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John McDowell: Reason and Nature

Lecture and Colloquium in Münster 1999

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Preface

John McDowell is one of the most influential philosophers writing today. His work, ranging widely from interpretations of Plato and Aristotle to Davidsonian semantics, from ethics to epistemology and the philosophy of mind, has set the agenda for many recent philosophical debates.

In recent years, McDowell's views have been hotly discussed among students and faculty in Münster, too. Therefore, we were very glad when McDowell agreed to give the third *Münsteraner Vorlesungen zur Philosophie* in 1999. On May 5, McDowell gave a public lecture; on the following two days, he participated in a colloquium where students and faculty from Münster presented brief papers on his philosophy. McDowell listened carefully and responded to questions and criticisms. This volume contains McDowell's lecture, revised versions of the colloquium papers and McDowell's written responses to them.

I should like to thank John McDowell for coming to lecture in Münster, for participating in the colloquium, and for putting his responses in writing. Discussing his views with him has been stimulation and pleasure for all of us. Next, I want to thank the participants in the colloquium who worked hard to come up with interesting and challenging presentations. Further, thanks are due to Karsten Wantia and Florian Wessels for putting much effort and time in type-setting and designing this volume. And finally, I want to thank the Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung in Nordrhein-Westfalen for funding the 1999 *Münsteraner Vorlesungen zur Philosophie*.

Throughout this volume, the abbreviation 'MW' is used to refer to John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge 1994.

Münster, July 2000

Marcus Willaschek

Contents

I. The Lecture	1
Experiencing the World John McDowell	3
II. The Colloquium	19
Spontaneity and Causality: McDowell on the Passivity of Perception Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter	21
Ontological Troubles with Facts and Objects in McDowell's <i>Mind and World</i> Christian Suhm, Philip Wageman, Florian Wessels	27
On "The Unboundedness of the Conceptual" Marcus Willaschek	35
Nature and Second Nature in McDowell's <i>Mind and World</i> Mischa Gubeljic, Simone Link, Patrick Müller, Gunther Osburg	41
Is McDowell confronted with an Antinomy of Freedom and Nature? Sean Greenberg and Marcus Willaschek	51
Platonism and Anti-Platonism Niko Strobach	55
Self-Criticism as a Way of Life Frauke Annegret Kurbacher and Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter	59
Nature or Natures? Notes on the Concept of Second Nature in John McDowell's <i>Mind and World</i> Christoph Jedan	69

Moral Facts, Values, and World Views Johannes Klaus Kipf and Frank Köhler	73
Secondary Qualities or Second Nature – which Reality for Values? Andreas Deeken, Christoph Halbig and Michael Quante	81
Responses John McDowell	91
Notes on the Contributors	115

Part I

The Lecture

Is McDowell confronted with an Antinomy of Freedom and Nature?

Sean Greenberg and Marcus Willaschek

1. In *Mind and World*, McDowell sets out to dissolve a philosophical anxiety that derives from the recognition of what he takes to be two genuine insights, both of which derive from Kant: first, that rational thought is 'spontaneous' in that it is responsible only to rational constraints from inside the conceptual sphere; second, that for thought to have objective content, it must be empirically constrained by facts from outside thought. These insights give rise to an apparent dilemma: If we start from the first, there seems to be no room for empirical input to experience (*MW* 5); if we start from the second, it seems that the empirical input cannot count as a reason for belief (*MW* 8). Either way, we cannot understand how rational thought can make contact with reality.

2. The idea which allows McDowell to avoid this dilemma derives from Kant, too (*MW* 9): namely, we must think of sense experience as providing both a rational constraint (from inside the conceptual sphere) and an empirical constraint (from outside thought). To see that this is possible, however, we must acknowledge that the conceptual sphere encompasses the immediate deliveries of our senses and thus extends further than spontaneous thought. In experience, we allow the world itself to exert a rational influence on our thinking (*MW* 42).

3. Both insights McDowell starts from as well as his conception of experience derive immediately from Kant. Yet Kant also explicitly endorses a conception of nature as the realm of law (cf. *Prolegomena*, § 14). To McDowell, this is surprising, since it is this very conception of nature that, according to McDowell, blocks our way to a Kantian conception of experience. Thus McDowell thinks we should 'marvel' at Kant's insight (*MW* 97) and his holding on to it even though, for 'lack of a pregnant notion of second nature' (*MW* 97), 'he has no intelligible way to deal with it' (*MW* 98). Kant's own way of dealing with the insight that concepts and intuitions are inextricably combined in human experience seems unintelligible to McDowell, for Kant locates spontaneity outside nature in the context of a transcendental constitution of empirical reality. In contrast, McDowell himself advocates a combina-

tion of the 'Hegelian' view that nature itself falls within the conceptual sphere and thus is inherently 'thinkable' (*MW* 28) with the 'Aristotelian' idea that our conceptual capacities are themselves something natural.

4. Kant's main reason for locating spontaneity outside nature seems to have been that causal laws and spontaneous thought and action seem mutually exclusive. Kant formulates this problem as the third of the 'Antinomies of Pure Reason'. On the one hand, it is necessary to assume a 'causality of freedom', an 'absolute spontaneity of causes' within nature (CPR B472; B474). On the other hand, there can be no freedom since 'everything in the world happens according to the laws of nature' (B 473). Kant gives supposedly conclusive proofs for each of these contradictory claims. Although he first presents this as cosmological antinomy (concerning a first cause of the world), he goes on to explain that the relevant kind of spontaneity also occurs in the case of human action (B 476) and human thought (B 574–575). The only resolution of this antinomy, according to Kant, is through a distinction between the noumenal and empirical realms that enables us to see one as a realm of freedom and the other as a realm of law (B 560–587).

5. While distinguishing between these two realms may solve the cosmological antinomy, this distinction alone does not suffice to make comprehensible how human thought and action might be spontaneous. According to Kant, human thought and action may be completely explained by appeal to natural laws alone. But then the problem arises how a kind of spontaneity located outside nature might enable us to understand how our actions, located within nature, might be spontaneous. Kant's own solution to this problem is to conceive of our empirical characters as caused by and therefore as 'signs' of our noumenal characters (B 574). Even if this proposal proves ultimately unsatisfying, we can well understand the pressure on Kant to adopt it. On the one hand, he is committed to the idea that every natural event may be completely explained by appeal to the laws of nature; on the other hand, he is committed to the idea that human beings, although part of nature, are spontaneous. We shall refer to the tension within our conception of nature between law-governedness and spontaneity as the 'Third Antinomy'.

7. McDowell is alert, of course, to the problem of the Third Antinomy. Although he doesn't refer to the problem explicitly, he essentially identifies his task as that of overcoming it (*MW* 71, n. 2), and the

second half of *Mind and World* might well be described as an attempt to break out of the problem space in which the antinomy arises. On McDowell's view, one enters this problem space when one identifies nature with the realm of law – a conception that McDowell characterizes as the achievement of modern science and an accurate reflection of how modern natural science understands its subject matter. Such a 'disenchanted' conception of nature seems diametrically opposed to the conception of nature as a realm of meaning that it displaced, so if one begins from such a disenchanted conception of nature, as, for example, Kant does, there seems to be no room for spontaneity in nature.

8. McDowell seeks to escape this problem space by refusing to identify nature with the realm of law. He explains that 'even though the logical space that is the home of the idea of spontaneity cannot be aligned with the logical space that is the home of ideas of what is natural in the relevant sense, conceptual powers are nevertheless operative in the workings of our sensibility, in actualizations of our animal nature, as such' (*MW* 74). Since spontaneity does not fit into nature conceived as a realm of law, the Third Antinomy may not be overcome on its own terms. Nevertheless, spontaneity may be characterized as natural, insofar as the capacity for spontaneity is a part of human nature. To this end, McDowell proposes a 'radical rethinking' (*MW* 79) and 'partial reenchantment' (cf. *MW* 85) of nature. Nature must not be identified with 'the realm of law,' but so conceived as to allow room for 'second nature' (*MW* 84), of which human reason is a part. Our rational capacities are natural insofar as they depend on our biological endowment (our 'first' nature) and insofar as they are acquired during the normal human developmental process. They are second nature because we can acquire them only by being initiated into a cultural tradition. Nevertheless, being rational is as much a part of human nature as being biped.

9. Whereas Kant began with a conception of nature as a realm of law and was faced with the problem of finding room in that conception of nature for spontaneity, McDowell recommends beginning with a conception of nature that makes room for spontaneity. This enables him to sidestep Kant's version of the antinomy. But it is not immediately clear whether McDowell overcomes the antinomy altogether. Since spontaneity is recognized to be in tension with nature conceived as a realm of law, it is unclear whether we are entitled to conceive of nature as a realm of law at all. McDowell thus seems to be faced with a flipped

version of the Third Antinomy, for he must still find a way to reconcile the lawfulness of nature with spontaneity.

10. We may sharpen this problem by briefly considering McDowell's conception of nature. McDowell distinguishes several different senses of 'nature'.¹ First, there is the disenchanted nature of modern natural science (*MW* 70–71). Then there is the concept of 'second nature' (*MW* 84), which presupposes the concept of a 'first nature'. Finally, there is the concept of 'nature' as opposed to what lies 'outside' nature, the 'supernatural' (cf. *MW* 77–78).

11. How are these different conceptions of nature related? One possibility is that the first nature of human beings is identical to disenchanted nature. However, if this is so, how can we think of the first nature of human beings as containing 'potentialities that belong to a normal human organism' (*MW* 84) whose actualizations enable the human being to arrogate his second nature? A second possibility is that the first nature of human beings is already conceived of as partially re-enchanted. But if this is so, how may this first nature be subsumed in the realm of law in such a way as to enable us to 'satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science' (*MW* 84)? Thus we are still facing the question raised by the Third Antinomy: How can we conceive of nature as having room for both for spontaneity and natural law?

12. The only way Kant saw to reconcile disenchanted nature and spontaneity was to place spontaneity outside nature. Because Kant was so impressed by the success of modern science, he thought that if spontaneity could not be reconciled in this way with natural law, then freedom would have to go (B 564). McDowell wants to make room for spontaneity within nature, while satisfying 'any proper respect for modern natural science' (*MW* 84). If spontaneity cannot be reconciled in this way with natural law, will natural law then have to go?

¹Cf. the preceding paper by Gubeljic, Link, Müller and Osburg.

Platonism and Anti-Platonism

Niko Strobach

1. Compromise philosophy

Let us say that a compromise philosopher is a philosopher who tries to mediate between two mutually incompatible extreme positions which he refuses to accept, but which he nevertheless believes both to be true and mutually compatible in certain respects. On this characterization, Aristotle was a compromise philosopher: he wanted to mediate between two positions which have traditionally been very roughly labelled 'materialism' and 'idealism'. Kant was also a compromise philosopher: he wanted to mediate between two positions which have traditionally been just as roughly labelled 'empiricism' and 'rationalism'. Certainly, trying to reach a compromise is not a bad idea if there are two partly attractive, but – without modification – mutually exclusive positions.

However, there are disadvantages to being a compromise philosopher. Compromise philosophers may be difficult to understand, because it is easier to formulate an extreme position than to formulate a compromise. It may sometimes be objected that it is very hard to see wherein precisely the compromise philosopher's compromise consists. Moreover, a compromise philosopher may also have difficulty resisting the attempts of the proponent of an extreme position to draw him to that side. For example, the proponent of an extreme position may argue that the compromise position does not *really* differ from the extreme position, but only nominally differs from it, and that the compromise philosopher does not *really* accept parts of the other extreme position, but only some of its vocabulary. A compromise philosopher may find himself in special trouble when proponents of both extreme positions try to claim him for their positions.

Those who have read *Mind and World* can hardly deny that John McDowell is a compromise philosopher. This becomes especially clear in connection with his concept of nature. McDowell is opposed to what he calls rampant platonism, and is also opposed to what he calls bald naturalism. Nevertheless, he conceives of a compromise between