

## Locating the Space of Reasons

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### RESUMEN

McDowell da una explicación singular del llamado “espacio de las razones”: defiende que al menos algunos hechos acerca del mundo externo se hallan en el “interior” de ese “espacio”. Sin embargo, este enfoque se enfrenta a una dificultad, al trazar una línea entre lo que se halla dentro del espacio de las razones y lo que se encuentra fuera del espacio de las razones. La dificultad podría mitigarse si los objetos de la percepción pudieran pertenecer *tanto* al espacio de las razones como a lo que McDowell denomina el “ámbito de la ley”.

### ABSTRACT

McDowell offers a distinctive understanding of the so-called “space of reasons”; he maintains that at least some facts about the external world belong “within” this “space”. His approach encounters a certain difficulty, however, in drawing a line between what belongs within the space of reasons and what lies outside of the space of reasons. The difficulty might be alleviated if the objects of perception could belong to *both* the space of reasons and to what McDowell calls the “realm of law”.

Sellars’ evocative notion of a “space of reasons” has been regularly invoked over the last decade or so — most centrally, perhaps, in the work of John McDowell. The basic metaphor is clear enough: the space of reasons is a “space” which “contains” things that can enter into rational or justificatory relations (things that are capable of providing reasons or justifications and/or things for which reasons or justifications can be provided), and it is a “space” whose “contours” are determined by the many intersecting “paths” that justification may take (with different justifications emerging from or converging on the same point, with more or less direct ways to justify one thing by appeal to another, and so on). What is less clear, and more in dispute, is just what entities can stand in justificatory relations and just how justificatory relations are related to other sorts of relations between things in the world. These are questions about what belongs “inside” *versus* “outside” the space of reasons, and questions about how the space of reasons is related to various other “spaces”. I begin by noting McDowell’s distinctive understanding of the space of reasons, and his arguments in favor of this understanding. I then highlight some tensions that arise in his work — in particular, tensions that

result from the contrast he draws between the space of reasons and the realm of law. And I end with a suggestion about how we might alleviate the apparent tensions in McDowell's account by allowing the contents of perception to exist in both the space of reasons and the realm of law.

## I

Sellars introduces the notion of a space of reasons in the context of his discussion of observational reports such as "This is green." Such a report can only express a state of knowledge, he argues, if the speaker is able to justify the report by appeal to some further, and more general, knowledge about the reliability of such reports.

The essential point is that 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 (1956), §36].

Sellars here makes a distinction between two different ways of characterizing an episode or a state — a way that indicates its empirical properties, and a way that indicates its availability for justification. An utterance of the sentence "This is green", for example, may be described as a sequence of sounds resulting from a series of bodily changes or it may be described as an expression of knowledge. The first characterization places it within the empirical world while the second "places" it within the "world" of justification — i.e. the space of reasons.

Brandom's explication of Sellars's notion of a space of reasons extends the relevant characterizations beyond the laudatory category of "knowing".

[Sellars] could as well have said that in characterizing an episode or state as one of *believing*, or *applying concepts*, or *grasping propositional contents* we are not giving an empirical description... but placing it in the logical space of reasons... [Brandom (1997), p. 160].

Brandom's point is that in the very act of employing concepts, we open ourselves to questions of justification and thereby enter into the normative space of reasons. Observational reports such as "This is green" belong to the space of reasons not merely because we regard them as expressions of knowledge but, more fundamentally, because using concepts to make claims (*versus* merely uttering words) depends on having the ability to make appropriate inferences to and from those claims.

[W]hat distinguishes concept-using creatures from others is that we know our way around the *space of reasons*. Grasping or understanding a concept just is being able practically to place it in a network of inferential relations: to know what is evidence for or against its being properly applied to a particular case, and what its proper applicability to a particular case counts as evidence for or against [Brandom (2001), p. 82].

The suggestion — quite accurate, I think — is that our capacity to recognize how one claim may be appropriately used to justify another is phenomenologically like our capacity to recognize appropriate pathways between objects in space.

McDowell extends the notion of a space of reasons still further, to encompass not only intentional states of all sorts but the very contents of those states — the facts that we perceive and come to believe. Perception, according to McDowell, is not an active process of conceptualizing input from a world that stands outside of the space of reasons; rather, it is a receptivity to a world that is already conceptual and already within the space of reasons.

*That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment ... So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are. Thus the idea of conceptually structured operations of receptivity puts us in a position to speak of experience as openness to the layout of reality. Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks [McDowell (1994), p. 26].

Note that, as McDowell understands it, it is not our recognition that we are presented with a fact that gives us a reason to believe. The relation is more direct: in being presented with a fact, we are presented with a reason to believe — whether or not we acknowledge it as such.<sup>1</sup> There are reasons that are not registered as such precisely because there are facts that are not registered as such. Thus McDowell adheres to something of a pre-modern sensibility in which reasons do not inhabit our minds so much as our minds inhabit a world of reasons. We do not *construct* reasons for belief or action, we *discover* them (and we do not discover them *within ourselves*, we discover them *in the world* around us).

Consider how McDowell arrives at this expanded understanding of the space of reasons. He begins *Mind and World* by endorsing Kant's famous statement that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" [Kant (1787), A51/B75]. But he argues for this double-sided claim in a rather unKantian way, and his targets are not eighteenth century philosophers Hume and Leibniz so much as twentieth century philosophers Quine and Davidson. Quine is accused of relying on unconceptualized intuitions (his "tribunal of experience") to legitimate our web of belief, overlooking the

fact that unconceptualized input cannot serve as a *reason* for anything. If experience were the reception of unconceptualized inputs, it would be “blind” and could not function as a rational constraint on our beliefs (“a bare presence cannot be a ground for anything” [McDowell (1994), p. 19]).<sup>2</sup> Davidson, according to McDowell, corrects for Quine’s mistake by retreating to an equally unsatisfactory position whereby beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs, never by the world itself. But if experience were already a state of belief, it could not provide us with independent grounds for belief; our beliefs would be answerable to the demands of coherence but not to an independent world. (“[I]f spontaneity is not subject to rational constraint from the outside, ... then we cannot make it intelligible to ourselves how exercises of spontaneity can represent the world at all” [McDowell (1994), p. 17].) The challenge, then, both for Kant and for McDowell, is to show how the contents of perceptual experience can be both *conceptual* content (which is the only sort of content that can serve as the content of a belief) but also *objective* content, existing independently of our beliefs.

McDowell responds to this challenge by showing how the contents of our most basic perceptions are able to secure a toehold in the network of inferential relations while also ensuring contact with a world outside of belief. Perceptual content is conceptual as long as one is able to retain a memory of what is perceived and able to recognize other things as being of the same type; and that is all that is required in order for the content of my experience to be capable of entering into inferences of various sorts (and, hence, to belong to the space of reasons).

[W]hat ensures that it is a concept — what ensures that thoughts that exploit it have the necessary distance from what would determine them to be true — is that the associated capacity can persist into the future, if only for a short time, and that, having persisted, it can be used also in thoughts about what is by then the past, if only the recent past [McDowell (1994), p. 57].

And perceptual content ensures contact with a world that is independent of perception insofar as it contains a demonstrative *this*, whose content is precisely that object to which perception is receptive. Without such receptivity, there would be no demonstrative content, and without demonstrative content, there would be no perception. The objectivity of its content is, as it were, built into the very nature of perception.

To say that an experience is not blind is to say that it is intelligible to its subject as purporting to be awareness of a feature of objective reality: a seeming glimpse of the world. [...] that can be so only against the background of an understanding of how perception and reality are related, something sufficient to sustain the idea that the world reveals itself to a perceiving subject in different

regions and aspects, in a way that depends on the subject's movement through the world [McDowell (1994), p. 56].

Various objections have been raised against McDowell's account of perceptual content. Many commentators have argued that demonstrative contents are simply too thin to count as conceptual in any interesting sense, and many have worried that McDowell's account fails to make room for a content that is shared by perception and misperception alike. (It is, of course, incumbent on such critics to demonstrate that these drawbacks are more serious than the drawbacks of the two alternatives McDowell is maneuvering between, or to show that there is still another alternative to be had.) If we follow McDowell's lead, however, we are returned to a world of reasons that are already "out there" to be discovered. We simply open our "eyes" to find conceptualized contents in the world around us, and those conceptualized contents give us reason to believe what we do. In seeing a flame, for example, we see something outside of ourselves that justifies our belief in the presence of a flame; the flame appears as something independent of us and its appearing — which is equally our perceiving — provides a reason (not just a cause) for our belief.<sup>3</sup> By embracing this picture of things, we regain something of the "innocence" of the ancients, freed from the need to engage in the sort of "constructive" philosophy that (fruitlessly) aims to refute the skeptic. (The project of restoring such "innocence" by dissolving the need to respond to the skeptic is a project in which McDowell is more closely aligned with Wittgenstein than with Kant — though he differs from both in seeking to restore an ancient innocence about values as well.)

## II

If the contents of perception are independent facts in the world, and if these facts already have a conceptual structure such that they are able to place rational constraints on belief, then nothing that is perceivable will fall "outside" the space of reasons. But, at least on the face of it, the facts that we perceive also belong to the realm of natural law, and McDowell, like Sellars, wants to draw a sharp distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law.

[W]e can say that the way our lives are shaped by reason is natural, even while we deny that the structure of the space of reasons can be integrated into the layout of the realm of law [McDowell (1994), pp. 88-9].

Sellars, it will be recalled, distinguished between empirical characterizations of episodes or states and normative characterizations of those same episodes or states; the very same state can be characterized in two different

ways — one way indicating its physical or law-like relations to various other states, the other indicating its rational or justificatory relations to other states. (Sellars' position is like Davidson's anomalous monism in this respect.) McDowell, though, rejects the claim that the conceptual network of reasons and the conceptual network of laws share the same subject matter. (He agrees with Davidson about the anomalousness of the mental, but he disagrees with Davidson's monism.) His objection seems to be the following: since the conceptual network of reasons cannot be reduced to the conceptual network of laws (oughts cannot be reduced to is's), and since the contents of perception cannot provide reasons for belief unless they are already conceptualized in such a way as to belong within the space of reasons (McDowell's point against Davidson, as described above), the contents of perception cannot be the same facts as those described by causal laws.<sup>4</sup> The former are (at least partially) constituted by their rational relations to our actual or potential beliefs, while the latter are not.

But how, then, are we to think of the relation between facts in the space of reasons and facts in the realm of law? McDowell insists that they are both parts of nature, broadly construed. He insists that we need not fall into "the supernaturalism of rampant Platonism" (or the unintelligibility of Kant's things-in-themselves) as long as we are willing to at least partially "re-enchant" nature, recognizing the irreducible reality of facts that are constituted by their normative relations alongside facts that are not so constituted. A "link" between the two sorts of fact is to be found, says McDowell, in the process through which certain modes of teaching or upbringing (ways described by Aristotle, for example) will produce a "second nature" — that is, a rational nature. In this way, normativity is said to have a causal "foothold" in the realm of law, but the resulting normative facts cannot be derived from, or reconstructed from, the practices that create them.

Many have objected to a lack of explanation at this point, unhappy with the minimal accounting that McDowell provides [Blackburn (2001), Brandom (1995), Larmore (2002)]. And I share the desire for a fuller explanation of just how the space of reasons emerges from the space of natural law — a topic that has puzzled McDowell's sympathizers and critics alike. The worry I want to pursue here, however, concerns the "location" of the contents of our perceptions. For the content of many of our perceptions seems to require a place within *both* the space of reasons *and* within the realm of law. When I perceive that a flame is growing, the fact that a flame is growing is a constitutive part of my perception such that it must also belong within the space of reasons. But the fact that a flame is growing is also a part of the realm of law, standing in lawful relations to facts concerning heat, oxygen, and so on. Indeed, it is hard to see how our perceptions of flames could justify our belief in various laws concerning flames, heat, oxygen, and so on unless the subject matter of our perceptions were also the subject matter of those laws.

At times, it seems that the phrase “space of reasons” is being used in two different ways — one way (more prominent in early sections of *Mind and World*) according to which everything that is perceivable belongs, necessarily, within the space of reasons; another way (more prominent later on) according to which only the activities of rational and ethical beings — being which are capable of spontaneity as well as receptivity — belong within the space of reasons.<sup>5</sup> Noting the two different uses, Michael Friedman [Friedman (1996)] accuses McDowell of conflating Kant’s account of the operations of the understanding (which infuse our perceptions, and our world, with conceptual content) with Kant’s account of the operations of autonomous reason (which determine how things ought to be, and free us from the constraints of causal law). On the one hand, the understanding (which synthesizes intuitions in accordance with rules) gives causal laws a necessary place within the space of reasons, for it is the causal laws that ensure objectivity. On the other hand, the spontaneity of moral action creates a realm of reason that cannot be reconciled with the necessity of causal laws. In trying to keep these two “worlds” apart while placing them both within nature, Friedman thinks that McDowell eventually falls into just the sort of post-Kantian idealism that he seeks to avoid — an idealism whereby the realm of law and the realm of morality are both created through the operations of the understanding. And this, of course, is an outcome that McDowell cannot accept. Whatever else he is, he is a realist; we are not responsible for creating an objective world but are, instead, responsive to it.

There are deep reasons for McDowell’s (and Kant’s) alignment of conceptual capacities and ethical capacities, however — reasons that McDowell articulates most clearly, perhaps, in his paper entitled “Two Sorts of Naturalism.” [McDowell (1998b)] There he maintains that the ability to apply concepts presupposes an ability to *evaluate* those applications, recognizing the possibility of error and standing willing to revise judgments as necessary; this, indeed, is what makes the making of judgments a normative enterprise. Furthermore, in acquiring the ability to evaluate judgments, one simultaneously acquires the ability to evaluate *actions*.

We cannot make sense of a creature’s acquiring reason unless it has genuinely alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play. We cannot intelligibly restrict the exercise of conceptual powers to merely theoretical thinking [...] we need to make room not only for conceptual states that aim to represent how the world anyway is, but also for conceptual states that issue in interventions directed towards making the world conform to their content. [...] This is to represent freedom of action as inextricably connected with a freedom that is essential to conceptual thought. [...] We cannot allow ourselves to suppose that God, say, might confer reason on wolves, but stop short of his giving them the materials to step back and frame the question “Why should I do this?” [McDowell (1998b), pp. 170-1].

I quote this passage at length in order to show how the possibility of reflection on one's beliefs and actions underwrites a kind of freedom for both understanding and morality. McDowell is not conflating Kant's account of the understanding and his account of morality so much as highlighting their common reliance on the free-play of reflection.

If this is right, then it is our capacity for reflection that enables us to move beyond informed *responses to* the world (the sort of responses that other animals make as well) to the making of *judgments about* the world and judgments about ourselves. "Second nature" is not just ethical nature, it is reflective nature, and reflective nature is what enables us to recognize both the independence of the world we perceive and its capacity to provide us with reasons for our beliefs and actions.

[W]e arrive at the notion of having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature [McDowell (1994), p. 84].

By McDowell's own lights, this independent reason-giving world includes both the fact that a flame is growing and the fact that hurting someone is wrong — both of which are *normative* in the sense that both warrant the acquisition of some beliefs rather than others, and the performance of some actions rather than others.

The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of *this tract of* the space of reasons [McDowell (1994), p. 82 (my italics)].

Ethical facts, then, are just one part of the space of reasons; physical facts are another.

My worry, then, is not that of Friedman, who fears that too much is being assimilated within the space of reasons. I worry, rather, that the sharp divide between the realm of law and the space of reasons begins to break down once we realize that certain facts — the facts that form the contents of many ordinary perceptions — must belong in both domains.

### III

I have been urging that, on McDowell's view, everything that we can perceive must exist within the space of reasons — because everything that we can perceive can serve as a reason for our beliefs and actions. But that does not mean that everything that we perceive must stand in rational relations to



each other. We can see that a flame is growing and we can see that water is flowing (and both of these facts place rational constraints on what we believe), but there need not be any rational relation between the two. To maintain that *every* relation between things is (even potentially) a reason-giving relation would amount to the total (*versus* partial) enchantment of nature — a view of the world that pervades medieval thought, following in the wake of Aristotle's identification of reasons and causes. Although McDowell is sympathetic to Aristotle on a number of counts, he affirms that:

[i]t is a good teaching of modernity that the realm of law is as such devoid of meaning; its constituent elements are not linked to one another by the relations that constitute the space of reasons [McDowell (1994), p. 97].

But recognizing the existence of non-rational, lawful relations between the facts we perceive does not require us to exclude any particular fact from the space of reasons *if* facts that stand in lawful relations to one another can *also* stand in rational relations to our beliefs and actions. Put another way, instead of supposing that there is a realm of law, containing one kind of thing, that exists alongside a space of reasons, containing another kind of thing, we should recognize that the very same facts can exist both within the space of reasons (on account of their rational relations to our beliefs and actions) and within the realm of law (on account of their lawful relations to each other).

On the face of it, this might seem like an endorsement of Davidson's anomalous monism — a view that allows a physical state to stand in lawful relations to other physical states and to stand in irreducibly rational relations to other physical states. McDowell rightly points out, though, that rational relations are constitutive of the very identity of their *relata*, so a state that is constituted by rational relations cannot be fully determined by its lawful relations (as Davidson assumes) — since the two sorts of relations are incommensurable. What I am recommending is something different, however. Without denying that the identity of a fact or event is constituted by its relations to other things, and without denying that rational, or normative, relations are incommensurable with physical, or lawful relations, I do want to deny that the identity of a thing can be constituted by *only one* sort of relation. Consider a more or less obvious case: the case of blushing. Blushing does not count as blushing unless it is lawfully related to the flow of blood through the skin *and* rationally related to relevant judgments about others' perceptions of oneself. Similarly, wincing will not count as wincing unless it stands in lawful relations to the movements of facial muscles *and* in normative relations to judgments about an error, an insult, or a pain, for example. Any attempt to separate a blush or a wince into the lawful part and the rational part seems misguided. There are not two separate states, in two separate realms here;

there is, rather, a type of entity that must secure its identity through ties of two different sorts.

I suggest that we take this same approach to the contents of perception to accommodate much of what seems right about McDowell's position. The perception of a growing flame, for example, will only count as the perception of a growing flame if there are *both* lawful relations connecting the contents of this perception to the contents of certain other perceptions concerning heat, oxygen, and so on *and* rational relations connecting the contents of this perception to the contents of a belief about a growing flame. I do not need to know that there is a lawful relation between the growing flame and the increasing heat in order to perceive that there is a growing flame; nor do I need to know that there is a rational relation between the growing flame and my belief that there is a growing flame in order to perceive the growing flame. But both sorts of relation must indeed hold in order for the content of my perception to be that there is a growing flame.

By insisting that the contents of perception — the fact that the flame is growing — are conceptual contents, McDowell has placed objective facts within the space of reasons.

[T]he deliverances of our receptivity ... can innocently be taken to belong together with our world-views in the space of reasons, since they are already in the space of concepts [McDowell (1994), p. 141].

But growing flames and increasing heat are the sorts of things that exist in the realm of law as well — with the result that the identity of perceivable facts must be constituted by both normative relations and lawful relations. Nothing will count as the fact that a flame is growing unless it can justify various beliefs and actions *and* unless it can enter into lawful relations with facts about heat, light, oxygen, and so on. Future beliefs and theories or future developments in science may transform the relevant rational relations or the relevant lawful relations, respectively, but that doesn't mean that rational relations and lawful relations are not *both* constitutive of the growing flame as such.

The possibility of an ontology that is doubly-constituted in this way is, in any case, an inviting alternative for those of us who have welcomed McDowell's extended understanding of the space of reasons, and who agree about the irreducible character of justification, yet find ourselves unable to find rest in the absence of a fuller account of just how the realm of law and the space of reasons fit together.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In replying to Barry Stroud (2002), for example, McDowell writes “I think we need an attitude of perception as something in which there is no attitude of acceptance or endorsement at all, but only, as I put it, an invitation to adopt such an attitude, which, in the best of cases, consists in a fact’s making itself manifest to one” [McDowell (2002a), p. 278].

<sup>2</sup> Not everyone agree with this argument, of course. It was criticized by Jerry Fodor (1995) in his early review of *Mind and World* and it has been criticized more recently, at greater length, by Richard Heck (2000).

<sup>3</sup> There is no need to first ascertain the reliability of such appearances. McDowell (2002a) defends this position against what he sees as Brandom’s misleading appropriation (or, perhaps, Sellarsation) of his ideas.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell’s rejection of Davidson’s ontological claim — i.e. his monism — is discussed most explicitly in McDowell (1998a), esp. pp. 339-40; more briefly in McDowell (1994), pp. 74-6.

<sup>5</sup> Animals are said to exist in an environment, not in a world (which is also a space of reasons), while we, as rational animals, exist in both. But this suggests that what we come to know through perception — e.g. that this flame is growing — is something different than what animals come to know through perception. McDowell elaborates on his view of animal knowledge in McDowell (2002b).

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