**Lecture 2: McDowell’s Philosophy of Language**

**1. Introduction**

McDowell’s *Mind and World* seems to be about the relation between *mind* and world. Specifically, it seems to be a claim about how a particular kind of mental thing—perceptual experience—has to be if a different kind of mental thing—judgement—is to be about the world at all. The claim is that perceptual experience has to have a content which is *conceptual*. It turns out that the world has to be conceptual too.

In the first lecture I offered a brief account of what it is for the content of experience of conceptual. This time I will argue that McDowell’s argument is not really about the relation between *mind* and world at all: it’s about the relation between *language* and the world.

**2. McDowell’s Reason for Thinking Experience Has Conceptual Content**

The important thing about perceptual experience, according to McDowell, is this (*MW*, 27):

Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks.

He thinks that reality can only exert a *rational* influence on what a subject thinks if it has a certain form. McDowell thinks that what someone thinks can only be rationally warranted in virtue of ‘relations such as implication or probabilification’, and these, he claims, ‘hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities’ (*MW,* 7)

In effect, what McDowell thinks is necessary is for experience to provide a premise in an *inference* whose conclusion is a judgement. And his point is that inferences have to be ‘within the space of concepts’.

My question will be: what inferences are these?

**3. McDowell and the Philosophy of Language**

Let’s approach that question indirectly. Last time we looked at one aspect of what McDowell means by ‘conceptual’:

(WC2) The world has something like a syntax: it must be ‘conceptually organized, and so articulable’ (6).

Let’s look at the larger context in which those quoted words appear. It’s a discussion of the ‘Myth of the Given’:

Suppose we are tracing the ground, the justification, for a belief or a judgement. The idea [of the ‘Myth of the Given’] is that when we have exhausted all the available moves within the space of concepts, all the available moves from one conceptually organized item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience. It can only be pointing, because *ex hypothesi* this last move in a justification comes after we have exhausted the possibilities of tracing grounds from one conceptually organized, and so articulable, item to another.

For (WC2) I concentrated on the interpretation of ‘conceptual’ which this provides. But there is clearly a philosophy of language in play here. McDowell is claiming that the ‘Given’ cannot be described, cannot be put into words. This is because the ‘Given’ is not ‘conceptually organized’. The assumption is that only what is ‘conceptually organized’ is ‘articulable’. The point seems to be that only what is itself articulated – jointed – can be described in articulate language.

The underlying assumption here is, in effect, the picture theory of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus:*

In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all. (2.161)

What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner – rightly or falsely – is its form of depiction. (2.17)

He puts the point like this in a later lecture (*Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930-32*, 9):

Grammar is a mirror of reality.

**4. A Wittgensteinian Interpretation of McDowell’s Philosophy of Language**

What is it for reality to have the same form as language? What is it for it to be such that ‘grammar’ (we would call it syntax) is a mirror of it? In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein offers an interesting suggestion:

In the fact that there is a general rule by which the musician is able to read the symphony out of the score, and that there is a rule by which one could reconstruct the symphony from the line on a gramophone record and from this again—by means of the first rule—construct the score, herein lies the internal similarity between these things which at first sight seem to be entirely different. And the rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of the musical score. It is the rule of translation of this passage into the language of the gramophone record. (*Tractatus*, 4.0141)

The claim seems to be that for one thing to have the same form as another *just is* for there to be a ‘rule of translation’ from one to the other. For the case of language, what is needed is a ‘rule of translation’ which takes us from the world to a sentence, and vice versa.

What might such a rule be? It’s natural to suggest something like a statement of a truth-condition, of the sort which Donald Davidson (‘Truth and Meaning’, e.g.) has championed. Consider this sentence:

(S) Lewes is hilly.

A Davidsonian statement of the truth-condition of that sentence might be:

(RS) The sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’ is true if and only if Lewes is hilly.

This seems to give us a rule which tells us when it’s correct to use a given sentence – sentence (S), ‘Lewes is hilly’ – given the way the world is. On the left of (RS) is a characterization of sentence (S) being correct – that is, true – and on the right is a characterization of how the world must be for it to be correct – Lewes must be hilly.

So we might understand a Davidsonian statement of truth-condition as providing just the kind of ‘rule of translation’ which Wittgenstein thinks sameness of form consists in.

**5. A Linguistic Inference**

For a Davidsonian rule such as (RS) to be a rule of translation from the *world* to language, the right-hand side – where the sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’ is *used*, rather than mentioned – must, in some sense, give us nothing less than the world itself, if the sentence is true (which it is).

That means that it could be used in an inference with a distinctive character. Here it is:

(L1) Lewes is hilly;

(L2) If Lewes is hilly, then the sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’ is true; *so*

(L3) The sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’ is true.

(L2) is obviously just half of (RS).

The important thing about the (L1)-(L3) inference is that, if (RS) is to provide a rule of translation between the *world* and language, (L1) must be supplied by the world itself. What (L1) says must be available in principle to someone who speaks any language at all, for example. It must, one might say, be simply *given* by the world.

**6. A Philosophy of Language**

There’s a philosophy of language here which looks like a kind of shadow of McDowell’s philosophy of judgement. We could argue for it in a way which mimics McDowell’s argument in *Mind and World*:

(PL1) Language can only be about the world if some uses of language can be justified by the world;

(PL2) Uses of language can only be justified by the world if they can be justified *inferentially* by the world;

(PL3) Uses of language can only be justified inferentially by the world, if some inferences like (L1)-(L3) are sound, with the first premise being simply given by the world; *so*

(PL4) Language can only be about the world if some inferences like (L1)-(L3) are sound, with the first premise being simply given by the world.

I’ll look in more detail at the kind of philosophy of language in play here next time. For the moment I just suggest that it lies behind McDowell’s assumption that only what is ‘conceptually organized’ is ‘articulable’ – can be described in words.

**7. McDowell’s Inference of Judgement**

McDowell’s main concern is not with language, but with judgement. Much of the point of his approach is to allow – within the assumptions which constrain him – experience to be ‘openness to the layout of reality’ (*MW*, 26). This in turn allows ‘the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks’. We have seen that McDowell seems to think that rational influence can only intelligibly be exercised by inference. What might the inference be?

At one point (*MW*, 11) he says:

How one’s experience represents things to be is not under one’s control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it.

This suggests that the inference which McDowell has in mind is something like this:

(J\*1) It is apparently the case that Lewes is hilly; *so*

(J\*2) Lewes is hilly.

(J\*1) might be taken to probabilify (J\*2), since things are generally as they seem. We have here something which is a bit like an inductive inference; but there is room for the subject to question whether things really are as they seem to be, and so there is space for freedom of judgement.

Unfortunately, (J\*1) cannot represent the content of perceptual experience in the ordinary case, since the content of perceptual experience, when things work as they should, is supposed to be nothing less than the world itself. Since the world which is present in one’s experience does not generally include this kind of presentation of the experience of it, in the ordinary case the world cannot supply us with (J\*1) as our premise. Instead, if it supplies us with a premise of inference at all, the premise it supplies must be what is given as (L1) in the linguistic inference.

But that, it seems, would make the inference this:

(J\*\*1) Lewes is hilly; *so*

(J\*\*2) Lewes is hilly.

And this is no inference at all. If we are to make any space between premise and conclusion in our inference, we need to change the conclusion, to something like this:

(C) It is correct to judge that Lewes is hilly.

But to get that conclusion, it looks as if we now need an intermediate premise. In effect, it looks as if the inference for judgement which McDowell needs is just a shadow of the linguistic inference (L1)-(L3):

(J1) Lewes is hilly;

(J2) If Lewes is hilly, it is correct to judge that Lewes is hilly; *so*

(J3) It is correct to judge that Lewes is hilly.

(J2) here looks as if it is simply part of a rule about judgement, which is exactly parallel to (RS):

(RJ) It is correct to judge that Lewes is hilly if and only if Lewes is hilly.

Here (J1) is simply *given* by the world, but given in such a form, McDowell will insist, as to make the inference possible: that is to say, it’s given *as* something which can be a premise.

**8. An Objection – in Outline**

The problem is that (J1)-(J3) is no real inference. It’s importantly different from the (L1)-(L3) inference.

Here is the outline. (L3) presents the justification for using the sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’, and it is apparently grounded in a premise, (L1), whose content, it is assumed, can be accepted without yet using that very sentence (for example, by someone who speaks a different language, but not English). But while (J3) presents the justification for judging that Lewes is hilly, what is presented as its ground—(J1), which is the same as (L1)—cannot be accepted without in effect making the very judgement which (J3) presents. This is because (J1) cannot figure as the ground of a judgement in an inference without itself being endorsed. And what is endorsed when the content of (J1) is judged is nothing other than the judgement that Lewes is hilly. But to endorse the judgement that Lewes is hilly is in effect to judge that the judgement that Lewes is hilly is correct. That is, to endorse what is expressed in (J1) is in effect to make the judgement expressed in (J3). The inference still goes through, of course, but for the wrong reason: not because (J1) provides an appropriate justification for (J3), but because one cannot accept (J1) without already in effect having accepted (J3).

**9. Three Stages of Argument for the Objection**

Stage 1 (J1) cannot figure as the ground of a judgement in an inference without itself being endorsed;

Stage 2 To endorse (J1) is already in effect to make the judgement expressed in (J3);

Stage 3 If that’s right, (J1) cannot provide the right kind of justification for (J3).

**10. Stage 1**

(J1) is meant to figure as the ground – justification – of a judgement – (J3) – in an inference which yields that judgement as its conclusion. In the case of a valid deductive inference, which (J1)-(J3) in some sense is, you must accept the conclusion *if* you accept the premises. But an inference is compelling *only* for someone who accepts the premises. The inference from (J1) to (J3) is meant to capture the rational constraint to which our judgement is subject, but it will only do so if it is assumed that (J1) is accepted. I take it that there is no significant difference between acceptance and endorsement: if you accept (J1), you must endorse it. It is just that the notion of endorsement makes it clear that in accepting a judgement you are committed to thinking that it is correct.

**11. Stage 2**

I have carefully avoided saying that endorsing (J1) is already *actually making* the judgement expressed in (J3): instead I am claiming merely that endorsing (J1) is *in effect* making the judgement expressed in (J3). There is therefore no obvious risk of a regress of higher-order judgements of the form ‘It is correct to judge that ...’, whether or not such a regress would be vicious.

The idea is this: (J3) is no more than an expression of—a making explicit of—the endorsement of (J1). It is an expression, or making explicit, of what must have been done for (J1) to figure as a justification for anything, if the justification is inferential. This is because endorsing something is just taking it to be correct (or otherwise valuable).

It is worth noting here the difference between the role played by (J2) – and hence (RJ) – in the argument from (J1) to (J3), on the one hand, and that played by (L2) – and hence (RS) – in the argument from (L1) to (L3), on the other. (L2) is a genuinely non-redundant premise, supplying substantive information about the meaning of the English sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’, which one can only possess if one knows what the English sentence means. Without it, the inference from (L1) to (L3) would not be valid. But (J2) is strictly unnecessary in the inference from (J1) to (J3), even if it helps in the formal regimentation of that inference into a familiar kind of pattern. (J3) follows from (J1), just in virtue of the meaning of the words used (not quoted) in it, and (J2) does no more than spell out explicitly how that is so.

**12. Stage 3**

If the last point is right, we cannot see the inference from (J1) to (J3) as an instance of the grounding of judgement in the world which is necessary to make judgement answerable to the world in the first place. The problem is that the use of (J1) in the argument is not sufficiently independent either of judgement in general, or of the judgement of the correctness of (J1) in particular. (J1) cannot represent the world’s constraint on judgement, because it can only play the role it has to play in this inference if it is itself endorsed—and that endorsement is tantamount to judgement, and so not a constraint on judgement. And it cannot provide a constraint on the higher-order judgement that (J1) itself is correct – that higher-order judgement appearing here as (J3) – because that higher-order judgement is no more than a making explicit of the commitment already accepted in accepting (J1).

**13. So What is Left?**

It seems that the inference from (J1) to (J3) cannot be the inference McDowell needs for his view—an inference from what is present in perception to some further judgement. And that means that none of the three supposed inferences we have considered—the inference from (J\*1) to (J\*2), the inference from (J\*\*1) to (J\*\*2), and the inference from (J1) to (J3)—can do the job which McDowell requires. In fact, it seems that the only kind of inference which allows the world as it presents itself in perception to supply immediately a premise for some further judgement, and which is at all relevant to the issues here, is the kind exemplified by the move from (L1) to (L3).

That means that the only way of making sense of McDowell’s claim that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual is as endorsing the kind of view of language to be found in the *Tractatus*. The only thingMcDowell’s view can be is a view about language.

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