

# Münsteraner Vorlesungen zur Philosophie

herausgegeben von

Prof. Dr. Kurt Bayertz,  
Prof. Dr. Ludwig Siep,  
Prof. Dr. Thomas Leinkauf,  
Dr. Michael Quante,  
PD Dr. Marcus Willaschek

(Philosophisches Seminar,  
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster)

Band 3

---

LIT

Marcus Willaschek (ed.)

## John McDowell: Reason and Nature

Lecture and Colloquium in Münster 1999

---

LIT

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

John McDowell: Reason and Nature : Lecture and Colloquium in Münster 1999 /  
Marcus Willaschek (ed.). – Münster : LIT, 2000  
(Münsteraner Vorlesungen zur Philosophie ; 3.)  
ISBN 3-8258-4414-5

© LIT VERLAG Münster – Hamburg – London  
Grevener Str. 179 48159 Münster Tel. 0251–23 50 91 Fax 0251–23 19 72

Distributed in North America by:

  
**Transaction Publishers**  
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

Transaction Publishers  
Rutgers University  
35 Berrue Circle  
Piscataway, NJ 08854

Tel.: (732) 445–2280  
Fax: (732) 445–3138  
for orders (U.S. only):  
toll free 888-999-6778

## 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

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

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

## Part I

# The Lecture

## On 'The Unboundedness of the Conceptual'

Marcus Willaschek

1. In Lecture II of *Mind and World*, John McDowell states a consequence of the preceding lecture by saying that reality 'is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere' (MW 26). Instead, the conceptual is to be seen as 'unbounded' (MW 44). McDowell expresses the same idea by saying that 'facts in general are essentially capable of being embraced in thought' (MW 28) and that 'there is nothing outside' the conceptual (MW 44). I shall call this the Conceptuality Thesis or CT. The image of the unboundedness of the conceptual, like that of our being 'open to the world', is meant to exorcise the 'confinement imagery' connected with Davidsonian coheren-tism. Unfortunately, it also suggests that we are cognitively omnipotent and thereby threatens to undermine our common sense confidence in the mind-independence of reality: it certainly seems that a world *essen-tially* within the reach of our thinking cannot be independent of our mental capacities. McDowell, keenly aware of this problem, devotes the greater part of Lecture II to arguing that CT does not jeopardize a sensible common sense realism. In what follows, I shall first explain why his argument leaves me unconvinced. In closing, I shall briefly ex-plain why I believe that McDowell's major aims in *Mind and World* can be upheld without CT.

2. First we need to understand what McDowell means by the claim that the conceptual is unbounded. In Lecture II of *Mind and World*, responding to the possible charge of idealism, McDowell offers clarifications with respect to three points. First, he distinguishes between thoughts as acts of thinking and thoughts as thinkable contents (MW 28). That the conceptual sphere is unbounded does not mean that the world consists of, or depends on, *actual* employments of concepts or acts of thinking, nor does it mean that the world itself is conceptually structured, if this is to say that there are conceptual capacities that some-how belong not to human beings, but to the world itself (cf. McDowell 1998, 470). Rather, it means that the world is essentially *graspable* in conceptual thought. The world, McDowell insists, is everything that

is the case, where something's being the case is something *thinkable* – a *possible* content of thought. Second, the employment of concepts in experience requires that they be integrated in a picture of a world that extends further than our actual and even possible experiences of it (MW 29–34.). And third, there is a perpetual obligation to scrutinize and, if necessary, to revise our present system of concepts in the light of new experiences. Thus '[t]here is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts or conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development' (MW 40). Since our historical development is a highly unreliable process, there may even be aspects of reality which forever escape our conceptual capabilities.<sup>1</sup>

3. At first glance, there may seem to be a tension between the first and the third of these clarifications: how can the world be 'essentially capable of being embraced in thought' (28) when at the same time there may be aspects of it which might forever escape our conceptual grasp? We can dissolve the tension, however, if we understand the claim that the world is essentially capable of being captured in thought (i.e. the Conceptuality Thesis) as follows:

CT For every aspect of reality, there is a *possible* system of concepts that would allow its possessor to grasp the aspect in question.

Of course, everything now depends on what counts as a 'possible system of concepts'. In particular, the question is: possible for *whom*? There seem to be three options: first, possible for *some* kind of mind, including hypothetical 'superhuman', or even infinite minds; second, possible for finite minds, which may differ from ours in the extent and efficiency of their conceptual capacities; and, finally, 'humanly possible'. I think we can rule out the first option simply because we don't have any clear understanding of what a 'superhuman' or infinite mind might be. The second option might seem to receive some textual support from McDowell's consideration of the possibility of 'Martians' who 'have an echo-locating capacity, which figures in the rational basis of their world-view in the same way our sense do in the basis of ours' (MW 123 n).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>McDowell himself seems to make somewhat the same point by saying that 'the idea of an end to inquiry is no part of the position I am recommending' (ibid).

<sup>2</sup>McDowell maintains: '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.'

But we have to bear in mind that the Conceptuality Thesis is supposed to explain the possibility of human experience. If we want to understand how the world can be open to *our* kind of experience, it does not help to say that, even though there are aspects of reality *we* cannot grasp, there *might* be someone completely different from us who can. The relevant kinds of minds ought therefore to bear enough resemblance to our minds that *their* ability to conceptually grasp a particular aspect of reality allows us to understand *our* cognitive access to the world. (For instance, like McDowell's bat-like Martians they should have to rely on some kind of sense experience in order to gain knowledge about their environment.) On the third option, we would be left with a *very* narrow reading of CT, requiring in effect that every aspect of reality could be conceptually grasped by *human* beings. For present purposes, though, it won't be necessary to decide between options two and three, since in what follows I shall focus only on the finitude of the minds under consideration.

4. Even if one takes an optimistic view of what systems of concepts are available to finite beings like us, CT is a substantial metaphysical claim. In light of McDowell's 'therapeutic' approach to philosophy, it may seem odd to ascribe it to him. But anything weaker than CT would not amount to the claim, explicitly endorsed by McDowell, that the world is *essentially* open to our thought. If the conceptual is indeed unbounded, then nothing can *possibly* fall outside the reach of concepts available to us or beings similar to us. (From now on, the first person plural will refer to humans and other finite thinking beings relevantly similar to them.)

5. Does the Conceptuality Thesis, on this reading, respect the common sense belief in a mind-independent reality? I don't think so. To be sure, CT does not entail that reality depends on our *actual* system of concepts and its employment. But CT issues an *a priori* guarantee that nothing in the world is precluded from our conceptual grasp. Now if the world does not depend on our mental capacities, how can we *know* that we could acquire the concepts appropriate for grasping each and every of its aspects? Without a concept of reality tailor-made to fit our cognitive capacities, there is no way to exclude the possibility that the world might outrun our possible concepts.<sup>3</sup> If reality is mind-

<sup>3</sup>There might seem to be the possibility of an argument for CT compatible with realism. Such an argument would have to start from the idea of our conceptual capabilities and

independent, CT may still happen to be true – but it cannot be *known* to be true. Thus, I do not see how CT could be maintained without presupposing that the world, in some sense, depends on our minds.<sup>4</sup>

6. One might perhaps respond that the idea of stretches of reality that, by their very nature, escape us, is no part of common sense, but rather wild metaphysical speculation. One might even try to argue that it is meaningless or incoherent: the world is a world of facts, and the idea of facts impossible to grasp is incoherent. But I don't think that such an argument can be made: the possibility of inconceivable aspects of reality, whether we call them facts or not, follows simply from the obvious truth that our mental capacities are *finite*, together with the admission that reality may be infinite – infinitely large, infinitely small, infinitely intricate. Of course, if McDowell is correct to deny that there is a non-conceptual content of experience, then even if there were conceptually inaccessible aspects of reality, we would not notice them – our experience would never tell us. Thus we could not imagine a situation in which we would be perceptually *faced* with something we could not conceptually cope with. Moreover, for obvious reasons it is impossible to give an example of something absolutely inconceivable. Nevertheless we can construct the *idea* of something inconceivable by focusing on those features which make it difficult for us to understand something (size, complexity, apparent absence of order etc.) and imagine these features pushed to infinity. In an infinite universe, there just might be patterns, structures or properties too complex (large, small etc.) for finite beings to understand and, therefore, to detect. Thus there is nothing incoherent nor even particularly metaphysical about the idea of aspects of reality impossible for us to comprehend.

7. The idea that something might fall outside the conceptual sphere would fall into incoherence only if we were to attach any further epistemological significance to it – for example by appealing to non-conceptual contents of experience or unknowable 'things in themselves'. But

go on to show that nothing tells against their being *indefinitely* perfectible. If such an argument could convincingly be made, it would yield the result that for every aspect of reality, there is a humanly possible system of concepts which would allow us to grasp the aspect in question. Such a claim would then be acceptable to the staunchest realist. I don't know of any such argument. And I don't believe there is one.

<sup>4</sup>Or perhaps both, mind and world, depend on something else that effects a pre-established harmony between our minds and the world. This has been argued by Leibniz, and in a different way, by Hegel.

the admission that our cognitive capacities are finite and therefore may not allow us to capture everything there is does not commit us to any such epistemological view. I do not doubt that much of reality – indeed *all* of reality that is of any interest to us – is capable of being fully embraced in thought and thus falls within the conceptual sphere. It may even happen to be the case that there is nothing outside the conceptual. But if this is so, it is because *we* are, as a matter of contingent fact, capable of embracing reality, not because *reality* is essentially embracable. In conclusion, I think it best to reject the Conceptuality Thesis, since it undermines our common sense reliance on the mind-independence of reality. In closing, then, I want to consider very briefly whether giving up CT would do any damage to McDowell's overall project – a project to which I am very sympathetic.

8. McDowell invokes the Conceptuality Thesis in two closely related contexts. First, he invokes it to explain how the world, as it impinges on our senses, can exert a *rational* control over our thinking. The idea is that in perceptual experience, the world itself 'saddles' us with a conceptual content that can serve as a justification for our beliefs. Second, McDowell invokes the Conceptuality Thesis to explain how the content of a veridical experience or true thought is something that really is the case: that is, when I see that the sun is shining, there is no 'gap' between what I see (that the sun is shining) and what is the case (that the sun is shining). This has come to be called the identity theory of truth. Both the idea that the world can saddle us with conceptual content and the so-called identity theory of truth may seem to require the Conceptuality Thesis. But as far as I can see, this is not so.

9. In order to understand how, in perceptual experience, the world can impress conceptual contents on us, all we need assume is that there are concepts which, once we have mastered them, may be employed both 'responsibly' in judgement and 'responsively' in perception. Our conceptual capacities, McDowell urges, can be actualized not only in judgements, but in the very workings of our sensible receptivity. This requires that we be trained in such a way as to respond, in perceiving a given situation, by 'automatically' (inadvertently) employing the appropriate concept. In this sense, the 'space of concepts' extends further than most empiricists have supposed (*MW* 10). But if I understand McDowell correctly here, such an extension of the space of concepts must be sharply distinguished from the Conceptuality Thesis, since it

concerns only a very limited aspect of reality, namely those processes that concepts can be *employed in*, such as judgments, perceivings or intentional doings. It does not (immediately) concern the question what these concepts can be *applied to*. The passive actualization of appropriate concepts in perceptual experience presupposes that, as a matter of contingent fact, we do possess an appropriate concept. But we need not assume, with CT, that there is an *a priori* guarantee that we can acquire such a concept.

10. In order to understand how experience and thought can be ways of taking in actual matters of fact, we must assume that our conceptual resources allow us to capture at least *some* of the facts. All thinking truly embraces a fact. But, obviously, from this it does not follow that all facts can be embraced in true thoughts. Again, a much weaker claim than CT would entirely suffice to ground the identity theory of truth.

11. These brief remarks only suggest the direction a more detailed argument would have to take, but I hope they suffice to show why I believe that the Conceptuality Thesis is not required by any of McDowell's central claims.

## References

- John McDowell (1998). 'Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant and Intentionality.' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 95, 431–491.

## Nature and Second Nature in McDowell's *Mind and World*

Mischa Gubeljc, Simone Link, Patrick Müller,  
Gunther Osburg

In lectures IV to VI the notions of nature, and especially of second nature become central to McDowell's *Mind and World*. The first part of our paper consists of a very short survey of the history of the term 'second nature'. In the second part we discuss how McDowell tries to employ the notion of second nature in order to develop a naturalism that can account for human rationality without denying its *sui generis* character. In the course of this discussion we raise some questions that arise out of this account.

### 1. Second nature from a historical point of view

The notion of second nature is introduced in *Mind and World* by reference to Aristotle's ethics, and as McDowell repeatedly remarks 'is all but explicit in Aristotle's account of the acquisition of virtue of character' (McDowell 1996, 184; (*MW* 84)). So it seemed natural to investigate the historical background of this notion.

No term corresponding to that of 'second nature' appears in Aristotle's works. Nevertheless, the passages McDowell refers to show how his own use of 'second nature' should be understood as – at least roughly – relying upon some such notion. Aristotle argues that it takes habituation to evolve ethical virtue, for ethical virtue is not naturally given, but is based upon natural tendencies that are realized through habituation (Funke 1984, 484).

During the Hellenistic period the notion of *altera natura* emerges, first mentioned (as far as we know) by Cicero when he says that 'consuetudine quasi alteram quandam naturam effici' (Funke 1984, 484).

In Augustine the expression 'secunda natura' itself finally appears. It carries an evaluative connotation, however, that is foreign to Aristotle: 'secunda natura' is closely associated with 'mala consuetudo'. Augustine conceives of second nature as a bad habit, for second nature is a corruption of God-given first nature. For him second nature does not