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Article (Unspecified)

Morris, Michael (2009) The question of idealism in McDowell. *Philosophical Topics*, 37 (1). pp. 95-114. ISSN 0276-2080

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The Question of Idealism in McDowell

Philosophical Topics 37 (2009): 95-114 (Version as submitted)

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1. Introduction

At various points, and in different writings, John McDowell recognizes that he is liable to be regarded as a kind of idealist. Thus in *Mind and World* he imagines someone asking him:

Why should we be so sure of our capacity to comprehend the world if not because we conceive the world as a shadow or reflection of our thinking?
(1994: 40)

And in similar vein, in the Woodbridge Lectures, he anticipates a critic making the following challenge:

[O]ur attempt to make sense of conceptual activity as having objective purport degenerates into an “idealistic” fraud; the so-called reality toward which we see our so-called conceptual activity as directed is a mere projection of the activity. (1998a: 470)

In this paper I want to argue that McDowell’s distinctive view of the relation between thought and reality is only defensible if we adopt a form of idealism which is similar in character to the one which he anticipates in such remarks as these, although it arises in a slightly different place.

What, then, is idealism? I will count any view idealist which denies, or refuses to accept, realism, and I define realism as commitment to the following thesis:

- (R) The nature of the world as it is in itself is altogether independent of anything to do with any way of thinking of or representing it.

Since I take idealism to deny, or decline to accept, this thesis, the notion of the world ‘as it is in itself’ must be characterized in such a way that the idealist can accept that there is such a thing as the way the world is in itself. Accordingly, I take the world as it is in itself to be the world as it is *as independently* of anything to do with ways of thinking or representations *as is possible*. The idealist will simply not accept that this maximal independence is complete independence.

2. The Main Argument of *Mind and World*

McDowell’s *Mind and World* can be seen as a working out of the consequences of a single argument. Informally, the argument can be put like this. Judgement must be subject to rational constraint by something external to judgement—ultimately the world. Otherwise, judgement would be completely unconstrained, and not really related to the world at all—which would mean that it was not really judgement, even. But if judgement were constrained by something which was not conceptual, that would be a constraint by an ‘alien force’ (1994: 8)—which is not *rational* constraint. So judgement can only be *rationally* constrained by something which, like judgement, is conceptual. That means that the world itself must be conceptual. As McDowell himself puts it:

[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So since the world is everything that is case ..., there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. (1994: 27)

This talk of there being ‘no gap between thought, as such, and the world’ is bound to sound idealist. It is natural to describe the idealist (e.g., Berkeleyan) response to scepticism as being to shrink the gap between the world and our

conception of it to such an extent that there is no space for scepticism even to arise. And McDowell anticipates that his description will seem idealist; but he thinks that the appearance of idealism is due to one or more of several ways of misconceiving his position.¹ First, his position is clearly non-Berkeleyan in the following respect. Whereas Berkeley held that, for perceivable things, existence depends on actually being perceived, McDowell does not identify the world with what is actually thought: rather, he identifies the world with what *can* be thought—to be conceptual is not the same as to be conceived. Secondly, he denies that his position involves the kind of self-congratulatory complacency which is characteristic of a certain kind of idealism—the view that there that there can be nothing in the world which we cannot (as we are now) make sense of. He thinks that possessing concepts carries with it a ‘standing obligation’ to ensure that our empirical concepts ‘pass muster’:

There is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development. (1994: 40)

And, thirdly, because our thoughts include *de re* senses—which are not specified descriptively—the objects which our thoughts are about cannot be supposed to be defined by the way we think of them. (1994: 180)

I will not accuse McDowell of any of the forms of idealism which he here defends himself against. In fact, it may be that McDowell is not an idealist at all: it may be that he has just made a mistake. McDowell himself thinks that he is likely to seem idealist to people because of an oversight on their part. They think (he supposes) that someone who does not make room for our judgement being constrained by what is external to the conceptual must have failed to make room for our judgement being constrained by anything external at all; they have simply failed to see—or properly to understand—the third possibility which McDowell himself is concerned to develop, that our judgement can be constrained by something external to *judgement* without being constrained by anything external to the *conceptual* (1994: 26). I suspect that McDowell has, similarly, not seen that a certain position is possible. It is only if

¹ These three responses are identified by Gaskin (2006: 171-2).

someone insists on McDowell's view once the possibility of this alternative position has been pointed out that she can really be accused of idealism.

The pivotal assumption of McDowell's argument is this:

- (M) Judgement can only be *rationally* constrained by something which is conceptual.

I think this assumption is false. More pertinently to my present purpose, I think this assumption can only be defended by adopting a form of idealism. In order to see why, we need to understand the crucial terms here. We need to understand what 'rational constraint' is, and, first, what it is for something to be 'conceptual'.²

3. The Nature of the 'Conceptual'

What is it for something to be 'conceptual', as McDowell understands that term? It looks as if two conditions need to be met:

- (C1) To be conceptual, something must have (something akin to) a syntax;
(C2) To be conceptual, something must have epistemic or cognitive identity conditions.

That the second condition here applies to everything which McDowell wants to count as conceptual can be seen in his view that the world, as the totality of facts (1994: 27), is the totality of true thoughts, where thoughts are the Fregean senses of sentences (1994: 179). Fregean senses, and hence thoughts, in this sense, are individuated (in part) by what Evans calls the 'Intuitive Criterion of Difference':

[T]he thought associated with one sentence *S* as its sense must be different from the thought associated with another sentence *S'* as *its* sense, if it is possible for someone to understand both sentences at a given time while

² The notion of 'rational constraint' seems to be the most general of several that McDowell uses: others are 'justification' and 'warrant' (McDowell 1994: 4-8).

coherently taking different attitudes towards them, i.e. accepting (rejecting) one while rejecting (accepting), or being agnostic about, the other. (Evans 1982: 19)

This is an epistemic or cognitive way of distinguishing between things: the things so distinguished might be called *ways of thinking* (thus Evans (1982: 16ff). If the world is conceptual, then (C2) makes the world consist of ways of thinking.

There is nothing deeply wrong in itself with using the term ‘world’ in this way: we might suggest that this is the use to be found in such phrases as ‘the world of classical Greece’, or ‘the world of Thomas Hardy’. But it is very hard to swallow when the ‘world’ so characterized is supposed to be the ultimate external source of rational constraint on judgement, that to which we become open in perceptual experience. When we use the term ‘world’ to refer to the ultimate external source of rational constraint on judgement, what we are referring to is the world about which the realist is realist and the idealist idealist: this is the world referred to in (R).

There are two problems with locating this world, the ultimate source of rational constraint, in the realm of Fregean sense. The first is that it is idealist in a way which is simply unbelievable: we just cannot suppose that the world to which we are open in experience is in itself composed of ways of thinking. The second problem is that senses are themselves dependent entities: they are ways in which *something else* may be given to us; they are ways of thinking *of something*. This something of which a way of thinking is a way of thinking is bound to be more real (in the realist sense) than the way of thinking itself: for one thing, it need not itself be a way of thinking, or composed of ways of thinking. So it looks as if anyone who holds that ‘the world’ consists of Fregean senses must think that there is another world—the realm of Fregean reference. But if we hold to (M), the claim that judgement can only be rationally constrained by something which is itself conceptual, and we limit the conceptual to the realm of Fregean sense, it seems that this other world—the realm of Fregean reference—can in no way rationally constrain our judgements. And this is immediately paradoxical, on McDowell’s view, since it seems that we cannot even talk about this further world, which means that some of the words I have just used (indeed, am using now) must fail to refer. For you will recall what McDowell says

about the idea of trying to find rational constraint for judgement in something which lies beyond the conceptual:

The idea 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. (1994: 6)

This is the basis of Richard Gaskin's charge that McDowell's restriction of the conceptual to the realm of Fregean sense commits him to a Kantian transcendental idealism (which is, of course, a form of realism, in the sense of (R))—a position which McDowell himself is hostile to, and which is, in any case, incoherent (Gaskin 2006: Ch V).

4. 'Conceptual Organization'

It looks, then, as if (C2), taken in the context of (M), commits McDowell to an awkward idealism-cum-Kantianism. But this is not the idealism which is my main concern. (C2) looks as if it is detachable from McDowell's main argument, for two reasons. One is that there seems to be a broadly coherent view—presented by Gaskin, in fact—which accepts something like McDowell's main argument, while denying that (C2) should be used to define 'conceptual' as it figures in that argument. The other is that McDowell himself seems at times to think that the really crucial feature of the conceptual is (C1). Thus, in the passage I quoted a moment ago, what matters is that the items which can figure in a tracing of grounds for judgement must all be 'conceptually *organized*': this looks a clear reference to something like syntax—particularly when taken with the choice of the word 'articulable' to describe what is describable. Moreover, the crucial thought of the passage relating thought to the

world which I have also quoted seems to depend chiefly on (C1). Here are the important sentences again:

When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case ..., there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. (1994: 27)

Here the key thought seems to be that thinking is always thinking *that p* (for some '*p*'), and the world consists of *thats*. The underlying point is that *sentences* can be used both to say what someone thinks and to describe how the world is: indeed, the *same* sentence can be used both to say what someone thinks and to describe the world. This underlying point is what Wittgenstein described as a 'paradox' which 'has the form of a truism' (Wittgenstein 2001: 95). It is detachable from the 'high-flown language' (which McDowell acknowledges that Wittgenstein would have been 'uncomfortable' with (McDowell 1994: 27)) which is introduced when McDowell identifies 'the sort of thing one can think' with 'the sort of thing that can be the case'. It is the identification which imports the demand for identity-conditions, which demand is then (partially) supplied by Evans's Intuitive Criterion of Difference. Consequently, it is the identification, and not the Wittgensteinian truism, which brings in the problematic condition (C2).

Putting the point in a natural way, McDowell's crucial assumption (M) claims that judgements—which are always judgements *that p* (for appropriate '*p*'s)—can only be rationally constrained by the world, if the world itself consists of things which have the form *that p* (for appropriate '*p*'s). This point, which is so naturally expressed in terms of 'form', is what underlies (C1). The idea is that since whole judgements have a '*that-p*' kind of form, they can only be rationally constrained by the world if the world consists of items which themselves have a '*that-p*' kind of form. This is why the world must be 'everything that is the case': items which *are the case* are precisely items with a '*that-p*' kind of form. To have a '*that-p*' kind of form is to be, in McDowell's terms, 'conceptually organized'. To be 'conceptually organized' is to have parts which are combined in the way in which parts of a '*that-p*' kind of thing may be combined. Since what replaces '*p*' here must be a sentence, to be 'conceptually organized' must be to have parts which are combined a way which is at

least akin to the way in which the parts of a sentence are combined in a sentence. And this is what is claimed by (C1).

My use of the word ‘form’ in this last paragraph must have given the game away. To have a ‘*that-p*’ kind of form is to have the form of a *sentence*. To claim that the world consists of items which have a ‘*that-p*’ kind of form—to claim that the world is everything that is the case, for example—is to claim the world consists of items which have the form of a sentence. The claim is that the form of the world is the same as the form of language. And this, of course, is the central claim of the theory of language put forward by the person who first said that the world is everything that is the case: it is the central claim of the so-called ‘picture theory’ of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.³ What this shows is that at the heart of McDowell’s argument about the rational constraint of thought by the world is a certain philosophy of language, even if he did not recognize that fact.⁴ I will argue that, although this philosophy of language itself may not be idealist, it is only defensible if idealism is assumed.

What, though, does this talk of sameness of form (which means *shape*, after all) really amount to? What is it for the world itself to consist of items which have a syntax—or something like a syntax? It is not at all obvious. Sentences have a spatio-temporal (perhaps spatial *or* temporal) articulation of a kind which things other than sentences just do not have. The notions of ‘form’, ‘syntax’, and ‘structure’ seem to have only metaphorical application to the world itself. What could it be for the world itself to have the same form as language?

A clue is provided by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*:

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

³ Wittgenstein (1922: 1). It surely should have seemed odd to McDowell that, in expounding a view which he took to be continuous with the work of the later Wittgenstein, he found himself endorsing a central slogan of the earlier Wittgenstein’s views.

⁴ He seems, in fact, to think that language is only involved in his picture as part of the account of *Bildung* (1994: 124-7).

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. (Wittgenstein 1922: 4.0141)

This is not a stipulation, I think: it is a piece of philosophical interpretation. The claim is that sameness of form between picture and pictured *consists* in the existence of rules of the appropriate sort for moving from one to the other. I think that Wittgenstein's interpretation is right: this is indeed what sameness of form amounts to. In fact, without this, the idea of identity of form between language and the world is little more than a gesture. That idea is inseparable from the idea of a possible *mapping* between sentences and items in the world; and what such a mapping depends on is what Wittgenstein here calls a 'rule of translation'.

Wittgenstein's talk of a 'rule of translation' between different 'languages' is suggestive in two ways. First, it shows something about how the rules here must be thought of if they are really to constitute similarity or sameness of form between picture and pictured—if they are really to underlie a *mapping* relation. These rules have to be thought to be capable of being understood by someone who does not (yet) understand one of the 'languages' between which the 'translation' is to be carried out. Why is this condition required if the existence of these rules is to constitute similarity or sameness of form? It is not *quite* that similarity or sameness presupposes the possibility of comparison, and comparison requires the possibility of each of the compared things being available independently of the other. It is not quite that, because two things may be similar in a certain respect, even if it is actually impossible, for various kinds of reason, to compare them. But the following more modest claim does seem to be true: two things can only be *known* to be similar in a certain respect if it is possible to compare them—and, of course, comparison requires being able to get at each independently of the other. So it seems that two things can only be similar if the following is true: if both things are accessible at all, each must be accessible independently of the other. This is the condition which is expressed by describing the

rule which takes one between a picture and what is pictured as a ‘rule of translation’ between different ‘languages’.

Secondly, the talk of a ‘rule of translation’ between ‘languages’ suggests an illuminating connection with something else which has been important to McDowell’s philosophy.⁵ McDowell has been a strong advocate of the significance of Donald Davidson’s work in the philosophy of language. Davidson follows Quine in championing the idea that the perspective of radical translation, or radical interpretation, is fundamental to a proper understanding of language.⁶ It is in radical interpretation that we really see language for what it is. This Quine-Davidson view can be put together with Wittgenstein’s idea that sameness of form consists in the existence of a certain kind of rule, to help us to see what the metaphor of the world having the same form as language really amounts to.

The basic claim of the Quine-Davidson view can be put like this:

(RI) There is nothing about the meaning of the words of any language, which is discoverable at all, which is not discoverable in principle by someone who begins from evidence which is available without understanding that language, and proceeds by means of a kind of rational theory-construction which is also available without understanding that language.

And the motivation for this thought is a certain view of the answerability of language to the world, which we might formulate like this:

(AW) Uses of language are answerable to the world; the world to which they are answerable, and the ways in which they are answerable to it, are there to be seen, if they can be seen at all, by an observer who does not understand the language in question.

⁵ See, in particular, McDowell (1998d). There may be a hint of ambivalence at his (1994: 35).

⁶ See Quine (1960: Ch 2); Davidson (1984b)

I suggest that (AW) and (RI) capture the core of the thought which is metaphorically expressed by saying that the form (shape) of the world is the form of language—or that the world is everything that is the case. Indeed, unless it is interpreted in this way, the metaphor remains no more than a gesture. (RI) incorporates the key thought that any language can be reached by a rational means from a conception of the world which is independent of it. The ‘rational means’ here is the counterpart to Wittgenstein’s ‘rule of translation’: it is the method of radical interpretation, developed in whatever way a proper understanding of the possibilities of rationality may suggest; it is the basis for a mapping between a language and the world. The sameness of form between each language and the world consists precisely in this rational method being enough to take someone from one to the other. And its being a genuine *sameness*, in a certain respect, between two different entities requires it to be possible to get at each of the entities in question—the language and the world—independently of the other, so long as it is possible to get at both entities at all.

I am claiming that McDowell’s view that it is only if it is ‘conceptually organized’ that the world is ‘articulable’ is empty unless it is explained in terms of the radical-interpretation conception of language which I have just described. But this might seem to be antithetical to a significant strand in his thinking. It might seem to involve an endorsement of the idea that it is only what is accessible to a ‘sideways-on’ perspective which can be counted as genuine, real, or true, and this is an idea which McDowell has famously argued against.⁷ I think there is some justice to this point, as will be clear at the end of the paper. But it does not undermine my claim that McDowell is committed to the radical-interpretation conception of language. McDowell himself seems not to recognize Davidson’s use of radical interpretation as involving an objectionable kind of ‘sideways-on’ perspective: he seems to think that, in the context of interpretation, a perspective is only objectionably ‘sideways-on’ if it takes the relations between belief and the world to be fundamentally causal (a view he finds in Rorty). He seems to think that provided that radical interpretation is carried on within the realm of the ‘conceptual’, exploiting rational (rather than merely causal) relations, there is nothing objectionable about it.⁸

⁷ See, e.g., McDowell (1998e: 207-8, 211-12).

⁸ The crucial discussion is at (1994: 34-6); in this passage he attempts to say something reminiscent of Gadamer’s idea of a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer 1979: 273). If I am right, this involves an awkward

But even if my characterization is fair to McDowell, you may have felt a certain awkwardness about the formulations I have given of the radical-interpretation conception of language. I was supposed to be explaining what it is for *language* to have the same form as the world, but I seem merely to have offered an account of what it is for *each* language to have the same form as the world. To see what is at issue here, we need to compare (RI) with the following:

(RI*) There is nothing about the meaning of the words of any language, which is discoverable at all, which is not discoverable in principle by someone who begins from evidence which is available without understanding *any* language, and proceeds by means of a kind of rational theory-construction which is also available without understanding *any* language.

If we hold on to the thought that genuine sameness in a certain respect between two items requires the items to be accessible independently of each other, if they are accessible at all, then the claim that *language*—just as such, and in general—has the same form as the world might seem to require (RI*), rather than just (RI). And, clearly, someone could accept (RI) without accepting (RI*). Indeed, McDowell himself clearly does not hold (RI*), since he holds that no one can possess conceptual capacities—which are surely involved in constructing a theory—without understanding a language (1994: 125-6).

What is at issue here depends on the reasons which may be given for refusing to accept (RI*), while accepting (RI). If you deny (RI*), while accepting (RI), you will hold that someone who understands no language at all *either* cannot have the relevant evidence available to her, *or* cannot engage in the relevant rational theory-construction. And there are more and less innocent reasons for holding each of these things. (I count a reason innocent if it avoids any obvious commitment to idealism.)

mix of two incompatible conceptions of language—the radical-interpretation conception, and what I later (§7) call the ‘transformation’ conception. The reference to Rorty is to his (1986), referred to at (McDowell 1994: 35).

The most innocent reason for thinking that the relevant work cannot be done by someone who understands no language at all is an empirical one: the claim would be either that the relevant evidence cannot, as a matter of empirical fact, be processed by someone who has no language, or that the rational theory-construction, cannot, as a matter of empirical fact, be carried out by someone who has no language. It is all just too complicated, we might think. This empirical reason can just be set aside: ‘available’ in both (RI) and (RI*) means *available in principle*—and that just discounts empirical difficulties.

The next most innocent reason might depend on holding a particular view of what it is to have certain states of mind. Someone might think that considering evidence or constructing theories essentially involved the manipulation of symbols, for example, which would require knowledge of some language. This is still an innocent reason, because it says nothing deep about the nature of the facts about meaning. It does not suppose, for example, that anything about the nature of the world is dependent on understanding a language: it is merely that certain kinds of activity require linguistic abilities. In the same way, it is clear that one can only ask questions about the world in French if one understands French; but this does not make the nature of the world in any way dependent on French. Again, we can set this reason for denying (RI*) aside. We can say that everything about the meaning of any language *would* be discoverable by the method of radical interpretation, even by someone who understood no language at all, were it not merely for the fact (as it is here being supposed to be) that much of the activity of radical interpretation is essentially linguistic. If the reasons for radical interpretation being essentially linguistic are suitably superficial, then this will still impose a significant constraint. And the reasons look as if they are bound to be appropriately superficial, provided that the reasons for denying (RI*), while holding (RI), remain relatively innocent.

We get a significantly less innocent view, however, if we hold that the world which is described in language—the world which is supposed to have the same form as language—has a status rather like that of secondary qualities, on an orthodox (if not indisputable) conception of secondary qualities. On this orthodox conception, a secondary quality is something whose nature is essentially dependent on a kind of sense-experience: the quality is unintelligible except as a quality which is to be

perceived in a certain way. If we treated the world which is described in language in a way which is analogous to this, the world would be, in some sense, a world *of* language, or a world *for* language. This view is clearly idealist, in the terms of my definition.

Someone who holds this idealist view ought, I think, to hold that we cannot strictly claim that *language*, just as such, has the same form as the world, because this would presuppose the possibility—insofar as languages and the world are accessible at all—of getting access to the world without understanding any language. The most that could ever be claimed would be that the form of *each* language is the same as the form of the world. But this does not mean that an idealist of this kind ought to say that language, just as such, does *not* have the same form as the world: for that claim itself presupposes the possibility of comparison in exactly the same way. So the claim that the form of each language is the same as the form as the form of the world would not be, in any sense, a deficient claim, from this idealist perspective: this is all that could be meant by the claim that language has the same form as the world.

It may be that McDowell himself is a linguistic idealist of this kind.⁹ But, again, I will not be assuming that in what follows. For what follows, I will assume that anyone who has reason to accept (RI) has reason, equally, to accept (RI*). And I will argue that they can both only be defended on idealist grounds.

5. The Idea of ‘Rational Constraint’

Where do we stand so far? McDowell claims that judgement can only be rationally constrained by the world if the world itself is ‘conceptual’. The notion of ‘conceptual’ here has been found to involve two separable components. I have argued that the most fundamental claim is that the world must be ‘conceptually organized’, which means that the world must have the form of language. And I have claimed that

⁹ And perhaps Gaskin is too. Gaskin describes himself as a linguistic idealist, but it is unclear to me whether his idealism is of this kind, or, rather, of the kind I discover as the motive for the radical-interpretation conception in section 7 below. It certainly strikes me that his view requires more than just that the constituents of the world are essentially expressible. See Gaskin (2006: 227)

that thought is only more than a gesture if we adopt some version of the radical-interpretation conception of language.

What, though, of the other contentious notion in McDowell's claim? What does 'rational constraint' amount to? According to McDowell, the notion is linked with those of 'justification' and 'warrant'. For judgement in general to be rationally constrained by the world it must at least be possible for particular judgements to be justified or warranted by the way the world is. McDowell follows Kant—and ultimately Hume—in understanding this justification or warrant in terms of *necessitation* (1994: 5). And he therefore contrasts a *rational* necessitation with a different kind of necessitation: necessitation by 'brute' or 'alien' force, a mere causal 'impact' (1994: 8). But this notion of necessitation figures in Kant—as in Hume—as part of a characterization of a deeper notion, that of explanation or responsibility.¹⁰ What we really need is for the way the world is to *explain* or be *responsible* for what we judge. That is to say, we want it to be the case that we judge what we do *because* of the way the world is. Adopting a necessitation theory of this explanatory link produces interesting and suggestive tensions, but these may distract us from what really matters here, which is the explanatory link itself.¹¹

Of course, shifting to the general notion of an explanatory link does not remove the need to make a contrast very like the one McDowell makes. McDowell is concerned to contrast a kind of explanatory link which provides a justification or warrant for judgement with one which is, at best, 'exculpatory' (1994: 8). The crucial thing is that the explanation should explain why the judgement we make is *right*, rather than just why we make the judgement we do (which judgement may, of course, then happen to be right).

¹⁰ I use the notion of 'responsibility' as a translation of the central Greek concept of explanation (enshrined in the terms 'aitia' and 'aition'). Hume, of course, is more generous with accounts of explanation than what I say here suggests: he gives us two accounts while seeming only to offer one. Thus he offers, as a way of putting the necessitation account 'in other words', a counterfactual analysis—if the *explanans* had not obtained, then neither would the *explanandum* (Hume 1975: 76).

¹¹ I recognize that I am here dismissing as a 'distraction' from what really matters the very thing which looms largest in McDowell's own presentation—namely, the difficulty of reconciling 'receptivity' and 'spontaneity'. As I see it, though, this difficulty is simply the product of insisting too quickly on a necessitation conception of explanation. And I suspect that the necessitation model may, in fact, be the source of more of McDowell's problems. Adopting this model makes it harder to distinguish the suggestion that the conceptual must be *answerable* to the non-conceptual from the suggestion that the conceptual must be *grounded* in the non-conceptual. McDowell is right to be hostile to the latter, but he has no good reason (I am claiming) to reject the former.

All of this can be characterized as putting certain requirements on an understanding of the ‘because’ which we might use to explain the explanatory link which we want to hold between our judgements and the world. We can take as our focus the following schema:

(E) *a* judges that *p* because it is, in fact, the case that *p*.

What we want is for it to be intelligible that (E) has true instances, with the ‘because’ properly read—as expressing a justification or warrant, rather than a merely causal explanation.

It is important that we use the same sentence letter ‘*p*’ in both ‘that’-clauses here: it is important that the same sentence must be capable of replacing it in both places. This matters because if the sentence in the second ‘that’-clause had to be different from the sentence in the first, that would identify a different explanatory relation: it would identify the explanatory relation as the one holding between a judgement and something which the subject herself might offer as a reason for that judgement. But that is not the explanatory relation we are interested in: we are not concerned with the relation between a judgement and other things the subject might think; we are interested in the relation between a judgement and the world. In effect, by insisting on the possibility of the same sentence replacing ‘*p*’ at both occurrences we are insisting on a more profound constraint than anything which a coherentist can provide.¹²

When McDowell is concerned with the possibility of judgement being rationally constrained by the world, what he is concerned with is the possibility of (E) having true instances, with the ‘because’ properly understood. And the possibility of (E) having true instances evidently turns on the Wittgensteinian truism we considered earlier: that it is possible to use a *sentence*—indeed, the *same* sentence—both to say what someone thinks and to describe the world. McDowell’s claim is that this requires the world itself to be ‘conceptually organized’—‘conceptually organized, and

¹² This gets McDowell one of the points he is keen to establish (1994: 14-18): the coherentist who is his most immediate target is Davidson (1986).

so articulable' as he puts it himself (1994: 6). Here again we see that McDowell's position depends, at base, on a claim in the philosophy of language. The sentence which replaces '*p*' in its second occurrence in (E) must there be capable of describing the world. According to McDowell, that is only possible if the world itself is 'conceptually organized'.

6. Radical Interpretation and Arguments to the Best Explanation

I am not claiming that this view is idealist. There is nothing intrinsically idealist in the thought that the world itself must be 'conceptually organized'—that is to say, that the form of the world must be the same as the form of language, which I have claimed is tantamount to a commitment to (RI) or (RI*). It might be that the world as it is in itself was wholly independent of anything to do with any way of representing or thinking about it, and yet matched language in its form. I am not denying that possibility. My claim is, rather, that the view is only defensible on the assumption of idealism.

This might seem absurd: are there not familiar ways of arguing for this common-form thesis which look clearly realist? The familiar arguments involve the claim that the best explanation of language being as it is is that the form of language is same as the form of world. I think these arguments do not provide us with the independent purchase on the issues which they might seem to. Let us look at them a little more closely.

The familiar arguments to the best explanation all have at their heart the following line of thought about how it is that languages are meaningful at all. Languages—so the line of thought goes—are, at bottom, systems of signs. Signs, or certain crucial components of signs, are things (marks or noises, say) which are intrinsically meaningless. Such things can only have meaning by being correlated, in some kind of context (the story can be elaborated indefinitely here), with something external to them: their having meaning can only be a matter of their being, or having been, correlated with something else. There is some room for dispute about exactly

which linguistic items are basic in these correlations: names might be correlated with objects, for example; or sentences might be correlated with objective conditions in reality. But some such correlation is essential, and it must—whether directly or indirectly—be a correlation between linguistic items, on the one hand, and items in the world (rather than merely items in the minds of speakers), on the other. So, at least, runs the line of thought.

This line of thought certainly requires us to accept that the world has the same form as language. The idea of a correlation here is just the idea of a mapping between language and reality which we considered before. And like the idea of a mapping, it is explicable in terms of the Quine-Davidson picture of radical interpretation. Indeed, the Quine-Davidson picture is naturally understood as being just a thorough working-out of the thought that languages are, at bottom, systems of signs. So the idea that languages are meaningful in virtue of correlations with reality seems clearly to bring with it the thesis that the world itself is, in McDowell's terms, 'conceptually organized'.

And it is certainly the case that the common-form thesis is most naturally understood in a realist, rather than an idealist, way when it is introduced like this. The crucial correlations are naturally taken to be between signs and an already existing reality. Moreover, a realistic interpretation is, if anything, even more natural for the arguments to the best explanation which are developed from this familiar account of how languages are meaningful at all. It might be claimed, for example, that the best explanation of languages having arisen in the first place is that certain linguistic items were once correlated with certain things in reality: the correlation might be taken to be intentional (some Adam might have set out one day to name things),¹³ or it might be regarded as a kind of extension of the instinctive communicative devices which we suppose develop in evolution.¹⁴ Alternatively (in another argument to the best explanation), it might be claimed that the success of languages in communication is best explained by the fact that parts of languages are correlated with features of the real world (as opposed to things in people's minds). Explanations of this kind take

¹³ Strawson (1980: 285-6) suggests that both he and Grice (1957) took this view.

¹⁴ There is a hint of this at McDowell (1998f: 40), although he seems to row back a little from that at (1994: 123-4)

languages to be shaped to suit a world whose nature is independent of them. The claim is that the form of language is *due* to the form of the world. I think this dependence clearly requires a realist conception of the world.

I accept, then, that these arguments all present a version of the common-form assumption which is not itself idealist: that is to say, I accept that the position they argue for is a realist position. What I deny is that they provide a reason for *holding* that position which is not idealist. And this is because these arguments do not really provide us with any reason for accepting the common-form assumption which is independent of a direct endorsement of (RI) or (RI*).

We need to remember that we have no idea at all of what it would be for the world itself to be ‘conceptually organized’—to have the form of language—except as whatever is required for each language to be intelligible as a mapping of the world. And what it is for each language to be intelligible as a mapping of the world is what is captured by (RI) and (RI*). The arguments to the best explanation do not give us reason to accept a hypothesis for which we might later find evidence which was independent of (RI) and (RI*). And, in fact, I think it is clear that the arguments themselves either presuppose or re-iterate the central claim of (RI) or (RI*).

This might not seem immediately obvious: it might be thought, in particular, that the thesis that languages are systems of signs was an independent datum. But in fact it is not. There is no reason to think that words are, or are constituted by, signs, in the relevant sense, other than thinking that the same thing might be the meaning of different words; and there is no reason to think *that* other than thinking that the meaning of words is something which is accessible independently of each word, and which might be correlated with any one of them. This, in turn, is only really intelligible in the context of a general conception of language which involves endorsing (RI) or (RI*). That is to say, the thesis that languages are systems of signs is not given independently of the radical-interpretation conception of language—as something which might be used to support it, for example—but is itself not significantly distinct from the radical-interpretation conception.

When we turn to the arguments to the best explanation themselves, we can see that they are all entirely shaped by the assumptions of the radical-interpretation conception. It is not that there are *better* explanations of the facts that they are concerned with. There may be no *better* explanation of the meaningfulness of languages than that they are meaningful in virtue of a correlation with something external to them. There may be no *better* explanation of the origin of languages than one which exploits such a correlation. There may be no *better* explanation of the success of linguistic communication than by appeal to a correlation between linguistic items and things in the real world. The problem is, rather, with the assumption that these things are all to be explained in anything like the way in which these explanations attempt to explain them. All of these explanations attempt to show that language in general, or each language in particular, is a rational or otherwise appropriate response to the way the world is. In order to do that, they need to assume that language (or: each language) is what reason would suggest it should be, given certain background conditions. And that seems indistinguishable from the core assumption of the radical-interpretation conception of language: the radical-interpretation conception holds precisely that language (or: each language) is within reason's reach of what is available in principle independently of language (or: that language).

7. Idealism, Realism, and Transformation

It seems clear that we have no reason for accepting the common-form assumption which is independent of a direct endorsement for (RI) or (RI*). The reason why the common-form assumption is only defensible once idealism is assumed is that the reasons for endorsing (RI) or (RI*) are fundamentally idealist.

To see what is at stake in endorsing the radical-interpretation conception of language, we need to think what might be involved in denying it. The radical-interpretation conception holds that reason alone—deployed with suitable imagination—is enough to take someone from the facts available without understanding language (or: that language) to a full understanding of a given language.

The alternative is to hold that, in order to understand a given language, someone must first undergo a transformation of a kind which is not intelligible as rational to someone who does not understand the language in question. This transformation will naturally be supposed to be effected by a form of training: but the training will have to be such that its point will not be visible except to people who have already undergone it. Let us call this the *transformation* conception of language.

If we adopt the transformation conception of language, there is no evident reason to think that we can only describe (in words) whatever is ‘conceptually organized’—that is to say, whatever already has the form of language. For learning a language will no longer be thought to involve *correlations* between linguistic items and something which is available independently of understanding that language. The notion of a correlation is inextricable from the notion of a mapping, which is, in turn, to be explained in terms of the core assumptions of the radical-interpretation conception. Once we get rid of the idea of correlation, there is no clear reason why we cannot describe, in words, a world which is available to a being who understands neither these words nor any others. Without the need for correlation, there is no reason at all to think that we can only describe a world which itself has the form of language. In particular, there is no reason why the transformation which is needed to come to understand a language must be thought to involve the construction of a special linguistic world, whose constituents are fit to be correlates of the words of the language.¹⁵ Once we adopt the transformation conception, there is no reason for correlation to enter the picture at all. The training which produces the crucial transformation need not be a training which can be recapitulated in terms of correlations: it need be nothing less than a training in the use of words to describe a world which is not already ready for language—a world which is not in any sense ‘conceptual’.

If we can make sense of the possibility of using language to describe a world which is not in itself ‘conceptually organized’, then we will have dealt with McDowell’s problem about the rational constraint of judgement by the world, without supposing that the world is in any sense ‘conceptual’—*pace* (M). For, as we saw

¹⁵ Although it is not entirely clear, it is natural to think that this is precisely what is achieved by *Bildung* on McDowell’s picture (1994: 87-8; 123-7).

before, the core of McDowell's problem was just understanding how there could be true instances of the following schema, with 'because' understood in the right way:

(E) *a* judges that *p* because it is, in fact, the case that *p*.

The transformation conception has no more difficulty in allowing there to be true instances of (E) than the radical-interpretation conception does.

So much (for now, for this paper) for the transformation conception. What reasons might there be for preferring the radical-interpretation conception? There is really just one reason: the transformation conception is (at best) minimally explanatory; it really tells us nothing at all about how language works. It is not merely that I have not yet developed the transformation conception in any detail: in certain crucial respects, it simply cannot be developed. The reason why it cannot be developed in the relevant respects is that any such development would involve a denial of its central assumption—that the transformation which is basic to a learning of any language is not one whose point can be seen in advance of an understanding of that language. This is the key difference between the radical-interpretation conception and the transformation conception: according to the radical-interpretation conception, language is explicable through and through, whereas according to the transformation conception, the most fundamental things in language cannot be explained at all.¹⁶

But is this a reason for preferring the radical-interpretation conception? In particular, is it a reason for thinking that the radical-interpretation conception is *true* and the transformation conception *false*? We can only suppose that it is a reason for thinking that the radical-interpretation conception is *true*, if we accept something like the following 'principle of reason':

(PR) Everything in the world is essentially explicable.

¹⁶ There is some irony in the fact that McDowell himself has consistently championed resistance to demands for explanation—all the way from his preference for 'modesty' in theories of meaning (1998g) to his denial of any need to provide an evolutionary account of the origin of *Bildung* (1994: 123-4).

But why should we accept (PR)? (PR), or something like it, is certainly a reasonable heuristic principle: something to take to heart as an injunction in the construction of scientific theories. As such it can be a fruitful generator of explanations, which can be held provisionally, awaiting later confirmation or rejection; it can guide practical choices. But that is not our present situation. There will be no further evidence to confirm or undermine our choice between the radical-interpretation conception and the transformation conception. We are not here using (PR) as a heuristic, or as a goad to future research. The issue has no practical application. We are being asked to accept (PR) as a flat truth, and to choose a particular conception of language on its basis.

At this point, we can have no reason to accept (PR), so understood, other than as part of a generally idealist conception of the world. The world has to be understood as essentially there *for* explanation: we are ruling in advance that there can be nothing inexplicable in the world. We are rejecting something as false just because it does not suit our intellectual concerns, and that only looks justified to the extent that we think that the world was made for us and our intellectual concerns.¹⁷ This strikes me as a kind of blasphemy. The transformation conception seems to me preferable for the reason, precisely, that it does not make these idealist demands on the world. And once we acknowledge the transformation conception as even intelligible, there are other reasons for preferring it: that it can more readily accommodate both the mental lives of infants and the obvious facts about actual translation, for example.

The transformation conception has not been widely considered as a way of protecting realism in the philosophy of language.¹⁸ But there is a well-known presentation of a similar view as a way of defending realism in ethics. It may well be—this version of realism in ethics claims—that there are two views on an ethical matter, which are incompatible with one another, and one of which is actually right, even though the following holds: there is no argument for her view which the person who is right could present to the person who is wrong, which the person who is wrong

¹⁷ For a particularly blatant example of what is, in effect, this kind of reasoning, see Morris (1992: 23-5); the same work reveals an uneasiness about the charge of idealism which looks at least similar to McDowell's (Morris 1992: 17-18, 68).

¹⁸ It is arguable, however, that the later Wittgenstein endorsed the transformation conception, and rejected the common-form assumption of his early philosophy, for just this kind of reason.

is rationally bound to accept. That is to say, one position can be objectively right, and the other objectively wrong, while the two positions are further than the reach of reason apart. To put it in another way again: the truth in a matter of ethics may be beyond the reach of reason from someone who has a fundamentally unethical outlook. In order even to appreciate the reasons as reasons, the person who has an unethical outlook needs to undergo a transformation of the kind provided by a proper upbringing—a transformation whose rationale cannot be appreciated from the unethical point of view. The point of this transformation conception of ethics is to insist on the reality of rightness in ethics: ethical rightness is not a mere construction from the attitudes we anyway happen to have. As such it is an exact parallel to the transformation conception of language.

You will, of course, have recognized the source of the transformation conception of ethics which I have just described.¹⁹ It is ironic that in *Mind and World* McDowell should present a view in the philosophy of language which appears blind to the very possibility which he himself made visible in ethics.²⁰

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¹⁹ See in particular McDowell (1998h)

²⁰ I suspect that it is, in fact, the ethical model itself which makes McDowell blind to the parallel. What he consistently objects to in *Mind and World* is the same kind of thing he has objected to throughout his career: the attempt to ground value in the baldly natural, and the conceptual in the merely nomological. This is the kind of 'sideways-on' perspective which he consistently rejects. What he does not see is the possibility of the conceptual being answerable to the non-conceptual without being grounded in it.

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