

The Myth of the Mind

W. W. Tait*

Of course, I do not mean by the title of this paper to deny the existence of something called ‘the mind’. But I do mean to call into question appeals to it in analyzing cognitive notions such as understanding and knowing, where its domain is taken to be independent of what one might find out in cognitive science. In this respect, I am expressing the skepticism of Sellars in “Empiricism and the philosophy of mind” [1956], where he explodes, not only the ‘Myth of the Given’, but also, as part of that myth, theorizing about thoughts, intentions and the like, where such theorizing is regarded as something more than a nascent cognitive science, in which such entities enter as *theoretical* entities, in aid of accounting for our cognitive abilities. The myth is that these entities present themselves in consciousness, available to us by introspection—and, perhaps, *a priori* reasoning.

But, even among authors who claim to embrace Sellars’ critique of the Myth of the Given, his message about the mind is ignored.¹ As an example, I want to consider and disarm an influential line of thought, by John McDowell, which implicates the mind in the analysis of knowing and understanding, not in the legitimate sense of suggesting causal accounts of our cognitive abilities in terms of mental or physiological structures, but in the sense of claiming that these abilities are mental or essentially involve the mental in a way that escapes the net of cognitive science.

The ground on which I stand in this discussion is one which I attribute to Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Basically, the position

*This paper is a revised version of part of Chapter 5 (with the same title) of my forthcoming book, *Meaning, Knowing and Understanding: a View From Outside*.

¹In truth, for all of us, when we think about who we really are, somehow our conscious experience so seems to define us that it is difficult to reject that part of us in an analysis of what we tend to regard as most human: the ability to express and grasp meanings. At least it seems difficult until we consider, not what makes *us*, in the first person, human, but what makes the other fellow human.

is that language is a social practice or complex of such practices; and so, when speaking of the meaning of words, ultimately we must be referring to the role that they play in our linguistic practice. Except in response to McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein, I don't want to argue in detail here that it was Wittgenstein's position; and likewise, except where it is in opposition to McDowell's theses, I don't want to defend it. That it was Wittgenstein's conception, I argue in [Tait, 1986c] and more extensively in my forthcoming *Meaning, Knowing and Understanding: a View From Outside*—henceforth: *MKU*. That it is correct, I argue in *MKU*.

This notion of a practice of course begs for extensive discussion, which I will deny it here. But it should be noted that the practice in question is defined by what we do or would do, where the 'we' (or, in some contexts, the 'they') in question will vary with the context; and this is certainly an idea with ragged edges. Nevertheless, when elaborated, I think it bears the weight of the honest demands of reason, as the source of norms, e.g., for correct linguistic usage and correct reasoning.² At least it does so if we remember to distinguish the practice that we in fact have from the fact that it is our practice—i.e. remember that when we speak of norms, we are referring to the practice *de re*: it, at least in relevant respects, doesn't change. In the sense in which we say that our practice changes or might change or might now have been different, we are speaking of it *de dicto*. (In the *de re* sense, we should say that we changed practices.) Thus, the assertion that $3 + 5 = 8$ is not an assertion about what we do; although its truth is founded on what we do. (*Investigations*, §241) And Frege's judgement, that it is logically possible that everyone is wrong about some principle of mathematics, is vindicated. To ignore the distinction between the *de re* and the *de dicto* senses of talk about practices and to take meaning to refer to what we do in the *de dicto* sense, is to fall into what I call empiricism and McDowell calls *bald naturalism*.

It is, I believe, a consequence of the conception I have just briefly described, and one for which Wittgenstein provides strong arguments in *Investigations*, that, when we speak of understanding an expression, we must be referring basically to a *competence*, to a disposition to use the expression or to react linguistically or otherwise to it in a suitable way, where what is suitable is defined by the practice. It is also a consequence of this view

²In times past, one might have supposed such norms encoded in a book of rules—a grammar or a logic text; but Wittgenstein's critique of rule following makes it clear that it is only against the background of a practice in following rules that the book constrains what we actually do.

that knowing is basically a competence, whether it be an instance of knowing that or of knowing in the sense of acquaintance. I am using the term “disposition” here in the sense of a propensity: the only criterion for having the disposition is what we in fact would do. This is to be distinguished from any causal mechanism which might account for what we would do. To speak of a *competence* is to add a normative element to the notion of disposition: the behavior towards which one is disposed is measured by some standard. On the other hand, it is no part of the notion of a competence that the standard by which it is measured is internal to the agent. In particular, in the case of understanding and knowing, the standard is the established practice: to understand an expression, for example, is to use it or react to it in accordance with its meaning—in accordance with the common practice.

Naturally, ‘competence’ cannot be construed too narrowly in this context: someone might be competent to do sums, in the sense that, given two decimal notations for numbers, she can, on demand and more or less accurately, apply the algorithm for adding numbers and find the sum. (In this, she would inevitably be less competent than a fairly low grade adding machine.) But, although certainly this much would be necessary, far more would be required before we said that she understood addition: “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.” (*Investigations*, §199) At what point in the scale of being able-to-do’s would we say that she understands addition or knows number theory or knows (or understands) English? One consequence of our position, and one that conforms to our everyday usage of these notions and so should serve as a reality check for theories of knowledge or understanding, is that these are not yes/no states: there are degrees of knowledge and of understanding—a fact that is recognized when we assign grades on some scale to students’ examinations.

There are a number of possible objections to the conception of meaning we are discussing, which I will mention, but which we cannot fully discuss here. One arises from the fact that language, in one of its functions, is a tool for describing an external reality and so meaning must to some extent be shaped by that reality. The appropriate answer is that, on the contrary, in the relevant respects, the reality is *constituted in* our language. (See *Investigations*, §§1-32 and Chapters 2 and 3 of *MKU*.) Another objection is at least implicit in [Kripke, 1982]: meaning is to be given by the practice, by what we do or would be disposed to do. However, not only individually, but collectively, our dispositions are finite. Therefore the meaning of, say,

“+” is indeterminate in the sense that there are only a finite number of pairs (m, n) of numbers for which the sum is determined by what we are disposed to do. Again, I pass this objection off with the remark that the claim that the defining equations for addition determine a unique numerical function is not an assertion about what we have done, can do, or will do: it is a mathematical assertion, capable of proof. (For a more extended discussion, see [1986c, pp. 483-4].) Finally, writers such as D. Davidson, who believe that language is essentially personal and that communication consists in a handshake across idiolects, would find our position unacceptable—not that the idea of a one-person language is incompatible with this position; but the idea that Italian, say, is a family of idiolects certainly is. However, I think that Dummett argues against this position adequately in [1991b, pp. 86-88], and, again, I will not take it up here. (See *MKU*, Chapter 1, for a further discussion.)

Our target in this paper is another objection, by McDowell, directed against the view of understanding and knowledge as competences, holding that these cognitive states essentially involve the mental. In [1992], he both disagrees with the position I have outlined and disagrees that it is Wittgenstein’s.

In [1984], he clearly recognizes the failure of empiricism (bald naturalism) to account for the normativity of meaning and, as well, the failure of Kripke’s skeptical solution to a skeptical paradox [Kripke, 1982]; and he understands that Wittgenstein was neither an empiricist in my sense nor a skeptic in Kripke’s. But, in that paper and in many others of his writings, one finds an account of meaning and its normativity that is very different from ours, and one in which the mind plays a central role. I believe also that it involves a serious misreading of Wittgenstein; and in the following, I will be arguing both against his reading of Wittgenstein and against the role of mind in his account of meaning and understanding.

One thing that is immediately clear is that what he means by the mind or the mental is very different from what I and, as I believe, Wittgenstein have been taking them to mean. For example, when Wittgenstein writes in §149 “If one says that knowing the *ABC* is a state of mind, one is thinking of a state of mental apparatus (perhaps of the brain) . . . ”, the mind is being thought of in the way that cognitive scientists might think of it, as the locus of causal explanations of our cognitive abilities; and that is the way in which I have been treating it. Mind in this sense does not enter into the analysis of the concepts of meaning, understanding and knowing as we are

employing them, only into a possible causal explanation of our understanding and knowing. In this respect, our conception of mind is, as we have noted, close to that of Sellars' Jones in "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind" [Sellars, 1956]—we are leaving open the possibility that Jones' nascent theory could actually develop into a theory which explains our cognitive abilities.

But McDowell has rejected causal explanation for the domain of the mental, or at least for some part of it. Thus, in [1981, p. 148], he concedes the possibility of an account of the brain according to which a scientifically respectable argument might preclude a person going 0, 2, . . . , 1000, 1004, 1008, . . . ; but of a corresponding theory of the mind, a psychological theory, he writes

... our picture tends to trade on assimilating the postulation of the psychological theory to this. But the assimilation is misleading. Consider this variant of Wittgenstein's case: on reaching 1000, the person goes on as we expect, with 1002, 1004, . . . , but with a sense of disassociation from what he finds himself doing; it feels as if something like a blind habit has usurped his reason in controlling his behavior.

But, of course, some theory of the mind, whether or not reducible to a physiological theory, might also preclude the aberrant behavior in question, at least in our sense of the term "mind"; and I can just as easily imagine the sense of disassociation in this case, too, since for all I know it is essentially the same case. McDowell perhaps finds this unimaginable because he identifies the mental with what is conscious; and then we would have a case of a unitary consciousness in conflict with itself. But much of what he says about the mind, about thinking for example, cannot, as Sellars emphasized, be understood in terms of the mental-as-what-is-conscious. In any case, it is clear from this that the subject matter of a psychological theory is not, for McDowell, the mind in the sense in which I refer to it.

In *Mind and the World* [1994], also, McDowell indicates a very different conception of mind from ours when he writes

It would be dangerous to deny, from a philosophical armchair, that cognitive psychology is an intellectually respectable discipline, at least so long as it stays within its proper bounds. And it is hard to see how cognitive psychology could get along without attributing content to internal states and occurrences in a way that is not constrained by the conceptual capacities, if any,

of the creatures whose lives it tries to make intelligible. But it is a recipe for trouble if we blur the distinction between the respectable theoretical role that non-conceptual content has in cognitive psychology, on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion of content that belongs with the capacities exercised in active self-conscious thinking—as if the contentfulness of our thoughts and conscious experiences could be understood as a welling-up to the surface of some of the content that a good psychological theory would attribute to goings-on in our cognitive machinery. (p. 55)

Later on, on p. 121, after recapitulating this argument, he writes “I do not mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science.” I have quoted these passages, in the first instance, as evidence of his very different conception of mind from mine or Wittgenstein’s. But the passages themselves are, beyond the avowed lack of impingement on cognitive science, not easy to understand.

I assume that, in speaking of cognitive science as attributing “content to internal states and occurrences”, he has in mind physiological states and occurrences, as when a particular neurological system is associated with the recognition, say, of a color or pattern. As to ‘non-conceptual content’, one gets a hint of his meaning on p. 12:

The ability to produce “correct” colour words in response to inputs to the visual system . . . does not display possession of the relevant concepts if the subject has no comprehension of, for instance, the idea that these responses reflect a sensitivity to a kind of state of affairs in the world, something that can obtain anyway, independently of these perturbations in her stream of consciousness. The necessary background understanding includes, for example, the concept of visible surfaces of objects and the concept of suitable conditions for telling what colour something is by looking at it.

In Lecture III, entitled “Non-conceptual Content”, he further writes

It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials.

There indeed seems to be a neurological basis for many kinds of recognition, e.g. of colors, patterns, etc., which is not limited to humans. McDowell wants to distinguish recognition in this sense from having concepts. I, too, don't wish to claim that this recognition amounts to conceptual knowledge on the part of those other animals who share it with us, although I would be more hesitant in making out a particular check-list of what more is needed for possessing a concept. I abstain from the claim because—or rather (since there are no sharp boundaries here), *to the extent that*—their recognition is unconnected to a linguistic expression of the recognition: although I here disagree with the usage of some people in cognitive science, I would say that they don't have the concept of a red object if they don't have words to express it; and this means having a language in which speaking of red objects has a place.

I think that McDowell could be interpreted in the last two passages as being compatible with this. He emphasizes in the last passage that the 'demanding sense' of conceptual capacities requires the ability to reflect on rational credentials; but accommodating this to my point of view merely requires a richer conception of language, which includes the capacity to recognize rational norms.

But, nevertheless, I believe that he means something different from what I mean. My position on this is dictated by the desire to use the term "concept" in the Fregean sense of something objective; and I think objectivity here can only be understood in the context of language. And, although the possibility of acquiring language may very well depend on mental/physiological make-up, the difference between having a language, i.e. having linguistic competence, and not having one is not a difference in mental states. *Qua* mental state, my competence to speak now of red objects is only a disposition: it is a competence in virtue of something external to my present state, namely to the established linguistic practice. There is no assumption in all of this that there is a qualitative difference between the human mind and that of other species or that the human mind is, in any respect, inaccessible to cognitive science.

McDowell, on the other hand, has a conception of the human mind that, at least in part, must escape the net of cognitive science. Moreover, the part that escapes on his account is an important one, for it includes the contentfulness of our thoughts and conscious experience: in the passage from p. 121, he seems to include all of this under spontaneity of understanding. But this lumping of the notion of consciousness with that of understanding and con-

tentfulness of our thoughts should be questioned. It is a theme of Frege that the content of thoughts is something objective, a meaning, although Frege himself used the term “thought” for what McDowell is calling the content of the thought. It is, indeed, a content that we can grasp, so that we may be said to have a ‘contentful thought’; but it is the nature of this grasping or understanding that is at issue. Our view is that content or meaning is to be understood in terms of use in our common language. Moreover, on this account, the content of consciousness has nothing to do with understanding. One must grant that, at least *sometimes*, one reasons blindly (*Investigations*, §219); and we cannot have a different conception of understanding and of reasoning for that case from that of the case in which we might say that we are consciously reasoning, where there is “self-conscious thinking”. Moreover, even in the case in which we might say that we are reasoning consciously, what is it that is going on in consciousness that could count as the essence of the reasoning? Does the consciousness in itself carry the mark of correct or incorrect reasoning? Whatever the mark, couldn’t it be that, with it, I could one time reason correctly and another time badly—and similarly without it? (Cf. *Investigations*, §140.) Or is it simply that consciousness is a *sin qua non* of reasoning: it just has to be there in general, even if, sometimes, it isn’t present when we reason; otherwise we shouldn’t count what is going on as reasoning?

But what if cognitive science or neurological science should find a mechanism that causally accounts for our reasoning or at least for some significant part of it, and that it turns out that other animals contain some form of that mechanism? Would we drop our claim to rationality? Or would we refuse these other animals reason on the grounds that they haven’t consciousness? Rather, I should say: on the grounds of our *belief* that they lack consciousness; and I don’t know the grounds for that belief other than the fact that they aren’t human. McDowell exhibits a surprising need to consider us, not simply as rather complex animals, but as something more than animals. In any case, I suggest that, in spite of his disavowal, he is in serious danger, indeed, of rejecting, from the philosophical armchair, something established in cognitive science—or of *accepting* some such thing. For agreement, too, would refute his presumption that his philosophy stakes out a different territory. I think that the part of the mind that he can successfully protect *a priori* from cognitive science is, in fact, the box in which resides Wittgenstein’s beetle.

Of course, on our view, we might very well reject the position that this

or that other species has reason; but that would be to the extent that reason is linked, not to a causal mechanism of response or with conscious states or even simply with dispositions to behave, but to linguistic *competence*. Thus, to the extent that we conclude that another species lacks something like norm-guided linguistic behavior, one might deny its members reason.³ But I don't see that this resource is open to McDowell. For him, the norm is internal, inside the box. But I don't know what is inside *your* box, much less my cat's.

His discussions in [1984] and [1992] focus on Wittgenstein's argument, on grounds of infinite regress, against understanding consisting in having an interpretation. But concerning this argument, it seems to me that he draws the wrong conclusion. I take the meaning of Wittgenstein's "... there is a way of grasping a rule that is *not* an *interpretation*," (§201) to be clearly indicated by the continuation of the sentence: "but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' or 'going against it' in actual cases." What is exhibited is a disposition to behave, which we, often rightly, identify as a competence at this or that. (See my discussion in [1986c].) For McDowell, on the other hand, there must be something more to the 'grasping of the rule', something more than competence and distinct from having an interpretation. But there is no clear indication of what it is: it is *sui generis* and the exclusive property of a philosophical theory of mind. In [1994] he suggests that mind possesses it in virtue of second nature, a conception that we will discuss below.

He himself refers to the passage (§219) "I obey the rule blindly", which I take to be in opposition to his reading of Wittgenstein, to be "of a piece with" the passage §241, which we have already cited:

So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not an agreement in opinions but in a form of life.

³But I am not entirely happy with this denial, i.e., with the definition of humans as rational animals and its implicit presumption that no other species has reason. One might even question the linking of reason to linguistic competence: I find it hard to disassociate my ability to solve mechanical puzzles from other aspects of my reason. So why should I deny reason to other animals who can solve such puzzles? Of course, solving puzzles in the sense I mean is not hit-or-miss, and therefore seems to involve something like manipulation of symbols. But this still falls short of possessing language in our sense.

He takes both to be directed against the view that there must be an interpretation that mediates between the expression of the rule and the action in conformity to it; whereas, in fact, neither passage is directly aimed at that: that idea had long been disposed of. §219 is directed more generally against there being *anything* ‘in me’ which *justifies* the application of the rule. Look at the immediately following passage, §220

But what is the purpose of that symbolic proposition [viz., “All the steps are really already taken”]? It was supposed to bring into prominence a difference between being causally determined and being logically determined.

There may indeed be something in me, my dispositions or some mechanism underlying them, which determine what I do; but they do not determine that what I do is right, or wrong. §241 has a quite different point: that what people in the community *in general* do does not justify my responses, either. It is the clearest expression in the *Investigations* (as opposed to *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Part VI, which contains much more explicit expression) of the view that, while meaning is founded on the practice or custom, the justification for what I do in following the rule does not lie in what we actually do in the *de dicto* sense. About this issue, McDowell writes in [1984]:

In Wittgenstein’s eyes, as I read him, Wright’s claim that “for the community itself there is no authority, so no standard to meet” can be, at very best, an attempt to say something that cannot be said but only shown. It may have some merit, conceived in that light; but attributing it to Wittgenstein as a doctrine can yield only distortion. [1998, p. 256]

(The reference is to [Wright, 1980, p. 220].) But, even leaving aside the obscurity of “what cannot be said, only shown”,⁴ Wright’s claim is simply false: it is indeed so that the community sets the standards: but they are in place and are, in the *de re* sense, unrevisable. The community may reject (and might have rejected) them and adopt new standards, but that is a different matter. When we speak of justification, we are referring to *those immutable* standards.

⁴If what he means by “can only be shown” is that the community might have had a different practice (or that their practice, in the *de dicto* sense might have been different), and so, have had different norms, then there: I’ve said it!

The fact is that §219 is an embarrassment for McDowell’s reading. An even greater embarrassment are passages such as §139:

When someone says the word “cube” to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in that way?

It is a measure of the desperation of his reading that he has to interpret Wittgenstein to be intending an *affirmative* answer to this question. He writes [1984]

“Grasping the whole use in a flash” is not to be dismissed as expressing an incorrigibly confused picture—the picture of a leap to an idiolectic understanding—but to be carefully understood in the light of the thesis that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation. In that light, we can see that there is nothing wrong with the idea that one can grasp in a flash the principle of a series one is being taught [1998, p. 258]

One thing to note is that, mostly, we would not be tempted to say that our understanding or grasping is ‘in a flash’: on the whole, we not only follow rules blindly, we read, write, converse, etc., without conscious sense of grasping anything. Of course, someone might define for me a new function in terms of ones that I already know, and I might be said to suddenly ‘get it’, to grasp in a flash the “principle of” computing its successive values. In another, and probably the most pregnant, case I am given a sequence of values of a function, e.g., $0, 2, 4, 6, \dots 2n$; and I grasp ‘in a flash’ the ‘principle of the series’ to be that of adding two. But, of course, the sense in which this finite sequence can lead me to a grasp of the intended rule somewhat different than in the first case and is only causal: no matter where the series of numerical values breaks off, it is consistent with infinitely many different numerical functions.⁵ But the real point of §139 is something else, alluded to above, as can be seen from the conclusion of the discussion at the end of §140:

⁵Wittgenstein, himself, is careless about this and sometimes acts as though giving the initial sequence $0, 2, 4, 6, \dots 2n$ of values has the same status as the definition $f(0) = 0, f(n + 1) = f(n) + 2$, from which all correct steps of following the rule are implied *logically*. His main point is that logic, too, is founded on our practice; but within that practice, logic surely has a special role, as he indeed has emphasized in other places.

What is essential is to see that the same thing can come before our minds when we hear the word and the application yet be different. Has it the *same* meaning both times? I think that we would say not.

Whatever is before our minds at the moment, leading us to say that we have grasped the meaning of the word in a flash, does not *logically* imply the correctness or incorrectness of this or that application. McDowell wants to replace the pictures, mental images, literal interpretations, whatever, that Wittgenstein's argument disqualifies for counting as understanding the rule, by something else in the mind, something more occult, a grasping that is not an interpretation but is more than a disposition. But why should that something determine what we should do, in the logical (or, for that matter, since it is not at all clear what it is, in the causal) sense? The fact is, there is no room, either, for McDowell's occult something: to grasp the rule is simply to have a competence, and neither having a competence nor *anything else about me* justifies what I do; rather, the notion of competence *presupposes* a source of justification: but that source is external to me—to us.

McDowell seems to be dissatisfied with this conception, because he believes that the understanding, itself, should carry the warrant for what we then do. For example, he writes in [1992, p. 50] of running the risk of “adopting a picture in which notions like that of accord cannot be in play, because the behavior is understood as nothing but the outcome of a causal mechanism set up by training.” He suggests that, with this attempt to eliminate the idea of interpretation, “we will lose our entitlement to the idea of understanding as well”. Of course, we say nothing about training or causal mechanisms, only of competence. But it is an obvious fact that we are trained in language and it is very plausible that there is a causal mechanism (in some sense of “mechanism”) to account for why the training works, why we become competent. If such a mechanism were found, would that in fact destroy our entitlement to the idea of understanding? Whether or not there is such a causal mechanism, accord would still be in play, because our competence does not amount to automation: just because I know how to add numbers, I am not bound by natural law to start adding on suitable command. I *choose* whether or not to obey it and to follow the rule as I am competent to do. Also, I am competent not only in following the rule, like some simple computer, programmed to follow just that rule; I am also competent to correctly judge about the correctness or incorrectness in following the rule.

To whatever extent we are automatons, we are sufficiently complex ones to allow accord to come into play.

One may feel that the very idea of a person's ability to choose to add numbers or not, indeed, of intentional action of any kind, requires more of meaning and understanding than we are allowing them. How can I mean to do X , when the meaning of X is its public meaning and not a meaning that I endow it with? How can my understanding of X consist in a competence, when the competence in question is a competence to do this or that under suitable circumstances, and among those circumstances may be my choosing to so behave? There may seem to be a circle here. This belongs to a class of problems, having to do with first person authority, which I cannot do justice to here. But a first step towards resolving this particular difficulty is to notice that my intention to add 2, in any sense in which the intention is construed as a state of consciousness, is no guarantee that I will proceed correctly—that I understand the rule.

In the Introduction to [1994] McDowell comes back to the same issue. Here again he rejects he rejects 'bald naturalism' (i.e., empiricism), which denies the dichotomy between the 'logical space of reasons' and the 'logical space of nature', and writes

My alternative holds on to the thought ... that the structure of the logical space of reasons is *sui generis*, as compared with the structure of the logical space within which natural-scientific description situates things.

... We must sharply distinguish natural-scientific intelligibility from the kind of intelligibility something acquires when we situate it in the logical space of reasons. ... Even so, we can acknowledge that the idea of experience is the idea of something natural, without thereby removing the idea of experience from the logical space of reasons. What makes this possible is that we need not identify the dichotomy of the logical spaces with a dichotomy between the *natural* and the normative. We need not equate the very idea of nature with the instantiations of concepts that belong in the logical space ... in which the natural-scientific kind of intelligibility is brought to light. [p. *xix*]

The notion of the logical space of reasons goes back to a passage in Sellars' "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind", where he writes

... 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 what one says. [Sellars, 1963, p. 169]

McDowell speaks of two other logical spaces, the logical space of nature, which has interface with that of reasons, and that of the natural-scientific, which is disjoint from it.

The metaphor of the space of reasons seems to me a bit misleading for what Sellars is describing. Certainly he is pointing to the fact that describing someone's behavior or propensities towards behavior, or indeed her mental or physiological states, in terms that do not already involve reference to cognitive states, is not sufficient to describe her cognitive state—her knowing or her understanding. For the latter are competences; and the descriptions in question must fail to describe the behavior or potential behavior *as* competences, because competence refers to a standard according to which the behavior is measured, a standard which is external to her physical/mental make-up. But why does Sellars speak of reasons and justifications here? Presumably what he means is that the state of knowing is a state of “justifying or of being able to justify”, and there is, in it, an appeal to reasons. But what is a reason that justifies my assertion that there is a red book on my desk other than that I see it there? But what warrants me saying *this* on seeing *that* in *these* circumstances? What *further* reasons can I give? Or, to take another kind of case, suppose that what I say is that for all numbers x and y , $x + y = y + x$. What is the justification for my saying that? That is, what would I have to do to justify my saying it, so that what I say constitutes knowledge? I think that the almost universal answer would be that I have to prove it. But a proof is a sequence of propositions related by the fact that certain of them are axioms, characterizing what we mean by numbers, and others are related to earlier members of the sequence by rules of inference. But what justifies the axioms and what justifies the rules of inference?⁶ Sellars' answer in either the empirical or the mathematical case is, presumably, an appeal to the logical space of reasons. But then what one needs from that

⁶Frege [1979, p. 3] understood that there is another notion of justification involved when one asks for justification of primary judgements; but, strangely, he never considered the question of justification of the rules of inference. Of course he included the laws of logic as primary judgements; but *all* the rules of inference cannot *at the same time* be reduced to laws.

‘space’, in either case, are not reasons in the usual sense of explanations, but *grounds* or norms. And, if we heed Wittgenstein and avoid supernaturalism, this means that we end up saying simply that this is what we do; and if we continue to heed Wittgenstein and also avoid bald naturalism, we must see, as we have, that there is a way to say “this is what we do” which does not amount to an empirical statement. To justify what we do in this ultimate sense is simply to say that it is in accord with our practice *de re*. And this is a strange sense of justification: it is no longer an empirical proposition which can be verified or refuted. we accept it because it is indeed what we do, or because we are in the position of being instructed. (Saying that this is what we do in this sense is *synonymous* with saying that it is right.)

A better name than the space of reasons would be the space of the *meaning-dependent*. For the question of whether or not one knows or understands X presupposes that X has a meaning; and one rightly denies to the meaning-dependent habitation in the space of the natural-scientific. Indeed, McDowell clearly takes the space of the meaning-dependent to be Sellars’ space of reasons when he characterizes the latter as the “structure in which we place things when we find meaning in them” (p. 88). So, in this sense, my knowing or understanding, *qua* competence, gets placed in the space of the meaning-dependent. On the other hand, as a disposition, it belongs to the space of the natural-scientific. Moreover, Sellars by no means indicates that he takes these two spaces to be disjoint. One *places* an episode or state in the space of reasons by calling it a case of knowing; the same episode or state has a place in the space of the natural-scientific. This is how I would read Sellars, how I would read Wittgenstein, and how I think things in fact are. Meaning-dependence is not something internal to the subject of the episode or state: what we say or do is meaningful only in the light of an external standard of meaning, a practice. The dichotomy that McDowell finds is a consequence of the fact that he thinks that meaning is somehow internal to the subject.

Although he clearly identifies the space of reasons with the space of the meaning-dependent, he also says that Sellars meant to include in it the space of concepts—in Kantian terms, the domain of the faculty of understanding (p. 5). It follows then that concepts are meaning-dependent and that “our sensibility yields states and occurrences with conceptual content” (p. 71); and so we arrive at the “kind of intelligibility something acquires when we situate it in the logical space of reasons” and which is not alien to nature: namely, our experience itself involves experience of meanings. But McDowell

is simply wrong here: both wrong to accept the inclusion of the space of concepts in the space of the meaning-dependent and wrong to attribute it to Sellars. The *expression* of a concept, the grasp or understanding of a concept: these indeed belong to the space of the meaning-dependent. But a concept no more belongs to the space of the meaning-dependent than does a physical object or a number (although a *naming* of the latter also belongs in that space). For Kant, and in truth, our experience of the empirical world is conceptual; but that by no means implies that it is experience of meanings. The meaningfulness of experience does not imply experience of meanings.

Of course, it is possible that McDowell intends the term ‘concept’ differently from what I have been supposing. But then his argument, drawing on Kant, for example, that experience is conceptual is open to question. But he suggests another argument for his other kind of intelligibility, one more relevant to our discussion here:

Let me stress that the issue here cannot be confined to our understanding of one another, something that must involve “space of reasons” intelligibility. If we acquiesce in the disenchantment of nature, if we let meaning be expelled from what I have been calling “the merely natural”, we shall certainly need to work at bringing meaning back into the picture when we come to consider human interactions. But it is not just in our comprehension of language, and in our making sense of one another in the other ways that belong with that, that the conceptual capacities are operative. (p. 72)

At the end here he is returning to Kant’s observation that experience itself is conceptual. However, two different ideas of the space of reasons are operating: one is that it is the space of concepts, the other is that it is the space of the meaning-dependent. Amalgamating the two ideas seems to lend support to his view of nature as meaningful from Kant’s point that it is conceptual. Separating the two ideas, as I think that we must, his sole argument for the meaningfulness of nature is that our understanding of one another, a part of our ordinary empirical experience, depends upon our grasp of one another’s meanings. But we should challenge this argument, which seems to bring “space of reasons” intelligibility into the intelligibility of nature: our understanding and related interactions with other humans are rooted in our understanding of our language. If you are reading and understanding this paper, it is because you can understand English (or so I fondly hope), not

because there is a meeting of our minds. We have already, on very strong grounds, stipulated against the idiolectic conception of language. But the issue, and this has always been the central issue in this discussion, is of what *this* understanding, the understanding of language, consists.

McDowell's concerns in [1998] derive specifically from Davidson's view in e.g. [1974] of the relation between 'conceptual scheme' and 'content'. But Davidson is concerned in that essay with the question of translation from one scheme or language to another, where 'content' is to be the constraint on correctness of the translation. The analogy here is with two speakers 'interpreting' one another, without the assumption of a common language, an example Davidson actually gives in illustration. Here we have, in effect, the case of communication across idiolects. It is certainly part of his argument that no coherent notion of content is available to pronounce on correctness of translation across proposed conceptual frameworks (or idiolects). But, in *that* paper at least, Davidson is not setting a boundary between concept and content: indeed, I take the last paragraph of that paper and, in particular,

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth—quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without this dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. [1984, p. 198]

to be rejecting such a boundary entirely. The 'tension' that McDowell wishes to dissipate arises, perhaps, in trying to understand communication across idiolects; but we are arguing that that is not the right way to understand communication, anyway: we communicate primarily in a common language and understanding is basically, not of each other, but of our language.

Because McDowell thinks that understanding has to be something more than mere competence—disposition measured by external norms, and because he wishes to escape supernaturalism ("rampant Platonism"), he introduces in Chapter IV the concept of 'second nature', which we acquire through training and which is part of our natural selves. It is this second nature which is the source of our understanding and knowing. He refers here to Book 2 of the *Nichomachean Ethics* on moral excellence and writes

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

But, unless “having one’s eyes opened to reasons at large” has a very deflationary sense, this is not a generalization of the argument of Book II: Aristotle speaks there of moral excellence as a habit or *disposition*.⁷ It is later on, e.g. in Book VI, 13, that Aristotle comes closer to saying something McDowell is generalizing in this passage: it is not the moral excellences, but practical wisdom, which *requires* moral excellence, i.e. doing the right things, but is more than this, since it involves doing the right things for the right reasons and so understanding what is right.

But the analogue of this distinction in our case would be between an automaton, perhaps a simple machine programmed to respond correctly on given inputs, and a person who not only can follow this or that rule, but who also knows what *is* correct linguistic behavior, can make decisions about whether or not she wants to follow the rule, etc. In neither the case of moral wisdom nor the case of knowing and understanding in this broader and truer sense are we obliged to take it to be something more than competence. It may seem that more is required because we speak, not simply of doing the right thing *and* knowing what is right, but of doing the right thing *for* the right reasons, i.e. *in the light of* knowledge of what is right. Now, I don’t feel obliged to answer for Aristotle the question of how something that is done as a matter of habit can also be done for the right reasons;⁸ But, in our case, we can say that reasons are involved when we, for example, add numbers. When asked why we are adding them, we might answer that we are taking an addition test and want to do well, or that we want to know how much money we have in our bank account. But these are not reasons why, when confronted with $2 + 2$, we write 4. Of course, we could give a reason for this, too, in terms of the recursive definition of $+$ and the definition of 4; but, at this level, we should be persuaded by Wittgenstein: reasons must come to an end (or, equivalently, never do).

The young of other species, too, require training: in truth, they are not introduced into such complex practices as ours and their training is not so

⁷Strangely he says nothing about the role of training, of having one’s character ‘molded’, in the case of moral excellence, although he attributes the other kind of excellence, intellectual excellence, to training. But, then, he is considering in the latter case the acquiring of scientific knowledge, not the more basic acquiring of language, which is our concern here.

⁸But in fact, what he seems to have in mind is that, having established the habit of virtuous action—e.g. rushing into battle on command, it becomes easier to indulge in it when right reasons demand it.

extensive. But McDowell must believe that the training in the two cases result in qualitatively different second natures: theirs, which embodies, among other things, non-conceptual competences, which may be regarded as a causal result of the training; and ours, something that transcends competence, as though the training is a magical device, the throwing of the switch to the light of meaning, if you like. But this light does not itself inhabit the space of causes, the logical space of the natural-scientific, and so the device cannot, in our case as opposed to that of other species, be regarded merely as causal. McDowell's commitment to naturalism is very much in doubt.

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