

Review of John McDowell's *Mind, Value, and Reality*, pp. ix + 400 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), £24. 95, and *Meaning Knowledge, and Reality*, pp. ix + 462 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), £24. 95

In a characteristic passage John McDowell says:

[T]his is one of those set-ups that are familiar in philosophy, in which a supposedly exhaustive choice confers a spurious plausibility on a philosophical position. The apparent plausibility is not intrinsic to the position, but reflects an assumed framework; when one looks at the position on its own, the plausibility crumbles away ... In such a situation, the thing to do is to query the assumption that seems to force the choice.

Here he is discussing knowledge, but the passage could stand at the head of almost any of the immensely influential essays collected in these two volumes. Reading them together one is struck by how much they have in common, despite the breadth of issues that they address, ranging from ethics to metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, mind and language. Time and again McDowell aims to dissolve a philosophical problem by showing that it rests on a false assumption. Not that he thinks the assumption will be easily dislodged; as he says in another context:

I am not recommending a brusque dismissal. On the contrary, I think that the roots of the attitude lie deep, and that a satisfying exorcism would have to start with a sympathetic appreciation.

What form do McDowell's exorcisms take? They vary of course to suit the nature of the problem addressed. But there is a typical McDowellian move which consists of the rejection of an approach that is so pervasive in contemporary philosophical thinking as to seem inescapable. This approach involves treating such phenomena as perception, knowledge, memory, and the content of thought as composite: as consisting of different factors that can obtain independently. And part of the reason why this approach can seem so inescapable is that it starts with reflections that are no more than common sense.

Consider perception. What is required for an individual, let us call her Clarissa, to see a particular object, for instance the Eiffel Tower? Clearly she must have a particular subjective experience. But that is not enough, for Clarissa could be deluded: a deceiving genius could make her seem to see the Eiffel Tower without setting foot in France. So in addition to having the experience as of seeing the Eiffel Tower, there must be an external factor, that of having the experience appropriately caused by the Eiffel Tower itself.

Likewise, knowledge requires the presence of an external factor. It is not enough that an individual has a justified belief; that belief must also be true. Clarissa cannot *know* that the Eiffel Tower is 300 feet tall unless it is. The same holds for memory. Here a subjective state is not enough since there needs to be the right sort of historical connection to what is remembered. Clarissa cannot *remember* a childhood confrontation with the Eiffel Tower, however much she thinks she does, if she really knows about it

only from photographs. Even the very content of our thought requires an external factor. Clarissa's thought will not be about the Eiffel Tower just in virtue of having the right kind of internal content (thinking of it as tall, vaguely rocket shaped, standing on four legs etc.). It must in addition have the right causal connection with the Eiffel Tower itself. A thought caused by acquaintance with another exactly similar Tower would not be a thought about the Eiffel Tower.

So far this is simple common sense, but many philosophers have wanted to go further. Rather than simply saying that external factors are *necessary* for states of perception, knowledge, and so on, they have wanted to *analyse* each such state into two factors, one internal and one external, which are each necessary and together sufficient for it. Thus knowledge, for example, is analysed in terms of (i) an internal factor consisting of an attitude to a proposition (justified belief, or similar) and (ii) an external factor consisting of the state of affairs that makes the proposition true. We can call this the "two factor" approach (McDowell sometimes gives it other names: the hybrid, the two component, the highest common factor approach).

As I said at the outset, this two factor approach is orthodoxy; indeed, many philosophers have failed to see how it could possibly be wrong. But its reductionist programme has not been a spectacular success. Attempts to elucidate the internal conditions (and in many cases the external conditions too) have consistently been vulnerable to counterexample. In particular, failures to elucidate the internal factor for knowledge has been an ongoing embarrassment for analytic philosophy. McDowell's exorcism is radical. In the distinctive move that unites so many of these essays, he rejects the two factor approach outright. He doesn't deny what common sense requires, namely that the external factors provide necessary conditions: that knowledge must be true, and so on. What he denies is that necessary and sufficient conditions can be given by conjoining the external factor with an internal factor; according to McDowell, there is no such internal factor that is independent of the external.

Consider again perception, where the Argument from Illusion has long traded on the two factor view. What happens when we seem to see an object although there is no object there? We are confronted with a visual appearance. But, runs the Argument, since these cases are, from the inside, indistinguishable from cases of veridical perception, that must be what we are confronted with in veridical perception too. There must be some visual intermediary -- an internal factor, a subjective appearance -- which stands between us and any object we see. In rejecting the two factor view, McDowell rejects this argument. There is no internal state of having an appearance which is common to cases of perception and illusion (no "highest common factor"); so there is no need to accept that we see things by means of visual intermediaries.

One immediate clarification is needed if this is to be at all plausible. In saying that there is no internal state common to cases of perception and illusion, McDowell is not denying that there might be some neuro-physiological state which is common to both. That would be an implausible empirical speculation. McDowell is rather denying that there is a common psychological state, where this is understood as a state of the agent,

rather than a state of the sub-personal information processing systems of the brain. So McDowell's rejection of the two factor view presupposes that psychological states cannot be reduced to neurophysiological states -- a contentious view, but one which is defended in several of these papers.

McDowell is, however, tempted to go beyond this basic rejection of the two-factor approach to perception. He not only suggests that we cannot characterize perception conjunctively, namely as consisting of an appearance *and* something else. He also suggests that we can characterize appearances disjunctively, namely as perception *or* illusion. McDowell has turned the tables here: perception isn't analysed in terms of appearance (*and* something else); instead, appearance is analysed in terms of perception (*or* something else), the idea of perception being taken to be more basic than the idea of appearance. McDowell's suggestion (following Foster and Snowdon before him) is that someone has the appearance as of seeing the Eiffel Tower if either they really do see it, or they have the illusion of seeing it. But it is unclear what this disjunctive proposal adds (as Tim Williamson has pointed out). For if the concept of an appearance were truly disjunctive we ought to have a purchase on each of the disjuncts. Being a Benelux country is genuinely a disjunctive concept, since we have an independent grip on each of the three disjuncts that make it up: being Belgium, or the Netherlands, or Luxembourg. Yet while we have an independent purchase on the idea of a perception, it doesn't seem that we have any independent purchase on the idea of an illusion: an illusion is nothing other than an appearance that doesn't amount to a perception.

If this is right, then the disjunctive account of appearance amounts to nothing more than this: an appearance is either a perception or an appearance which isn't a perception. But that isn't truly disjunctive in the way that being either Belgium or the Netherlands or Luxembourg is. It's more like saying that the concept of a tree is disjunctive just because to be a tree is to be either an oak, or a tree that isn't an oak; and that isn't helpful at all. Moreover it is unclear why, by his own lights, McDowell should want to characterize appearances in this disjunctive way. What motivation for providing a disjunctive account could there be other than the craving for analysis (this time of appearance rather than perception) that McDowell has rejected? Why not just say that seeing an object is a sufficient condition for having the appearance of seeing something, though not a necessary one, and leave it at that? Perhaps that is all he means to do. If so, the talk of disjunctive concepts is a distraction.

Let's now consider knowledge. Here, as we have seen, the two factor view treats knowledge as the conjunction of an internal attitude towards a proposition (such as a justified or reliable belief in it) and the external fact that the proposition is true. If we are unlucky we can have the internal attitude in the absence of the truth of the proposition: a good pretender can get us to believe that they're in pain when they're not. It is a consequence of this view that we cannot gain knowledge that another is in pain just from seeing the look on their face; they could have the look without the pain. At best what we see can form the basis for a justified belief in their pain. Knowledge only comes when we combine seeing the look with the fact that they are in pain.

In rejecting the two factor view, McDowell can reject this unappealing idea. There is no internal state common to those who see the genuine sufferer, and those who see the pretender. The former gain knowledge directly from what they see; the latter do not. (Similarly we can gain knowledge from what others tell us when they tell the truth, even though it is possible that they are lying.)

It might seem that in saying this McDowell will have to abandon the idea that we have reasons for knowledge. For aren't the reasons exactly the states which we think are common to cases of knowledge and to case of justified but false belief? That is why we do not blame the person who is fooled by the clever pretender. She had reasons for her belief even though it was not true. McDowell blocks this objection by pushing the notion of a reason out into the world. The person who saw the pretender *thought* she had reasons for believing he was in pain, but in fact she did not. For the only reason for believing that someone is in pain is their being in pain.

McDowell is surely right that this captures one of our normal senses of reason . But don't we want to retain the idea that, in another sense, those who saw the genuine sufferer and those who saw the pretender had the same reasons for their beliefs? This, after all, is the sense of "having a reason" which ties in with notions of epistemic responsibility and blameworthiness and control. McDowell concedes that more needs to be said on many of these issues. It remains to be seen whether, within his framework, he can say enough to do them justice.

Consider, finally, the notion of semantic content, where a two-factor view has been motivated by an argument from Hilary Putnam. Suppose two people come across different but indistinguishable substances: Abel, here on Earth, comes across H₂O; Bathsheba, far away on a distant world, comes across a totally different substance, XYZ, which looks and behaves just like water. Suppose that, by a remarkable coincidence, XYZ just happens to be called "water" in Bathsheba's community (which is otherwise English speaking). Suppose finally that neither of them knows anything about chemistry, or the composition of the substances they have encountered. Then, even though they may entertain thoughts which are subjectively identical ("Water is wet"), the thoughts will have different semantic contents because they are about different things: H₂O and XYZ respectively. Meaning or content involves an external factor: as Putnam famously put it, meanings just ain't in the head .

A common response to this is to try to factor out the internal and external aspects. On this view there are different sorts of content, wide and narrow; the former is object-involving, the latter is not. When Abel and Bathsheba both think "Water is wet", their thoughts differ in their wide content but not in their narrow. Wide contents are then analysed via the standard two factor approach: they consist of a narrow content (the internal factor), together with a link to a particular object (the external factor).

This is, of course, where McDowell disagrees. He denies that there are narrow contents that are common between different wide contents. Indeed, there is no such thing as a

narrow content for McDowell. It is true that the two subjects might be in identical brain states when they entertain the two thoughts; but he denies that such sub-personal states are contentful at all.

It is worth distinguishing this view from another thesis about content for which McDowell is famous and which is also well represented in these essays: the thesis that there can be no singular thoughts about non-existent objects, or as it is often put in Fregean terminology, that there is no sense without reference. (An approach which is also strongly associated with McDowell's former colleague Gareth Evans.) When a child hopes that Father Christmas will come early this year so that she can catch a glimpse of him, we would ordinarily have no hesitation in crediting her with a contentful thought. But McDowell denies that she has one. He holds that a subject who appears to entertain a thought about a non-existent object is not really entertaining a thought at all: "he may think there is a singular thought at, so to speak, a certain position in his internal organization, although there is really nothing precisely there".

Here it looks as though McDowell is either introducing a new technical notion of a thought, or else is being hugely revisionary of common sense. He does something to soften this blow, broaching the possibility that she might nevertheless be credited with a "mock" or "apparent" thought (though it's unclear quite what this is), and pointing out that she might have other thoughts in the vicinity of the alleged thought about Father Christmas whose existence he denies (presumably quantified non-singular thoughts like "I hope that the man with a white beard and red suit who brings me presents will come early"). But I very much doubt that common sense will be appeased. We want to say that the child has a hope with precisely the content that Father Christmas will come early.

Of course, common sense might just be wrong here; even a very Wittgensteinian philosopher can accept that there might sometimes be overwhelming theoretical reasons for denying something we would ordinarily say. I shan't try to give a cursory assessment of whether McDowell does have such overwhelming theoretical reasons in this case. Instead, let me just point out that McDowell's no-sense-without-reference thesis is independent of his rejection of the two factor view of content. In denying the two factor view we concede that if Ronald Reagan exists, our thoughts about him are, in their entirety, essentially about him. These very thoughts have no narrow content that we could have entertained without his existence. But that does not preclude the contention that, were it to turn out that he does not exist (were he, for instance, an elaborate hoax on the part of the US media) we would still have a mistaken but contentful thought which we would express with the words "Reagan was once President". It is just that this thought would not have the same content as it has given that he does exist.

We can draw parallels here with the other areas discussed so far. In holding that there is no state common to perceptions and illusions, we need not deny that there are

illusions. And in holding that there is no state common to knowledge and to justified but false belief, we need not deny that there are justified but false beliefs.

I have said nothing of McDowell's work on ethics, which occupies about a quarter of these essays, and here I cannot do more than mention some distinctive themes: the immensely influential idea that a proper account of ethics must start, not with a catalogue of good acts, but rather with an assessment of the character of a virtuous agent; and the idea that moral properties can usefully be compared to secondary properties like colour. But it is worth pointing out that here too there is an echo of his opposition to the two factor approach.

McDowell wants to defend the idea that virtue is knowledge: that a correct appreciation of the circumstances leads an agent to the right action. He is faced with an obvious objection: surely the immoralist can perceive what he ought to do, and yet be in no way moved to do it. The objection is motivated by a two factor view of virtue: the virtuous person is someone who both perceives what they ought to do, and has the motivation to do it. But this is to abandon the idea that virtue consists in knowledge alone. In defending the idea that virtue does consist in knowledge, McDowell rejects the two factor view here too. For him the virtuous person's state cannot be factored into two independent states; and hence there is no perceptual state that the virtuous person holds in common with the immoralist. The immoralist simply does not see the world as the virtuous person does.

In focusing on the two factor view, I have ignored many of the issues that McDowell addresses in his twin tasks of appreciation and exorcism. These difficult essays are rich with ideas. Readers interested in the state of philosophy will want to see for themselves.

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