

Rediscovering the Meaning of Man and the World——Reading McDowell’s *Mind and World*

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Abstract: *Mind and World* was compiled based on McDowell’s lectures and divided into six chapters. Each chapter is independent of each other. This article assumes that McDowell wants to explain this core theme in these six chapters. Breaking the original isolation between people and the world (mind and world) through “meaning,” allowing the two to reconnect in “meaning.” This “meaning” originates from human subjective consciousness, but its carrier is the world object. Therefore, the world’s objectivity constitutes the carrier and content of the formality of meaning, and human subjective consciousness adds the meaningful form of will to the world’s objects. Because of the existence of “meaning,” the relationship between people and the world is no longer divided into “subject-object” and “form-content” but is spliced into one through the thread of “meaning.” This article attempts to summarize the logical thread of McDowell’s entire book around how McDowell returns “meaning” by overcoming methodological dualities.

Keywords: McDowell; Meaning; Mind; World search

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1. Background introduction

Mind and World was compiled by McDowell based on lectures and divided into six chapters. Each chapter is independent, but it can be assumed that McDowell wants to explain the theme through these six seemingly independent chapters. This core theme is to break the original isolation between people and the world (mind and world) through “meaning” so that the two can reconnect in “meaning.” This “meaning” originates from human subjective consciousness, but its carrier is the world object. Therefore, the world’s objectivity constitutes the carrier and content of the formality of meaning, and human subjective consciousness adds the meaningful form of will to the world’s objects. Because of the existence of “meaning,” the relationship between people and the world is no longer divided into “subject-object” and “form-content” but is spliced into one through the thread of “meaning.” Therefore, the first thing McDowell must do is open-up “meaning” and then find a stable place for “meaning” in people and the world.

2. Research process

2.1. McDowell's philosophical "worries"

In the introduction, McDowell clarifies his question. He said that his "purpose is to explain, in a diagnostic spirit, some of the typical (translated as "descriptive") anxieties of modern philosophy"^[1]. This anxiety exists in the dichotomy between thinking and experience. Under this dichotomous thinking, modern philosophy either classifies experience into the realm of norms, making the realm of norms our only "tribunal of judgment," or it allows experience to become the "court of judgment" of thinking, causing people to fall into the "myth of what is given." McDowell believes that philosophical anxiety arises from the re-perception of the threat of this dichotomy. We are trapped in a way of thinking that prevents the mind from contacting with the rest of reality^[1]. The following sentence sums up McDowell's theme well^[1]: "If we acquiesce in the disenchantment of nature, if we have allowed meaning to be driven out of what I have been calling 'merely natural matters,' then we certainly need to work on bringing meaning back into the picture (intelligibility, the author added) among the images." This article attempts to summarize the logical context of McDowell's book around how McDowell returns "meaning" by overcoming the duality of methodology.

McDowell "believes that modern philosophy sees itself as having received such a call: to bridge the dualistic gap between subject and object, thought and world, and for meaning, it attempts to bridge the binary opposition between norms and nature. This is a deeper binary opposition, which is the root of all the binary oppositions people are familiar with in modern philosophy"^[1].

2.2. Concepts and intuition: traditional solutions to "worry"

McDowell first emphasized that previous philosophies had proposed solutions to the "worries" of modern philosophy, among which Kant was the representative. Therefore, he proposes at the beginning: "Kant should still occupy a central position in our discussion of how thought and reality relate"^[1]. This conclusion ultimately affirms the status of the "final court" in the normative field of man. McDowell believes that human response to nature reflects human freedom, but at the same time, human freedom is restricted by experience, that is, human freedom must have a base (experience). If concepts are indispensable for man's understanding of the world, but "concepts must be at least partly constituted by the fact that the judgments in which they appear are grounded in the given, those associated conceptual faculties must be obtained from an encounter with the appropriate given judgment"^[1]. We should not understand what Kant calls 'intuition' (empirical reception) as the naked acquisition of a given outside of a concept. However, it should be understood as a process or state with conceptual content^[1]. Therefore, McDowell treats concepts and intuitions as "initiated" by concepts or intuitions, and the latter interact. The "flowing" process of action and coordination overcomes the split between the two that traditional Kant could still cause.

3. The unboundedness of conceptual matters: removing the barriers between the mind and the world

Firstly, McDowell wants to criticize some "opinions" that everyone agrees are plausible. Some think that we should understand thinking and judgment as ultimately related to a reality outside of thought so that we seem never to be able to do without it. A reasonable limit can be created from external reality. McDowell believes this idea leads to a "myth of the given." This myth holds^[1]: "The fact that something is such-and-such is an empirical, conceptual content, the same thing that something is such-and-such is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world."

In order to avoid the "myth of the given" and to prevent falling into idealism, McDowell tried to propose

a solution: “The fact that experience is passive, an operating receptive event, should assure us.” The following point is made: “We have all external limits to what we can reasonably desire, such limits come from outside thinking, but not from what can be thought outside. The final matter we arrive at when we retroactively justify it is still a thinkable content, rather than something more ultimate than this, a naked reference to a given fragment.” Thus, McDowell regards experience as both passivity and receptivity ^[1]. In his view, if experience were not passive, there would not be an open world, but experience must be added to concepts to become intelligible. Such a conceptual network belonging to the subject has its own foundation in experience. Any perceptual report with no concept in the judgment of experience has the intervention of concepts in advance.

By viewing concepts and experience as a process of reasonable interaction, McDowell integrates conceptual abilities into the network of concepts, and the world and concepts appear as seamless connections between phenomena and meanings. From this, the world becomes more important to people and thinkable, which achieves the consideration of conceptual spontaneity within the passivity of experience. Without external experience, “internal experience” will become questionable. At the same time, without the intervention of concepts, any external experience will be unthinkable.

In McDowell’s view, people must communicate through concepts that rely on experience. However, this concept is not pure, nor is it a definition of the thing itself, but a concept that people must rely on when communicating and sharing conceptual power about experience.

4. Non-conceptual content: limiting the mind

McDowell believes the coherence theory and the “myth given” are traps. In order to prevent these two traps, we must return to Kant’s thinking. He believes “the way to end the swing between these two traps is to combine them like Kant did.” Empirical knowledge is conceived as a collaboration between sensibility and understanding ^[1]. However, McDowell differs from Kant in the way experience and understanding cooperate. He believes that “this cooperation must be conceived extraordinarily, that is, we must insist that understanding is already inseparably involved in sensibility within the release itself.” Experience is the receptive product of the world’s impressions on our senses, but those impressions already have conceptual content ^[1].

“Could McDowell’s approach beyond the Kantian tradition happen, and how did it happen?” The question is something that scholars, including Evans, need to be more skeptical about. McDowell believes ^[1]: “The concept of experience has a restricted use, governed by a connection with the idea of spontaneity. We need to admit that there is an external limit to the exercise of spontaneity in empirical thinking.” Moreover, this limitation is the world of experience itself, the object of experience itself that we perceive. We understand the world through concepts. Concepts represent the spontaneous ability and freedom of the human mind, but this spontaneous ability and freedom cannot exist independently of the content they are intended to represent. The initiation of receptivity always accompanies the initiation of spontaneous activity. In other words, the activation of human conceptual ability, which is the ability to understand the world, must be accompanied by the simultaneous activation and penetration of non-conceptual content, the receptivity of the empirical world.

Concepts give us the ability to understand the world, but if we want to make the world understandable, more is needed to rely on concepts. When a concept is activated, the non-conceptual content it points to is activated at the same time, and the non-conceptual content delimits the concept. It can point to the boundaries of intelligibility. The non-conceptual content of concepts delimits the boundaries of our minds and simultaneously allows the mind and the world to contact and integrate, making the world understandable.

5. Reason and nature: raising the issue of “meaning”

Although Kant partially overcame the dichotomy between sensibility and intelligence in terms of methodology through innate structure, in terms of epistemology, Kant made us face the threat of this dichotomy again when he emphasized human rational ability. In Kant, we actively reflect on empirical judgment and knowledge spontaneously. Although he emphasized human freedom and rationality, according to McDowell, it may “make us lose our empirical thinking and independent reality.” There is a specific connection between them, spontaneity is an idea of freedom, and this puts the danger of what should be empirical thought degenerating in our images into frictionless rotations in the void ^[1].

In this section, McDowell restates his methodological thinking and unique approach to solving the worry of being separated from the mind and the world. He maintains: “We must conceive experience as a state or occurrence in which faculties belonging to spontaneity play a role in the actualization of receptivity. Experiences have their content because conceptual faculties play a role in them. Moreover, this means that faculties that belong to the understanding insofar as they are what they are, they can be actively and potentially self-critical. The fact that these faculties are utilized in the mind of this is itself sensibility in its operation, rather than an intellect constructed on some pre-conceptual release of sensibility, which allows us both to admit freedom of spontaneity without constraints and without falling into inconsistencies. Therefore, we can exorcise the specter of frictionless rotation ^[1].

McDowell believes the renewed methodological split between reason and nature stems from the modern scientific view of nature. Kant, Davidson, and Evans have all accepted the modern scientific view of the West since the Enlightenment. Accepting the modern scientific view means denying or abandoning the meaning of man and nature or recognizing the meaninglessness of the mind and the world, which is the real worry of modern philosophy. In Aristotle, before modernity, the discussion of knowledge emerged from a specific ontology and was, first of all, a reflection on the ontology. Therefore, modern worries did not exist in Aristotle or the Middle Ages. As McDowell puts it ^[1]: “In ordinary medieval ideas, what we now regard as the subject matter of natural science was conceived as full of meaning, as if the whole of nature constituted a book of lessons for us.” McDowell seems to have absorbed this classical injunction, as he puts it ^[1]: “If we acquiesce in the disenchantment of nature, if we allow meaning to be expelled from what I have been calling ‘merely natural matters,’ then when we start thinking about interactions between members of the human race, we need to be working on bringing meaning back to this image of (comprehensibility, the author added).”

6. Conclusion: action, meaning, and self – the return of meaning and subject issues

McDowell seems to have absorbed the precepts about “meaning” in classical thought. However, he wants to use something other than classical sources to solve the worries of modern philosophy but to consider modern philosophy within it. A big problem in modern philosophy is human action and its meaninglessness. This action chapter, meaning and self, attempts to find a way to reconcile the self in action with nature through the return of meaning. Let nature not be the perceptual existence of experience but become the meaningful existence of some subjectivity. To achieve this reconciliation, McDowell introduced “second nature.” He said ^[1]: “Most of our nature is second nature, and our second nature is in the state it is in not only because of the potential we are born with, but also because of our upbringing. This is the re-enchantment of parts of nature that I was talking about. Our upbringing actualizes some of the potentialities with which we are born, even though the structure of reason space cannot be reconstructed from the facts about our involvement in the realm of laws, but it can be the framework within which meaning comes into view only because our eyes can be opened to it through education. Furthermore, education is an element of the normal maturation process for the kind of animals we

are. Meaning is not some mysterious gift from outside nature.”

Here, McDowell wants to combine the enchantment of meaning on people with the advancement of methodology. Perceptual experience and intellectual concepts are blended through second nature, which results from education. As an existence wrapped in meaning, this result is a gift from nature about the soul and human meaning. As a result, the issue of human meaning is not only re-raised through the resolution of methodological tension but also becomes the core issue of human beings and why the human soul can be called soul. Human actions are not natural but existences that present meaning in second nature through education. The meaning of action makes human actions understandable. At the same time, these meanings penetrate concepts through second nature, adding content from nature but different from natural reactions to concepts. As self-subjects, through this shareable meaning, obtained a “self” that can communicate with each other but be different from each other. In this way, people are normatively regulated by shared meanings in their freedom.

McDowell “believes that modern philosophy sees itself as having received such a call: to bridge the dualistic gap between subject and object, thought and world, and for meaning, it attempts to bridge the binary opposition between norms and nature. This is a deeper binary opposition, which is the source of all the binary oppositions in modern philosophy that people are familiar with”^[1]. Meaning ensures life’s integrity, the mind’s coherence, and the way of natural existence. McDowell regards the rediscovery of meaning and its role as an effective solution to the worries of modern philosophy. He says with great certainty^[1]: “Human life, our natural way of being, has been shaped by meaning.” Then McDowell returned to the examination of Kant’s methodology. He believed that Kant’s understanding of the field of laws made it a matter external to concepts due to the lack of attention to meaning. However, “the realm of laws is not only the realm of acts of meaning, but also is not external to conceptual matters”^[1].

Lastly, McDowell emphasizes the importance of human subjectivity and its meaning framework by contrasting rational animals and other animals. “Only with full-fledged subjectivity the awareness of the external world can obtain an appropriate position”^[1]. Acquiring this “position” is not a simple response to the environment like an animal but a meaningful world construction. Therefore, the methodology and approach to the enchantment of meaning have become McDowell’s key to solving the worries of modern philosophy.

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