 66–80



- Friedman, Michael 1996 "Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*" *The Philosophical Review* 105 427-67
- Gaynesford, Max de 1996 "Critical Notice (on McDowell 1994a)" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 495-509
- Gunnarsson, Logi 1997 "Erfahrung als Tor zur Welt" *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 45 457-63
- Harrison, Bernard 1996 "Review of Brandom, Making it Explicit, and McDowell 1994a" *Philosophical Investigations* 19 345-53
- Hume, David 1978 *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed Peter H Nidditch) Oxford Clarendon
- Husserl, Edmund 1985 *Erfahrung und Urteil Untersuchung zur Genealogie der Logik* (ed Ludwig Landgrebe) Hamburg Meiner
- Kant, Immanuel *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* In Kant, Immanuel, *Gesammelte Schriften* ('Akademieausgabe'), Berlin G Reimer 1902ff, Bd III (B-Auflage) und Bd IV, 1-252 (A-Auflage)
- Locke, John 1982 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ed Peter H Nidditch) Oxford Clarendon
- Moore, George Edward 1958 *Ethics* Oxford Oxford University Press
- Rorty, Richard 1996a "McDowell, Davidson, and Spontaneity" Ms Charlottesville/VA
- Rorty, Richard 1996b "Bald Naturalism and McDowell's Hylomorphism" Ms Charlottesville/VA
- Strawson, Peter Frederick 1959 *Individuals An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* London Methuen
- Williams, Bernard 1973 "Deciding to Believe" In Williams, Bernard *Problems of the Self Philosophical Papers 1956-72* Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 136-51
- Wolf, Susan 1990 *Freedom within Reason I* Oxford Oxford University Press

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf KrV, A 19/B33, A 50f /B 74f, A 68f /B 93f, A 320/B 377

<sup>2</sup> Cf Locke 1982, II I 1, Hume 1978, II 1

<sup>3</sup> Cf Frege 1980, 66ff, Strawson 1959, 137, cf also Evans 1982, 100ff on the distinction between the two basic cognitive capacities exercised in thought

<sup>4</sup> Numbers in the text refer to pages in the book

<sup>5</sup> Cf KrV, A 51/ B 75 According to Kant objects are "given" by intuitions, intuitions are "particular" ideas that refer "directly" to objects. In contrast concepts "think" objects, they are "general" ideas which refer "indirectly" to objects (cf KrV, A 19/ B33, A 50f / B 74f, A 68f / B 93f, A 320/ B 377). It is astonishing that McDowell does not use any of these parts of Kant's theory for his own project, even though Kant is of the foremost importance for it.

<sup>6</sup> Cf A 50f / B 74f, A 68f / B 93f

<sup>7</sup> For a critique of McDowell's account of Kant in *Mind and World* cf Bird 1996, 219ff and Friedman 1996, 436ff. Bird, however, focusses on a topic I do not discuss here: Kant's "transcendental story". For a critique of McDowell's use of the distinction between receptivity and spontaneity cf Rorty 1996a, 1, cf also de Gaynesford 1996, 500 and Gunnarsson 1997, 461f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Harrison 1996, 349, who thinks that this has an air of paradox. Harrison holds that the main problem of McDowell's book lies in his conception of spontaneity (cf *ibid*, 351f).

<sup>9</sup> Cf Husserl 1985, 119 on "Passivitat in der Aktivitat" ("passivity in activity")

<sup>10</sup> Cf for a similar critique Rorty 1996b, 18

<sup>11</sup> As to the other contexts, I can identify four in McDowell's text: responding to rational relations (cf 11f), judging (in contrast to merely experiencing) (cf 12), revising one's beliefs (cf 12f) and refashioning one's concepts and conceptions (cf 13, 114).

<sup>12</sup> Cf KrV, A 50/ B 74

<sup>13</sup> Cf, in the first *Critique*, KrV, A 801ff / B 829ff, A 445ff / B 473ff, A 532ff / B 560 (much more can, of course, be found in Kant's writings on moral philosophy)

<sup>14</sup> Cf for the last conception Moore 1958, 122ff, cf for the former conception, more recently, Wolf 1990

<sup>15</sup> Cf Williams 1973, 136ff