

# An Aconceptual View of Mind and World

Anna-Karin Selberg, Skövde

In *Mind and World* (1994/1996), John McDowell follows Donald Davidson in claiming that the world is a conceptually laden structure. A (conceptual) language and tradition constitutes the world, and our (conceptual) “openness to the world” (ibid, p.155). This means that the condition for access to the world is a clear subject – object split, and a clear split between content and the way the content is presented. With this view as the basis he criticizes the idea of a non-conceptual<sup>1</sup> experience and non-conceptual content, starting from the demand that (conceptual) thinking must be constrained by, and rationally answerable to the empirical world (ibid p.xii).

If conceptual structures are understood as separable from a non-conceptual experience, we stand in front of a dilemma according to McDowell: Either we have to deny experience the role of providing rational reasons (as long as rational reasons requires conceptual reasons that a subject can give for holding for example a belief [ibid p. 165]). Or, we embrace the Myth of the Given, i.e. a separation between scheme and content and in McDowell’s understanding an acceptance of conceptual structures that reaches outside of the conceptual realm in an inconsistent model of experience and conceptual structures. Common to both of those horns is not only the dualistic separation between experience and conceptual structures (ibid p. xi-xxiv and pp 3), but also the metaphysical idea of a clear separation between the non-conceptual (be it experience, surface irritations, stimulus, natural processes or whatever) and the conceptual. McDowell’s way out of the dilemma is to question the first dualism. Experience is understood as conceptually structured, and inseparable from the conceptual realm. This provides for giving experience a rational role. McDowell emphasises that conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* experience, they are not exercised *on* an independent experience. (ibid, p. 10). A subject that is moving from experience to judgement in, for example Gareth Evans’ model where experience and the conceptual system are kept apart is moving between separable spheres – from a non-conceptual, animal sphere to a conceptual, human sphere. In McDowell’s system the movement into the conceptual, from animal to human, takes place differently and on a developmental line<sup>2</sup>. It is a movement over time where a “mere animal” with a (non-conceptual) “sensitivity” to her environment achieves a conceptually structured experience when entering *Bildung*. This also involves a transformation of the animal environment to a human world and of a “proto-subjectivity” (ibid p.117) into a “full-fledged subjectivity” (ibid), and it “brings intentional bodily action on to the scene” (ibid p.117).

Another way to avoid those horns is to reverse McDowell’s model of experience and conceptual system. Such an alternative would take aconceptual experience that is not yet conceptually structured as its starting point<sup>3</sup>, as opposed to McDowell’s model where conceptual

structures such as subject and object are conditions for experience. Here conceptual structures are instead understood to grow continuously in experience and the autonomy of the conceptual realm is questioned. This means that the conceptual realm does not belong into another realm than experience but conceptual structures arise *within* experience. Thinking, believing and judging are also to be seen as types of experiences. In aconceptual experience world and mind are not separated but must be seen as a whole. The world is not an external object, but an experiential and meaningful environment in which world and mind cannot be ideally separated. In this picture we can talk about experience serving a rationally justifying role in an approximate sense at best. If a fully conceptually structured experience (that satisfy demands on conceptuality such as Evan’s Generality Constraint [Evans, 1982], objectuality, objectivity and systematicity) can only be seen as an ideal, that can be approximated in real human agency and practice growing from “proto-subjectivity”, this consequence need not be radically different from the consequences of McDowell’s way of picturing experience<sup>4</sup>.

A problem in McDowell’s philosophy is a dualism within nature that renders the entrance into the conceptual realm mystical. Nature as natural sciences describe it is in McDowell’s philosophy understood as “the realm of law” whose inhabitants are characterized by “a lack of freedom” (ibid p. 117), while intentionality, freedom and agency are understood as belonging to “the logical space of reasons”, that is, to the conceptual system and capacities that a human being gets access to as she grows from a ‘mere animal’ to subject and agent. Since “world” in McDowell’s understanding is equated with a conceptually structured world, consisting of ‘inner’ and ‘outer objects’ (ibid p. 30-33), intentionality is a purely conceptual affair: a non-conceptual content is no content at all since it is not objective and does not present objects in an independent and detached reality whose existence presupposes a clear subject – object split. In experience and thought we are ‘open to the world’ only as long as the content of experience and thinking is conceptual (ibid p. 31, 37, 47, 54). A non-conceptual experience or ‘intuitions without concepts’ can provide no ‘glimpses of the world’, at least not as long as the world is understood to have a conceptual structure; it is ‘blind’ (ibid p. 32, 89). For avoiding that the transformation from “the realm of law” to “the space of reasons” takes place outside of nature, but still be able to keep the separation between the “realm of law” and “the space of reasons” clear to provide for freedom in “the space of reasons”, McDowell introduces the idea of a “second nature”. Children are ‘born mere animals’ and as they enter their first language and *Bildung*, they move from a ‘first nature’ (‘the realm of law’) into a second nature, (“the space of reasons”) (ibid p. 125). The movement is a movement from a “mere” animal’s being in an environment where conceptual structures such as subjects and objects have not arisen (ibid p. 117), into a “full-fledged” subject and agent in a conceptually structured world. Even if we respect McDowell’s

<sup>1</sup> The term aconceptuality, previously used here, refers to phenomena where the distinction between non-conceptuality and conceptuality can not be applied.

<sup>2</sup> Evan’s philosophy contains a developmental movement too, in the sense that non-conceptual perception should only count as experience if it is available as “input to thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system” (Evans 1982, p. 158).

<sup>3</sup> See Pauli Pylkkö, 1998 and Tere Vadén, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Another consequence of McDowell’s demands on experience is that old people, children, animals, artificial networks and people from cultures that do not have a conceptually structured language cannot be seen as experiencing since their “sensitivity” is not conceptually structured.

understanding of “world” this discontinuity in nature is problematic, and non-conceptual content and a more primitive intentionality seems to be needed to make the development into the human ‘glimpse of the world’ possible.<sup>5</sup>

McDowell’s rethinking of naturalism is a refusal to equate nature with a “disenchanted” nature (i.e. a picture of nature that excludes meaning), or to put it differently: a refusal to equate it with the abstraction that was used to characterise nature in the Newtonian paradigm. But this rethinking must start on a more fundamental level and demands a rethinking not only of nature but also of meaning, a rethinking which needs to provide for a continuous and non-dualistic conception of nature. Meaning, agency and intentionality go deeper down in nature than human beings and “full-fledged subjects”.

A radical way of defending non-conceptual content is to question McDowell’s understanding of “world” as well as “mind”, and therefore also of nature. Thinkers like Heidegger (1992, p. 63-110), Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.248-249; 1962/1986, p. 71) and Pauli Pykkö (1998) are emphasising that the world is to be understood as a holistic cultural and natural experiential environment, where mind and world are not separated. In McDowell’s understanding the possibility of a subject (mind)/ object (world) split is a *condition* for worlds and meaning. Here, conceptual structures are instead understood to arise gradually within nature and they presuppose a lower level of content. Conceptual structures are not in McDowell’s sense transcendental with respect to their aconceptual origin. Pykkö emphasizes that conceptual structures, and conceptually structured experience, action and language grow from, and are to be explained in terms of what McDowell calls “proto-subjectivity” and an “animal environment”. Fully conceptual structures can at best be approximated. (Pykkö, 1998). Also according to Adrian Cussins experience is to be understood in this way as fundamentally embodied and non-conceptual. Conceptual structures presupposes a human practice and action whose content is too holistic or inseparable<sup>6</sup> to satisfy for example Evan’s Generality Constraint for concepts. Cussins describes experience as structured in a non-pure continuum:

My claim is that we are – as adult humans – still awash in a partially differentiated, partially objective, mind/world continuum, at which pain-experiences lie at the one end, various sorts of emotional experience a little further in, then colour-experience, then, perhaps, shape-experience, and the experience of democratic justice. (Cussins, 1990, s. 411.)

Discussions within recent physics seem to support the idea of the world as a holistic and non-separable wholeness that cannot be fully conceptually analysable. Thinkers like Niels Bohr and David Bohm who are usually thought to be radically different both emphasise the limits of conceptual analysability of quantum phenomena. While Bohr points to epistemological problems in the description of empirical phenomena, the later Bohm’s ontological interpretation puts limits to the idea of both world and mind understood as conceptually structured. Bohm understands the basic reality as an undivided wholeness where distinctions such as subject – subject (and therefore subject – object) cannot, strictly speaking, be upheld (See

Bohm, p. 55, 172-179, 210). Subject and object can be understood as relatively autonomous subwholes, which can be correctly distinguished only in an approximate sense.

The world understood as environment does not mean that it is ineffable and beyond articulation – it is not fully conceptually articulable, but there are a- and non-conceptual aspects also in language. For Bohm, the world has an explicate aspect and so does mind/experience, and thus conceptual description can be possible and approximately correct. But an important aspect of the understanding of the world as fundamentally holistic and inseparable is that it seems as if we risk *losing* information about the world if it is being described as a conceptual structure – i.e., conceptual structures, and conceptually structured agents are in a sense partially *blind* to the world. Conceptual content presents the world as an independent world consisting of conceptually organized separable objects and properties, but on the quantum level it is open to interpretation whether the world can be understood in this sense.

If conceptual structures can reach no ideal transcendent polarisation, the idea of persons, understood as ‘full-fledged subjects’ that remains identical over time, or full-fledged bodily objects that likewise satisfy philosophical criteria of identity, are to be understood as an instrumental description. At the fundamental level persons are not separated from the immediate environment (that can indeed be another person) in a sense that makes identity possible. This picture of nature is not incompatible with intuitive, pre-theoretical ideas about human personality; it is rather the other way around. Within the Newtonian paradigm it is indeed hard to see how naturalism can possibly be compatible with for example meaning and freedom. In the natural science of today, however, there seems to be room for freedom and meaning without the introduction of a “second nature”, and it is not clear that the nature described is “disenchanted”. Here freedom, and uniqueness in persons, can be related to non-determinism, unrepeatability and unpredictability, for example in quantum processes and dynamical systems, rather than to rational prediction and control. The past cannot fully determine the future, but is open-ended in a sense that provides for freedom.<sup>7</sup> Free activity understood in this way, as well as aconceptual intentionality and agency go deeper down in nature than the human subject.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Ron Chrisley, 1996, p. 66; Adrian Cussins, 1990 and 1992; Daniel D. Hutto (1998 and 1999, p.122); Jose Luis Bermúdez, 1994 and 1998, p. 19 and p. 182; who argue that a more primitive notion of content is needed to make sense of the movement from what McDowell calls a “proto-subject” into a mature subject.

<sup>6</sup> In the sense of inseparability used by Howard, 1989, which says that the behaviour of an inseparable phenomena can not be explained comprehensively in terms of any subsystems.

<sup>7</sup> See Pykkö, 1998, p. 104-107 and Vadén, 2001, for the idea of freedom developed in terms of unpredictability.

## References

- Bohm, D. 1980/1983 *Wholeness and The Implicate Order*, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London.
- Bermúdez, J. L. 1994 "Peacocke's argument against the autonomy of nonconceptual representational content", 402-418 i *Mind and Language*, vol. 9, nr 4, dec.1994.
- Bermúdez, J. L. 1998 *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.
- Cussins, A. 1992 "Content, Embodiment and Objectivity: The theory of Cognitive Trails", 651-658 in *Mind*, Oct. 1992.
- Cussins, A. 1990 "The connectionist construction of concepts", 368-440 in Boden, M. (ed.). *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* (1990), Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Evans, G. 1982 *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Heidegger, M.1992 *Varat och tiden*. Translated from the German by Matz, R., Daidalos: Gothenburg. Original title: *Sein und Zeit*.
- Howard, D. 1989 "Holism, separability, and the metaphysical implications of the Bell experiments", 224-253 in Cushing, J. and McMullin, E. (eds). *Philosophical Consequences of Quantum Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana.
- Hutto, D. D. 1999 *The Presence of Mind*, John Benjamins: Amsterdam.
- Hutto, D. D. 2000 *Beyond Physicalism*, John Benjamins: Amsterdam.
- McDowell, J. 1994/1996 *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962/1986 *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated from the French by Smith, C. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London. Original Title: *Phénoménologie de la perception*.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1968 *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated from the French by Lingis, A. Northwestern University Press: Evanston. Original Title: *Le Visible at l'invisible*.
- Pylkkö, P. 1998 *The Aconceptual Mind, Heideggerian Themes in Holistic Naturalism*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Vadén, T. 2001 "Qualifying qualia through the skyhook test", in *Inquiry*, 44, no 2.