

## Non-Articulable Content and the Realm of Reasons

Stella González Arnal

### RESUMEN

En este artículo, exploro el concepto de experiencia en la obra de John McDowell y muestro cómo no puede acomodar la dimensión tácita (que no puede ser articulada) que está presente en nuestra aprehensión del mundo como agentes. Aunque este elemento tácito está fuera de nuestra atención focal, está regulado normativamente. Para McDowell, éste no contaría como conceptual y no pertenecería al ámbito de la razón. Yo argumento que este elemento está regulado normativamente y pertenece al ámbito de la razón.

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore John McDowell's concept of experience and show how it cannot accommodate a tacit dimension, which is present in our apprehension of the world as agents, and which cannot be articulated. Although this tacit dimension remains out of our focal awareness, it is nevertheless normatively constrained. Within McDowell's theory, this would not count as conceptual and would not belong to the realm of reasons. *Pace* McDowell, I argue that, as it is normatively constrained, it belongs to the realm of reasons.

### I

John McDowell argues for the conceptual character of experience and considers that in experience, both receptivity and spontaneity are in operation. He preserves a traditional element within the realm of experience: he claims that it is, in a sense, passive, which allows us to have a "glimpse" of the world, and affords us the security that *how things are* exerts a control on our thinking. At the same time, as our spontaneity is in action, experience is also the product of an active engagement with the world. He says that "in experience, one finds oneself saddled with content" [(1994), p. 10], but we are also allowed enough freedom to decide whether or not to take the deliverances of experience as they appear to us.

In the conception that I am recommending, the need for external constraint is met by the fact that experiences are receptivity in operation. But that does not disqualify experiences from playing a role in justification, as the counterpart thought in the Myth of the Given does, because the claim is that experiences

themselves are already equipped with conceptual content. This joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity allows us to say that in experience one can take in how things are [(1994), p. 25].

An important characteristic of experience is that “[i]n experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*. That is the sort of thing one can also, for instance, judge” [(1994), p. 9]. In this view, there is a close link between experiences as conceptual and their linguistic articulation (it has often been said that for McDowell experiences are propositionally contentful)<sup>1</sup>. But it can be claimed that our conceptual apparatus is not adequate to capture the richness of our experiences and that there are aspects of it that escape conceptualisation. McDowell argues against the idea that there is a content of experience that is unmediated by our conceptual capacities that is able to ground our judgements. According to him, experiences can be fully apprehended by our conceptual abilities and, furthermore, if experiences were non-conceptual they would not be able to enter into justificatory, rational relations. We would not be justified, but only “exculpated to believe”. The relationship between our experiences and our judgements is not purely causal, but normative.

According to McDowell, it is by learning a language that we become aware of the structure of the space of reasons, that we can see the relation between concepts and that we become aware of asking for reasons and of giving reasons. By learning a language we acquire a second nature, we become rational. Human rationality is therefore very closely linked with the fact that we are linguistic beings.

Can we think of human subjects as embodied agents acting in the world within this schema? In our “relation” to the world, in our living in the world, we apprehend aspects of it that do not seem to be the sort of things that are conceptual. First, because we are not focally aware of them, and second, because they cannot be linguistically articulated. I will argue that these unarticulable aspects play a central role in our exchanges with the world and yet are normatively constrained. It is important to notice that they should not be considered to be “building blocks” that are conceptualised at a later cognitive stage, but rather, it is their non-articulable, non-focally perceived character that makes them so central in our engagement with the world.

The following quotation, which is an example offered by Michael Polanyi, illustrates the type of content to which I am referring:

When we use a hammer to drive in a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, *but in a different way*. We *watch* the effect of our strokes on the nail and try to wield the hammer so as to hit the nail most effectively. When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. Yet in a sense, we are certainly alert to the feelings in our

palm and the fingers that hold the hammer. They guide us in handling it effectively, and the degree of attention that we give to the nail is given to the same extent but in a different way to these feelings. The difference may be stated by saying that the latter are not, like the nail, objects of our attention, but instruments of it. They are not watched in themselves; we watch something else while keeping intensely aware of them. I have a *subsidiary awareness* of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my *focal awareness* of my driving the nail [(1998), p. 55].

In the next section I will show why this content cannot be linguistically articulated and cannot appear in our focal awareness. I will also explain why, despite this, it is normatively constrained.

## II

The above example shows that there are different types of awareness (subsidiary and focal), which function simultaneously in our engagement with the world, but cannot be attended to at the same time. If we want to hit the nail we have to be focally aware of it, but also, subsidiarily aware of the hammer. Our focal attention allows us to direct our efforts towards the realisation of the task in hand, by giving us a general feeling for the situation, but this entails that the subsidiary awareness, an awareness of the particulars, remains in the background. If we switch our attention from one to the other, if we become self-conscious of particular movements within a performance, then we lose sight of the whole, which frequently means that we have to stop our performance, or that it is disrupted by going wrong. Therefore, in order to be able to act, those elements of which we are subsidiarily aware have to remain in the background. Furthermore, even if it were possible to direct our focal attention to them, by doing so we would not be able to capture why they are relevant to the performance. The particulars are not significant on their own, they lose their meaning when they are not observed within the background of the whole performance.<sup>2</sup> There are aspects of our embodied relation with the world, which remain tacitly known, upon which we cannot reflect, that are as important in guiding our actions as these other aspects upon which we can reflect and which can be made linguistically explicit.

The action of going from what we are subsidiarily aware of to what is in our focal attention is an *act of integration*, which itself remains tacit. It is not a process which can be reflected upon, but it is not passive either.<sup>3</sup> It has been argued that making integrations is a similar process to making inferences, but one that cannot be characterized as such.<sup>4</sup> Integration has been characterized as an inference that is made “within the body”, because linking the focal target and the subsidiary clues is not simply a mental exercise, but

rather, a process in which the whole person is involved [Gelwick (1977), p. 64]. In order to understand the difference between making inferences and integrations, it is useful to review Polanyi's concept of knowledge as indwelling. Becoming able to grasp new patterns, to understand new practices, to make new integrations, is a process of acquiring skills. Once we have acquired them, they become second nature. Polanyi describes this process of acquiring a second nature as dwelling in the knowledge, and compares it with the way in which, by using tools, we perceive the world through them as if they were an extension of our body. By using them we indwell in them, we accept them existentially (which does not imply that we have done so mechanically).

In the same way in which we assimilate actual tools existentially, we also assimilate intellectual tools, such as languages, scientific theories, or even moral teachings. We do so by participating in social practices, first without really being able to understand them, but later, being able to participate fully. It is then that we see the world as mediated by them, as if they were part of our perceptual apparatus. Once we have mastered a language then we have committed ourselves to mediating our relations with the world and others by it, and we have been intellectually shaped by it. There is a clear parallel with the work of McDowell here. Polanyi stresses the embodied character of our experiential relation with the world. As Jerry Gill points out, in accordance with Polanyi, we can see how "the body is the bridge or the axis that makes knowledge possible, even conceptual knowledge such as language" [(2000), p. 46].

There are several reasons why this tacit dimension cannot be articulated. First, Polanyi points out that within perception, we are only subsidiarily aware of our bodies. Perceived objects always include information about their relation to our bodies that remains unnoticed by us [(1966), pp. 13-4], but we do have knowledge of our bodies (mainly) only in relation to other things. Therefore, in all instances of knowledge, there is always an element that remains tacit, which is captured in our focal awareness of what is known, but which remains unarticulated. What remains tacit is the way in which *our embodiment influences our relationship with the world*, and in which it mediates all our knowledge. Polanyi expresses this relationship in the following way:

The way the body participates in the act of perception can be generalized further to include the bodily roots of all knowledge and thought. Our body is the only assembly of things known almost exclusively by relying on our awareness of them for attending to something else. Parts of our body serve as tools for observing objects outside and for manipulating them. Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts. Such is the exceptional position of our body in the universe [(1969), pp. 147-8].

To say that we have tacit knowledge of the impacts made by the world on our body could be taken to mean that we are passive recipients of it, but we should not forget that we are able to ascertain what aspects of our experience (although tacit) are relevant in guiding our interventions with the world. Some aspects of the world become salient to us when we engage with the world, they are significant, even if we cannot either articulate them or be focally aware of them. This type of content is also part of our integrations, so we are able to relate it to explicit aspects of our experience.

The way in which we are induced into epistemic practices, their social aspect, adds a further reason as to why there is a non-articulable content in our experiences. We are induced in practices, we learn, by imitation, by copying the ways of those who have already mastered the practice. We are able to tacitly pick up rules in the behaviour of our masters that are not reducible to a knowing-that form and that more often than not also remain tacit to them. They show the rules in their practices but do not “tell” them. Even when these rules are made explicit, their use in guiding our performance is limited. For instance, a theory of how to ride a bike, is only of limited use to a cyclist who wants to improve his performance, because *the elements that act as clues in his subsidiary awareness when he is riding a bicycle and the theory are diverse*. These elements are of a different kind. They are partly given by his embodied nature and therefore, they have to be existentially apprehended. The type of content that remains in our subsidiary awareness is useful because it remains there, unarticulated but meaningful in relation to the whole. Furthermore, there is an interpretative element in making integrations that cannot be captured by making an analysis of the different elements that are subsidiarily known. In making a destructive analysis of the elements present in the from-to relationship, we cannot capture either the relationship itself, or the dynamic elements present in our integrations.

This is the case not only in examples of “practical” knowledge such as riding a bike, or hammering, but also in the case of “intellectual” types of knowledge such as mathematics. Polanyi insists that we can only learn mathematical theory by practicing, by learning to recognize that a particular puzzle is just an instance of a more general type. Mathematicians have to undergo a certain training allowing them to develop skills that enable them to see things that would not be meaningful to a less trained eye. They are able to make an integration of knowledge that remains tacit and a conclusion that becomes explicit. For instance, they become able to see aspects of a new problem that make it similar to one that they already know how to solve.

In summary: what acts as clues in our subsidiary awareness must be *existentially* apprehended. The clues are different from the “objective” description offered in the form of rules. They are meaningful within a context, relationally, and become unusable if we apply the method of analysis to them. We cannot become aware of the many ways in which our embodied nature

mediates our engagement with the world, and finally, the way in which we are socially induced into practices, for which explicit rules cannot be given, supports the idea that we make sense “existentially” of the practices first, before we can even reflect upon them. There is always an element of our knowledge that cannot be told.

We experience our embodied engagement with the world in ways that cannot be completely captured in a linguistic form. The element of our experience that is non-articulable allows us to act upon the world; it guides our performances and is not merely passively received. Some aspects of the world are perceived as salient, and are significant and relevant for our acting. I have asserted that we become able to perceive those aspects as salient as a product of our social training. It is within social practices that such content is perceived as relevant and appropriate. This tacit aspect of our experiences is normatively constrained. Therefore, I think it is meaningful to ask whether or not we can consider it as belonging to the realm of reasons. Questions arise regarding its status as it is not clear if this sort of content can enter into rational, justificatory relations. Furthermore, in McDowell’s view, the conceptual, that which belongs to the realm of reasons, can be reflected upon,<sup>5</sup> but as we have seen, we can only actively reflect upon that which is in our focal awareness.

Charles Taylor agrees that there are aspects of our engagement with the world that become meaningful to us as actors, which are neither conceptual nor are within our focal awareness. He says “[e]ven when I’m not thinking of them these things have those relevances for me; I know my way about among them” [(2002), p. 111]. And he also underlines its ambiguous status when he claims: “[t]his is non-conceptual; or put another way, language isn’t playing any direct role. [...] Ordinary coping isn’t conceptual. But at the same time, it can’t be understood in inanimate-causal terms” [(2002), p. 111].

### III

McDowell makes a very close link between reason and language. He says that it is by learning a language that human beings become aware of the rational relations between concepts and become able to give and ask for reasons, and consequently enter the realm of reason. Furthermore, he says, “[i]n the reflective tradition we belong to, there is a time-honoured connection between reason and discourse. We can trace it back at least as far as Plato: if we try to translate ‘reason’ and ‘discourse’ into Plato’s Greek, we can find only one word, *logos*, for both” [(1994), p. 165]. He argues against the idea that non-conceptual content can enter rational relations with conceptual content and that it can offer us reasons for actions or beliefs. He thinks that theories that support non-conceptual content (such as Christopher Peacocke’s) are unattractive because they have to “sever the tie between reasons for which a

subject thinks as she does and reasons she can give for thinking that way. Reasons the subject can give, in so far as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts" [(1994), p. 165].

Commenting on the work of Peacocke, McDowell discusses the example of a cyclist who adjusts his bodily movements to keep his balance when taking a curve. We can see the appropriateness of his actions because this is what he has to do to keep his balance, to reach a goal. There is thus a rationality to it; but this does not imply that these are his reasons for his actions. "The connection between a movement and the goal is the sort of thing that *could* be a reason for making the movement, but a skilled cyclist makes such movements without needing reasons for doing so. Why would it not be similar with experience and judgement, if experiences had the non-conceptual content that Peacocke says they have?" [(1994), p. 163]. If we take the example of the cyclist offered by McDowell, we feel inclined to accept that he does not act for reasons, and so it seems to follow that non-conceptual experiences cannot be reasons for beliefs.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, there is a type of content in experience that is neither fully conceptual nor non-conceptual. It is not the type of content that could be articulated, but it is socially acquired and normatively constrained. For instance, an experienced baker is preparing dough in order to bake some bread. He measures the flour and the water, begins to work on the dough and then adds some more water until the consistency of the dough "feels right". He cannot tell you beforehand how much water, if any, he will have to add, and he is not able to explain, either, why the dough is just right now and not earlier. He does it, as the cyclist did, because it felt right. He is able to *assess* when the dough is ready, although he is not able to give a precise description of why. Can we claim that his apprehension of the situation, how he experiences it, something which he could not articulate, is his reason for his actions, and not merely the reason why he acts in that way?

McDowell offers the following example: "suppose one asks an ordinary subject why she holds some observational belief, say that an object within her field of view is square. An unsurprising reply might be 'Because it looks that way.' That is easily recognized as giving a reason for holding a belief. Just because she gives expression to it in discourse, there is no problem about the reason's being a reason for which..., and not just part of the reason why..." [(1994), p. 165]. In his assessment of what counts as a reason for such a belief McDowell allows that the level of articulation can be minimal; he says that "[r]easons that the subject can give, in so far as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts. I do not mean to suggest any special degree of articulateness" [(1994), p. 165].

If the baker, in the previous example, claims that he knows that the dough is ready because "it feels right", could we take this to be sufficiently articulated to count as giving a reason for action or for holding a belief? Even

if this were the case, we should not forget that, according to McDowell, if “the reason is articulable (even if only in the form ‘it looks like that’) *it must be no less conceptual than what it is a reason for*” [(1994), p. 166, italics mine]. But there are aspects of the baker’s engagement with the world in his bread making, which cannot be considered to be “conceptual” as they are not in his focal awareness and they cannot be articulated linguistically. Even if they allow him to determine when the dough is ready, they cannot appear in judgements.

Furthermore, let us imagine that when the baker is questioned, he merely shrugs his shoulders. He is able to assess when enough water has been added to the dough and when he has to stop kneading. But he is unable to articulate, even minimally, his reasons for his actions. The baker has undergone a certain training, which has made him able to perceive certain aspects of his environment as *meaningful* and *relevant* for his actions, in a way that an untrained person would not. He can correct his “mistakes”. He also knows what would count as an acceptable loaf of bread *within a particular context*. The baker shows how he has captured the normativity of this practice. Still, even if he has reasons for his actions he cannot articulate them, he cannot give them (perhaps because they cannot be given).

McDowell points out that he does not conflate having reasons with actually giving them, rather “the proposed connection is between having reasons and an *ability* to give them, which of course need not be exercised whenever a subject has reasons” [(2001), p. 183].<sup>6</sup> The baker, although unable to articulate linguistically his reasons for acting in the above example, does have the ability to give and ask for reasons in other contexts: he has entered the realm of reasons. In this case, he cannot give reasons for his actions, but he can show in his performance that he has reasons for his actions, even if they cannot be articulated linguistically. I will claim that the way in which he engages with the world gives him reasons for his actions, and also gives him reasons to form beliefs.

Let us return to the example of the cyclist. McDowell claims that even if the connection between a movement and the goal is the sort of thing that could be a reason for making a movement, skilled cyclists make those movements without needing reasons for doing so. Cyclists have reasons why they make certain adjustments while riding, but not reasons for doing them. But cycling is an activity that requires being initiated into certain practices, just as making bread is. A cyclist has to apprehend his environment and make the appropriate adjustments in his bodily movements or behaviour if he wants to ride successfully and appropriately. And this cannot be understood as a mere mechanical response to the environment. For instance, he must learn how a bike “responds” when ridden on different surfaces, as one does not keep one’s balance in the same way when riding on ice as riding on a mountain track full of loose stones. He has to respond appropriately to the changes on the road. He also has to learn how to behave when cycling in a city, which



is different from riding on tracks, etc. There is a whole background that has to be apprehended and “negotiated” by the cyclist when riding a bike, even if he is not paying attention to it, and this infuses his whole performance. As in the previous example, there is a normativity that the cyclist has to apprehend in order to engage in this practice, and, again, he might be unable to articulate how he is apprehending the relevant features and negotiating his behaviour accordingly.

The status of this content appears to be ambiguous as on the one hand it is normatively constrained as conceptual content is, and therefore should be “located” in the realm of reasons; but on the other hand, it is not linguistically articulated by the agent (in many cases it is not even articulable), which seems to exclude it from being conceptual, and therefore from the realm of reasons. If we take this content to be non-conceptual we are not acknowledging that it is normatively constrained. Thus, I would suggest calling it “quasi-conceptual” and accepting it within the realm of reasons. Another alternative could be to accept that there is a conceptual content which can be attributed to agents who have entered the realm of reasons, even when they cannot articulate this content linguistically.

#### IV

In previous sections I showed how there is a tacit dimension in our apprehension of the world that could not be articulated, and remained out of our focal awareness. I claim that this content entered into relations of integration with content that could be made explicit and of which we were focally aware. We become able to make integrations as the product of social training, through which we acquire a second nature. I believe that this tacit content is normatively constrained and is, in combination with explicit content, the reason why we form beliefs. This tacit content belongs to the realm of reasons, even if it cannot be articulated linguistically.

*Department of Humanities  
University of Hull  
HU6 7RX, Hull, United Kingdom  
E-mail: S.Gonzalez-Arnal@hull.ac.uk*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to R. Brandom, “experience for him is always propositionally contentful: experience *that* things are thus and so” [(1998), p. 369]. R. Schantz also claims that “experiences, according to McDowell, are through and through conceptu-

ally informed, and even always propositionally contentful, and yet prejudgemental and nondoxastic" [(2001), p. 173]. Finally, although Collins asserts that McDowell makes a link between the conceptual and the propositional character of human experience, he also accepts that "McDowell himself does not say that perception involves judgment and perhaps it may go beyond his view to assert that perception, *per se*, accepts propositional expression, though [it] is hard to separate that idea from the claim that we experience facts. In any case, I think there are overwhelming reasons for thinking that perception is not intrinsically propositional" [(1998), p. 379].

<sup>2</sup> This is exemplified, for instance, in the recognition of a physiognomy: we are aware of the features of a physiognomy only in terms of the physiognomy we are attending: Polanyi agrees with Gestalt psychology in that "the particulars of a pattern or a tune must be apprehended jointly, for if you observe the particulars separately they form no pattern or tune" [(1998), pp. 56-7].

<sup>3</sup> W. T. Scott remarks on this active engagement: "The terms 'integration' and 'construction' should not be taken to refer to acts of imposing structure on unformed data, or of a mechanical summation of parts, but rather to mean that the perceiver is active in forming a perception of what it is that he sees or hears, while attending to the object from its particulars" [(1971), p. 24]. Regarding this point, Polanyi, who agrees with Gestalt psychologists on the general outlook of their theory, distances himself from them because they do not stress enough that perception requires an intentional effort. He also believes that subjects are able to revise that which is presented to them through their senses, underlying the active nature of perception. "Gestalt psychologists have tended to collect preferentially examples of the type in which perception goes on without any deliberate effort on the part of the perceiver and it is not even corrigible by his subsequent reconsideration of the result. Optical illusions are then classed with true perceptions, both being described as the equilibration of simultaneous stimuli to a comprehensive whole. Such an interpretation leaves no place for any intentional effort which prompts our perception to explore and assess in the quest of knowledge the clues offered to our senses. I believe this is a mistake" [(1998), pp. 97-8].

<sup>4</sup> See Gill (2000) in particular to understand the scope of the distinction. Inferences are central to explicit knowledge and comprise knowledge that can be identified and articulated, and that is a reversible process; while integration is tacit knowledge that cannot be articulated, and cannot be reversed.

<sup>5</sup> McDowell says, for instance: "the faculty of spontaneity carries with it a standing obligation to reflect on the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that, at any time, one takes to govern the active business of adjusting one's world-view in response to experience" [(1994), p. 41]. "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. When I say that the content of experience is conceptual, that is what I mean by 'conceptual'" [(1994), p. 47].

<sup>6</sup> McDowell says that "when the ability is exercised in an explicit appeal to experience, the exercise need not take the form of describing the way something, for instance, looks; so it is besides the point for Schantz to insist, rightly enough, that a subject who has reasons to believe an animal is a crocodile need not be able to describe the way the animal appears to her. This is accommodated by the point [...] that there are conceptual capacities that are expressible only with the aid of demonstratives" [(2001), p. 183].

REFERENCES

- BRANDOM, R. (1998), "Perception and Rational Constraint", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LVIII, pp. 369-74.
- COLLINS, A. (1998), "Beastly Experience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LVIII, pp. 375-80.
- GELWICK, R. (1977), *The Way of Discovery*, NY, Oxford University Press.
- GILL, J.H. (2000), *The Tacit Mode. Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- MCDOWELL, J. (1994), *Mind and World*, London, Harvard University Press.
- (2001), "Comment on Richard Schantz, 'The Given Regained'", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LXII, pp. 181-4.
- SCHANTZ, R. (2001), "The Given Regained. Reflections on the Sensuous Content of Experience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LXII, pp. 167-80.
- SCOTT, W. (1971), "Tacit Knowing and the Concept of Mind", *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 21, pp. 22-35.
- TAYLOR, C. (2002), "Foundationalism and the Inner-Outer Distinction", in Smith, N.H. (ed.) *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*, London, Routledge, pp. 106-19.
- POLANYI, M. (1966), *The Tacit Dimension*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- (1969), *Knowing and Being*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- (1998), *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London, Routledge.