

Conceptuality of Experience

Abstract: In *Mind and World*, John McDowell makes a Kantian thesis that the two faculties of human knowledge – sensibility and understanding – are inextricably combined, in particular, that the sphere in which the faculty of understanding is operative is unbounded. He explicates this thesis by suggesting that concepts, despite belonging to the side of understanding, are passively drawn into operation in the workings of sensibility. I argue that the “passive operation” account fails to do justice to his original Kantian thesis. Alternatively, I defend the inextricable-combination thesis by building on a proposed reading of the Transcendental Deduction in *Critique of Pure Reason*. I read Kant as telling us here that it is *constitutive* of pure concepts to be involved in experience, which enables us to understand the conceptuality of experience in a way that does not invoke the puzzling notion of the passive involvement of concepts. On the proposed account, the co-operation between intuition and concepts is indeed inextricable: pure concepts have no other use than to be applied to intuition so that the latter can fully realize its cognitive role of giving an object to the mind. To fully make sense of the idea of conceptuality of experience, we need a new picture of the kind of interaction between mind and world in experience, which amounts to a reconsideration of what knowledge and its objectivity are.

1. Introduction

Experience plays an indispensable role in making possible our knowledge of the world. As Kant tells us in *Critique of Pure Reason*, “all our cognition commences *with* experience” although it does not on that account “all arise *from* experience”.¹ The precise relationship between experience and knowledge may be difficult to make clear, but one of the fundamental features of empirical thinking is that it must be *directed towards the world*. A judgment is correct or incorrect according to whether or not things are in fact the way one judges them to be. For this reason, John McDowell contends, rightly, that experience must play a *justificatory* role, which commits him to taking experience as somehow already conceptually articulated.

Kant tells us human cognition consists of two faculties, sensibility (the faculty of receptivity) and understanding (the faculty of spontaneity). McDowell’s suggestion, to put in Kantian terms, amounts to an invitation to reconsider the nature of the co-operation between sensibility and

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understanding in experience. McDowell's target is an inclination to interpret this cooperation as an addition of two separate processes. Sensibility first supplies raw materials to the mind, at which stage experience can be said to have non-conceptual content as something we share with non-human animals. Later the faculty of understanding comes to work *on* these materials to shape them into a conceptual form that is suitable for human knowledge. Against this two-processes reading, McDowell argues that spontaneity is operative already *in* the workings of receptivity not *on* some prior deliverances of receptivity. Our experience is constitutively conceptual from the very beginning.² As his thesis goes, we should conceive the co-operation in such a way that sensibility is *inextricably combined* with understanding in experience.

Fully supporting McDowell's thesis, I dispute with him, however, on the specific way in which the workings of receptivity are to be conceived conceptual. According to McDowell, experience is conceptual because of the *passive involvement* of conceptual capacities. The emphasis on the passive mode of involvement attempts to clarify that, although these conceptual capacities are somehow involved in experience, their *proper* actualizations lie in judgments, i.e., these capacities belong *essentially* to the spontaneity of understanding and *not* to experience. My main criticism is that this view does not get deep enough. It fails to fully capture the force of the original thesis that receptivity and spontaneity are inextricably combined because it still remains in line with what McDowell himself has identified as a bad way of thinking. To defend McDowell's thesis while avoiding the defects in his argument, I find in Kant a model for the role

² The two-processes reading is in a way motivated to make room for non-human animal experience. It has non-conceptual content, which does not rise to the level of having cognitive significance as human experience does. Now although we reject this reading, we need not commit ourselves to deny animal experience altogether. We can think of ourselves as having a radically different kind of sensibility than that of animals. Indeed, it is part of McDowell's thesis on the inextricable combination that our sensibility becomes transferred because we are *rational* animals.

of concepts in experience. Specifically, I propose a reading of the Transcendental Deduction according to which it is *constitutive* of concepts to be operative in experience; without concepts, intuition cannot be what it is, i.e., that which gives us objects. To fully make sense of the conceptuality of experience, it will lead us to question the standard notion of an “object” and a “subject”. Accordingly, I suggest a new picture of the nature of the interaction between the object and the subject in experience, a picture that treats experience indifferently subjective and objective. Ultimately, we will need to embrace a new notion of what knowledge and its objectivity mean.

2. McDowell’s account

In *Mind and World*, McDowell frames the difficulty of knowledge in terms of the debate between the Myth of the Given and coherentism.³ Briefly, the Myth of the Given is the idea that empirical thinking must be founded on grounds given to us via sense experiences as the ultimate rational warrants of thoughts. By contrast, coherentism denies that experience, as non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thoughts, can provide any rational ground for thinking; it is thus driven to accept that we only have a coherent system of beliefs without any foundation. Either view has a solid argument against the other; thus the debate seems to go on forever admitting no resolution – this is why McDowell calls it an “interminable oscillation”.⁴

Nonetheless, McDowell recommends a way out of this oscillation. He acknowledges the motivation of both positions while managing to avoid their conclusions. On one hand, the Myth

³ The term “Myth of the Given” is first due to Wilfrid Sellars in his book *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, and McDowell is following Sellars here in using this term.

⁴ McDowell 1996, 9.

of the Given rightly urges that empirical thinking must be answerable to how things are in the world. For, otherwise, "we cannot make it intelligible to ourselves how exercises of spontaneity [that is, acts of thinking] can represent the world at all".⁵ If a thought about the world is to have real content, it must have a justificatory ground that lies ultimately in the mind-independent objective reality itself. On the other hand, coherentism is correctly premised on the fact that anything outside the conceptual sphere cannot serve as a valid justification. The idea is that if something is to be the tribunal of thinking then it must bear *rational* relations on thoughts.⁶ Yet a piece of Given, insofar as it is to be the absolute foundation of all knowledge, cannot possibly be called into question upon any process of thinking.⁷ This means that a mere Given must remain completely outside the conceptual realm and on that account it cannot offer a *rational* ground of any thought at all. Coercing oneself to be comfortable with the Given as the tribunal is tantamount to a betrayal of the rationality of knowledge.

The key to seeing a third way around, McDowell suggests, is to identify a common assumption implicitly endorsed by both positions: that only something *external* to the conceptual sphere can serve as a constraint on, and thus tribunal of, thoughts. The two positions disagree only on what the assumption entails. The Myth of the Given insists that such externality is a necessary condition of the possibility of knowledge since thinking must be answerable to independent reality, whereas coherentism claims that such externality precisely eliminates the possibility of knowledge because it is unconceivable how a merely causal given can rationally ground any

⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁶ Davidson, who McDowell uses as the representative of adherents of coherentism, thinks that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (cited in McDowell 1996 at pg. 14).

⁷ Because if it were conceivable that what is given to us could be wrong, then it can no longer have the level of certainty anymore to serve as the absolute foundation.

thought. The common assumption can thus be paraphrased as a firm divide between the realm of causes and the realm of reasons. Coherentism directly denies that it can be mediated; the Given is purported to be a mediation between causes and reasons but it is only mythical how it can succeed.

McDowell points out that it is the assumption itself that is problematic. We need to reject the picture that there is a boundary around the conceptual sphere, outside which is reality. Rather, the conceptual sphere – the sphere of, in Kant’s term, spontaneity – “extends all the way out”.⁸ In other words, the realm of causes must be *part of* the realm of reasons rather than disjoint with it. Experience must truly stand in justificatory linkage with beliefs; it must be able to provide us with not only causes but at the same time reasons for thoughts. From the *unboundedness* of spontaneity it follows that the content of experience must already be *somehow* conceptually articulated.⁹ I take this to be what McDowell means by his thesis that receptivity and spontaneity are “not even notionally separable” and are always “inextricably combined” in experience.¹⁰

⁸ McDowell 1996, 11. To clarify a bit the terminology, Kant tells us that human cognitions have two stems, understanding and sensibility. Understanding is a faculty of spontaneity. Thinking and judging through *concepts*, the paradigm of acts of understanding, are self-consciously active and “spontaneous”. For we make judgments about the world following the principles of reason that essentially belong to ourselves. As far as sensibility is concerned, our senses are only receptive – we are affected by things in the world – and cause us to have *intuition*. And any experience, insofar as it gives us knowledge, is a product of the co-operation of both understanding and sensibility, both concepts and intuition. Further, McDowell uses interchangeably, so will I, “the sphere of spontaneity” and “the conceptual sphere” to both refer to the work of understanding, or, more specifically, the result of our capacity to apply concepts, i.e., what he calls our “conceptual capacities”.

⁹ It is a fair question to ask what exactly is meant by “conceptually articulated experience”. But I think what is relevant in this discussion is the claim *that* experience *must be somehow* conceptual, given the earlier analysis of the oscillation, and not *in what specific way* experience is conceptual, which is a separate matter. Although McDowell does explain his take on the conceptuality of experience later in his book, I think it introduces a whole story that is unnecessarily complicated for my purpose in this paper. For what I defend is only his thesis as a *claim*. I will give my own reading of this thesis to make sense of the notion of the conceptuality of experience; indeed, it is the primary task of this entire paper.

¹⁰ McDowell 1996, 9.

Denote these two ways of expressing McDowell's thesis, which I will be using interchangeably in this paper, as

UB (Unboundedness): Spontaneity must be unbounded and extend all the way out to experience, i.e., experience is already conceptually articulated.

IC (Inextricable Combination): Receptivity and spontaneity are inextricably combined in experience.

I second the thesis above, yet I take issue with McDowell's following specification of it. The conceptuality of experience, he thinks, is a result of the operation of conceptual capacities in a special way.

It sounds off key in this connection to speak of *exercising* conceptual capacities at all. That would suit an activity, whereas experience is passive. One's conceptual capacities have already been brought in play, in the content's being available to one, before one has any choice in the matter.¹¹

Therefore, the conceptual capacities, though belonging essentially to the spontaneity of understanding, should be conceived as in "passive operation in sensibility".¹²

PI (Passive Involvement)¹³: Conceptual capacities are passively drawn into operation in the workings of receptivity (and in experience).

Endorsing the UB/IC thesis does not automatically commit one to PI. McDowell's thesis is a *must*-claim and the account of PI is supposed to answer the *how*-question, to show the way in which concepts *can* function in the working of sensibility. But PI is not doing the work because it does not explain away what precludes one from seeing the possibility that spontaneity must

¹¹ Ibid, 10.

¹² Ibid, 12.

¹³ Hereafter, I will refer to this view, with which I dispute, as "the passive involvement theory" (PI). It should be kept in mind that this is only shorthand for sake of reference. What McDowell actually argues for is not a passive *kind* of spontaneity, which would indeed be mythical, if not directly contradicting with what the faculty of understanding is. Nonetheless, I intend to show that, McDowell's view is still subject to criticisms even on a faithful reading of it.

extend all out.¹⁴ Rather, I argue that PI precisely keeps the detrimental way of thinking that the UB thesis is meant to dismantle. Thus, the fact that McDowell is impelled to adopt the passive involvement view only demonstrates that he fails to fully appreciate what his own thesis entails.

3. Passivity and Activity

As mentioned, McDowell identifies the common ground underlying the Myth of the Given and coherentism as a dualistic divide between the causal and the rational. Now McDowell believes PI avoids this divide that launches one into the oscillation, but I doubt it succeeds. According to PI, a causal relation can also be a rational one only on the condition that spontaneity permeates into receptivity. McDowell, in effect, thinks it is unacceptable for what is *merely* causal to be rational, which betrays his fear that the merely causal – the working of receptivity if left alone – threatens to be a harmful Given outside the rational realm. It is precisely the fact that McDowell *thinks* leaving receptivity on its own will be a problem that is the problem. It shows that he still feels the pull to keep a minimal dualistic distinction between the (merely) causal and the rational. In this sense, PI marks a partial retrogression to the cause-reason divide that traps us in the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism, a dualistic way of thinking that McDowell himself has criticized in explication of his thesis.

With the cause-reason divide set up as such, the argument of Passive Involvement comes too late as a remedy. It is at best disingenuous to think that the workings of receptivity are in the order of justification *only because of the additional assistance* from the conceptual capacities drawn into

¹⁴ McDowell does take the effort to give a diagnosis of why people are blinded to this possibility of UB/IC, which I will address in much detail later. But the point for now is that this diagnosis is independent of McDowell's claim of PI. Even though I do appreciate and fully agree with the idea of second nature, it does not on that account justify PI. In fact, I think, it precisely shows that PI cannot be right.

operation, which essentially belong to the territory of spontaneity. This mode of co-operation can sound like no more than a cheap gluing of two desiderata. The passivity of experience is responsible for securing our direct contact with the objective reality by being affected by it in the senses, whereas conceptual capacities are responsible for bringing experience into the conceptual sphere.

However, the difficulty of the thesis lies precisely in the apparent incompatibility between the *passivity* of experience and the essential *activity* of spontaneity. Through the passive occurrences of sensation we can only be causally related to reality. By contrast, if something is to count as a reason for thinking, then it is not enough to be merely passively given to us but rather must be a result of the activity of understanding. Together the two propositions preclude the possibility for experience, being passive, to enter into the realm of reasons. This passive-active tension, which we see recoils back to the cause-reason divide, draws one towards a how-possible question that seems to admit no answer: how is it possible that spontaneity can permeate into the passive occurrence of experience without infringing its status of being passive? How on earth can the two apparently opposite features – rationality and conceptuality on one hand, passivity and objectivity on the other – be unified in experience? It seems that we face a deadlock.

McDowell almost simply asserts that PI is the solution, that the involvement of concepts in experience just is passive, without taking the effort to show readers how and why it can be the case.¹⁵ After all, what does it even mean to say that the conceptual capacities that are essentially active nonetheless can be passively at work? It becomes questionable whether such passive

¹⁵ This is perhaps part of McDowell's philosophical quietism, to not give constructive theories, but rather as a therapeutic philosopher to diagnose the problems in ways of thinking.

involvement can be the basis of conceptuality of experience at all. For conceptual capacities are recognizable *as* conceptual only when they are actualized in *active* judging. If the conceptual capacities are merely *passively* involved in experience, then it is arguably doubtful whether their being so involved can justify *at all* the conceptual character that McDowell would like to attribute to the content of experience. On this reading, PI amounts to a disconnection: even if the *scope* of spontaneity is claimed to extend into experience, the *proper exercises* of spontaneity – which are in judgment and not in experience – do not. This surely cannot be what McDowell wants; he, and so do I, really means to show that spontaneity is unbounded in a genuine sense.

Not only does PI fail to illuminate the possibility that spontaneity can permeate into experience, what is worse is that PI reinforces just the detrimental way of thinking that initiates one into the deadlock, i.e., the passive-active distinction. It merely begs the question. The quick and puzzling distinction between an active and a passive mode of involvement of concepts in judgment and experience, respectively, does nothing other than apply once again the passive-active distinction that gives rise to the difficulty we face. It does not explain away the tension between the passivity of experience and the activity of spontaneity at all. Moreover, recall that McDowell has rejected the oscillation between coherentism and Myth of the Given by rejecting the dualistic divide between causes and reasons. Here in arguing for PI by appeal to the passive-active divide, McDowell himself falls into the exact same pitfall. It seems fair, then, to criticize him for being inconsistent: on the one hand, he sees that the cause-reason divide is a mistake that leads to the oscillation, and yet, on the other hand, he appeals to just the similar passive-active divide *as the resolution to the oscillation*.

Now it might sound as if I have been charging PI on the grounds that it provides no satisfactory account of how it is possible that the passivity of experience and the conceptuality of spontaneity can be combined. This is not my intention. In fact, this how-possible question is a bad question to ask in the first place. We ought to reject the how-possible question rather than answer it, as McDowell would agree, yet I think his PI theory fails to do so. It fails because PI attempts to *explain* the conceptuality of experience *within the established framework that first renders the thesis impossible*. That is, it thinks it can dissolve the passive-active tension by drawing upon once again the tension itself.

Let's admit that the thesis can *never* be made coherent *within* the framework defined by the passive-active model because what is wrong is precisely this model itself. In other words, our encountering a firm deadlock shows not that the move is impossible altogether, but only that the conventional way of thinking forbids us to make such a move. The deadlock is a sign telling us that the passive-active model does not conceptually fit with what we aim to make sense of. What we need to do, then, is not to deny the possibility that spontaneity can be unbounded, but rather to update our conceptual framework in order to let the possibility show itself, since, as McDowell makes it convincing, spontaneity *must* be unbounded or else we fall into the oscillation.

4. Two Pictures

Treating the PI argument as my target of criticism, I've argued that what makes the IC thesis – that experience is essentially conceptual – appear to be an impossible task is a certain entrenched framework of thinking, whose elements include what I've been calling the passive-active divide

as well as the cause-reason divide that McDowell has identified earlier. This broader framework is an *Inside-Outside picture* that I think is due to Cartesian dualism. Descartes thinks there are exactly two separate modes or kinds of interaction between mind and the world. In a world-to-mind direction, sensory experiences are passively caused by objects in the world, relating the subject with things outside itself. In a mind-to-world direction, the intellect makes judgment by an act of will, either “giving or withholding our assent” to propositions via reasoning through clear and distinct ideas.¹⁶ Corresponding to these two modes of interaction, we can think of the dualism consisting of, as it were, two baskets of entities, one labeled Outside and the other labeled Inside. In the Outside basket, we find things like objects in the world, external reality, causal relations, etc., and they relate to us through sensory experience. In the Inside basket, we find things like concepts, meaning, rational relations, etc., and they relate to us through acts of thinking.

The implication of the Inside-Outside picture is an ontologically categorical divide between mind and the world. Meaning and significances, in virtue of our actively thinking through concepts, are entirely internal to the subject, whereas the world is a collection of causally related occurrences about the matter – including our interaction with the world through experience – that is explained and governed by physical laws alone. Under such a picture, it is natural to endorse the detrimental assumption that the scope of spontaneity – which belongs to the side of the mind, unique to rational beings – has to be bounded, outside which is objective reality that belongs to the side of the world. For the Inside-Outside picture makes unintelligible how sensibility and intuition – “the operations of a bit of mere nature” – could be structured by concepts at all and

¹⁶ Descartes 1984, sec. 39.

how the conceptual can be put into the merely law-governed natural world.¹⁷ Conceptually indexed occurrences and experience apparently belong to different baskets.

Constitutive of the Inside-Outside picture is a distinctive notion of an object, a notion resulting from a specifically Western modern history, downstream of, say, Descartes and Kant. We need to acknowledge that this plainly familiar notion of an object, although it might appear unproblematic to our eyes, indicates not a final stage of our understanding of the world but only one moment in the midst of the ongoing philosophical inquiry. Specifically, the notion of an object is an acquired status *in reflection of* the evolution of our way of viewing the world, rather than a quality innate to how things inevitably are in themselves. Recognizing the historicity will open up the theoretical possibility to conceive differently what we mean by *things*. And this is crucial for overcoming the Inside-Outside picture and seeing the possibility of the IC thesis. We should thus ask, how do the knowable things become "objects" for us?

The standard notion of an object, I think, is a product of the modern scientific approach to the world, which is grounded in the application of the notion of physical laws to understand the world, or, nature. For Aristotle, students of philosophy are students of nature. Living beings in nature have their inner principles and forms of life that are expressed in and through their everyday behaviors. Thus, we can learn the principles by observing their behaviors. But with modern science, nature becomes a "disenchanted" notion that is "indiscriminately equated" with the realm in which physical laws are operative.¹⁸ Everything in nature is sheer matter organized, assembled, and interacting with other matter in a certain way. When we get to Descartes, the

¹⁷ McDowell 1996, 70.

¹⁸ Ibid, 70.

world as a whole is a giant machine operating under the governance of physical laws. But there is one thing that is different - the thinking mind of humans. This significant moment of rediscovery of the rational mind further sets the dualism between nature and mind. Anything non-intellectual – not capable of rational thinking and doubting – is reducible to a natural machine whose performances are exhaustively described by physical laws.¹⁹

Not only does the human mind have a unique ontological feature due to being rational, the prominence of humans also has an epistemological influence. It implies a specific ego-centric viewpoint that shapes our relation with the world in the course of an inquiry. That is, the "I" becomes a special kind of being - a "subject" - with respect to which all remaining things in the world first determine themselves and become "objects" in inquiry.²⁰ This ego-centric viewpoint represents the human as a spectator and render the thing further "objectified". Things in the world are now not only reduced to law-governance in their essence, but also are docile participants in scientific investigations. An object is that on which we do experiments, where we almost torture nature to force it to disclose its laws to us.²¹ The human, the conductor of experiments, plays the role of a disinterested observer and judge. It is like we stand above the world and observe from God's eye view. Thus the spectator viewpoint is at its heart a third-person outsider perspective.

¹⁹ The problem with this view is that, as Macbeth discerns, the notion of life gets lost (Macbeth 2014, 28). There is no difference between a rock, a tree and a bird. Only machines with different levels of complexity. The notion of life implies a continuum, from rocks to plants to animals to rational animals. But the early modern cut off the continuum from the middle and holds only the two endpoints - rational animals and everything else.

²⁰ For example, Heidegger 1967 gives a reading of Descartes along this line.

²¹ As Kant tells us in the B Preface, we approach nature not as a "pupil" but as "a judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them" (B xiii).

But this tendency to keep apart the object and the subject is an idle boast of science. First, the object-subject duality puts in an embarrassing position our very own nature. We are beings *in* the world and indispensably bear an organic relation to things around us. The metaphysical separation between the world and the human thinker is too barren a picture that fails to explain how the human is also part of the very nature dismissed as merely mechanistic. Even though the capacity to use concepts seems unique in nature, rationality does not resist naturalization. For, indeed, "exercises of spontaneity belong to our way of actualizing ourselves as animals".²² To make sense of the naturalization of rationality, I embrace McDowell's suggestion that our nature is a kind of second nature, borrowing from Aristotle's ethics.²³ Much as an ethical person is initiated into a specific ethical outlook through being well brought up, so rational animals are initiated into the space of reasons through acculturation including acquiring a language. Much as from within an ethical outlook, the person sees various virtues and vices as existing in the world, so to the eyes of rational beings the world appears already saddled with meaning. The conceptual capacities acquired when we enter the space of reasons exemplify our natural through a distinctive way of living as rational beings.

More generally, and more seriously, the Inside-Outside picture described above makes our knowledge of the world impossible. As Macbeth points out, it displays no inherent harmony between what we are caused to experience and what we decide to believe through reasoning.²⁴ Thus arises two inter-related questions of their mutual interaction: how acts of judgment can represent anything real in the world (i.e., the problem of the *objectivity of thoughts*), and

²² McDowell 1996, 78.

²³ Ibid, 84.

²⁴ Macbeth 2014, 151.

conversely how experience can provide us with reason for beliefs (i.e., the problem of the *conceptuality of experience*).

To resolve these two questions, we need a new picture of the interaction between mind and world according to which experience and thinking are not to be conceived as constructed bridges between two islands, as causal and rational communication, respectively, between the law-governed objects on the outside and the subject on the inside. I suggest interpreting experience as an interplay between mind and world that is constituted by the *unification* of the opposing notions of the “object” and the “subject”. Macbeth provides a powerful model to conceive this unification:

The process of evolution by natural selection does not only realize living things. Nature, the world in which animals are to be found, acquires thereby a new sort of significance as well. What are otherwise mere things, for instance, various rock formations, bodies of water, climatic conditions, come to have the significance of what J. J. Gibson calls affordances for animals. ... For an animal, the environment affords both that which is needed for its survival, food, shelter, sexual partners, and so on, and hazards to its survival, dangers of various sorts. Animals and environments co-evolve; they emerge together, and neither is intelligible with the other.²⁵

The relation between a rational animal and its surroundings can also be understood in this way – they co-arise. With the emergence of rational beings and their capacity to form thoughts does reality acquire the very status of being an object for thoughts.

More specifically, it is the involvement of concepts in experience that enables the object-subject unification. The role of concepts belongs to our *approach* to the world. Only with some approach does one encounter anything at all. As a human becomes an experiencing subject by bringing its

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

own concepts to the world, the thing also becomes a knowable object for us, to be perceived and thought. Under this picture that I will explain in more detail in the following sections, the unification of object-subject via concept-involvement in experience need not trample the very idea of independent reality. Concepts need not cause the objects into existence (as in a direct idealism) or pre-structure the empirical reality that we can have access to in experience (as in a transcendental idealism). But concepts can allow the world, as it were, to “acquire a face to be known” – that is, to become for the first time an object of possible experience (in common sense, not in the distinctively modern sense).²⁶ If we could understand experience as such an integration of the world and the human *as a result of each presenting itself to the other*, we will have available a way to close the gap between the objective being of reality, which used to be the Outside, and its cognitive meaning, which used to be the Inside. Uprooting the Inside-Outside picture, the difficulty of conceptuality of experience and objectivity of thoughts will disappear. As we will eventually see, this picture will lead to a radical change in conceiving what activity of concept-application and objectivity of reality means, respectively.²⁷

5. Conceptuality of Experience

So what is the role of concepts in experience, really? I think we can find a model in Kant's Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Experience is conceptual not because

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ I diverge here from McDowell's interpretation of what the conceptuality of experience entails. McDowell thinks perceptual occurrences are already in conceptual shape and “have the same conceptual content” as judgments though not yet in the form of judgments (McDowell 2008). We are thus “open to the layout of the world” in the same sense of openness in which one is open to a thought (McDowell 1996, 111). To put it more plainly, on his view, the world is doing us a favor by “giving us candidates for belief that we are free to accept or reject” (Rorty 1998, 147). But this seems to almost “a crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world”, to borrow McDowell's own words: the world supplies reasons by borrowing our ability to use concepts (McDowell 1996, 72). There have been criticisms of this peculiar characterization of the world, perhaps most prominently by Richard Rorty and Charles Travis.

spontaneity finds its way to secretly sneak into the workings of receptivity, as PI suggests.

Rather, on my reading of Kant, it is because the workings of receptivity themselves are, in some sense, proper actualizations of pure concepts. Concept-involvement are not to be viewed as an adjunct to experience, but intuition, being what it is, is already *constitutively* dependent on pure concepts.

Kant's thinking starts with and is based on a fundamental logical distinction between intuition and concepts. Intuition is singular, immediate representations whereas concepts are general, mediate representations. Insofar as we are finite beings, objects must be *given* to us through sensibility in intuition because our understanding is not intuitive; we cannot think of objects directly through concepts without first sensing them in some way. As Kant points out in *Jäsche Logic*, there is "no lowest concept"; logical determination can never be considered complete.²⁸

One could always add more details to one's concept to specify it, whereby only an object can determine whether the new concept applies to it or not. Hence, individual objects are "all-sided determinations": they have infinite faces and are open to infinitely many descriptions.²⁹

Correspondingly, according to Kant, it would require a concept to have infinite representations in order to single out in thought precisely one object. But finite rational beings do not possess infinite power of the intellect like this. Therefore, for Kant, there is a necessary distinction – and thus necessary co-operation – between intuition in which objects are given to us and concepts through which they are thought.

²⁸ Kant 1990, 103.

²⁹ Ibid, 105.

Kant points out in the Transcendental Deduction that “the principle of the synthetic unity of apperception is the supreme principle of cognition from the side of the understanding”.³⁰ I read this as supporting exactly that spontaneity is unbounded. Understanding, for Kant, is essentially defined by its *combination* of given representations in intuition as opposed to, say, *analysis* of representations or *abstraction from* intuition. Accordingly, the mark of the operations of understanding is synthesis or unity, in particular, a specific kind of unity – the synthetic unity of apperception.³¹ As Kant comments, “the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of understanding ... indeed, this faculty is understanding itself”.³² Therefore, the principle of the unity of apperception is essentially a principle of understanding, and it states “the I think must be able to accompany all my representations”.³³

This principle considered as a statement is an analytic proposition, a mere tautology, because for any representation to be mine means simply for it to be brought under consciousness. If I represent something to myself, then it must on that account already be my representation, i.e., “accompanied by the I think”. What is less obvious is the *identity* of apperception demanded by the statement: all representations belong to the *same* “I”. That is, understanding enables me to unite all relevant representations into one consciousness in which I am aware of myself as the subject. In this sense, the unity of representations is a necessary condition of all cognition; for, without being combined in one consciousness, the given representations cannot be grasped at all.

³⁰ B136, adapted.

³¹ Pippin 1987 gives a reading of the spontaneity of understanding from just the perspective of the apperceptive unity.

³² B134.

³³ B131.

As far as the *analytical* necessity of the statement is concerned, the "I think" is merely a formal representation under which "nothing manifold is given" and through which no representations are actually unified.³⁴ It is a fact whose truth can be determined independently of any particular given representations. However, insofar as it is the supreme principle of cognition, i.e., a *rule* not just a *fact*, this analytical unity declares necessary the *synthesis* of the representations under the unity of "I think". For "the empirical consciousness that accompanies different representations is by itself dispersed".³⁵ I can see white at one moment and taste sweet at another moment; the representations of whiteness and sweetness are not necessarily unified simply in virtue of my empirical sensations. That representations belong to one consciousness "does not *yet* come about by my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but rather by my *adding* one representation to the other and being conscious of their synthesis".³⁶ In other words, it is only because I can *actually combine* representations in one consciousness that I can then *represent* such oneness of consciousness in these representations. The analytic unity of the apperception thus presupposes a synthetic one.

Intuition, insofar as it is a representation, must also conform to this principle of unity. As McDowell often quotes Kant, "the same function which gives unity to the various representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations *in intuition*; and this unity, in its most general expression, we entitle the pure concept of the understanding."³⁷ Kant thinks intuition acquires its synthetic unity by standing under the pure concepts of the understanding. The idea is that, to fulfill intuition's role of object-giving, merely

³⁴ B135.

³⁵ B133.

³⁶ B133.

³⁷ A79/B104-5.

having various sensations floating around is not enough. One needs to be able to recognize that “the representations are combined *in the object*”, not just so in one’s perception.³⁸ For instance, if I am hit by rock on my head, intuition gives me two sensations – seeing a rock and feeling pain on my head. The fact that I find in myself these two sensations need not imply that they are related to each other in any way. I might see a rock and something else hits me. Sensations standing by themselves are merely unstructured matter, in Kant’s words, only “a rhapsody of perceptions”.³⁹ To have the representation that “a rock just hit me” requires me to draw a causal connection between these two sensations. They must be synthesized under a rule that is first made possible by my having the concept of causality.⁴⁰ Intuition, on this account, can no longer be conceived as consisting of mere sensory inputs, but it possesses a synthetic unity as a result of the application of pure concepts.

One may be uneasy by the talk of synthetic unity. For instance, P. F. Strawson charges the very idea of synthesis as part of Kant’s idealist doctrine that needs to be discarded.⁴¹ He thinks that it seems to Kant there can only be a single unity of all representations if the unity is a result of my activity of self-ascription. That all my representations share the relation to the identical self amounts to the kind of synthetic unity because I must *do* the synthesis. And this activity of

³⁸ B142.

³⁹ A156/B195.

⁴⁰ What these pure concepts are and how Kant deduces them is a separate matter. See Longuenesse 2001 for more detail.

⁴¹ Strawson views the Deduction as both things at once: “both as an argument about the implications of the concept of experience in general, and also a description of the transcendental workings of the subjective faculties, whereby experience is produced.” (88-89) He thinks we need to disentangle these two lines to “by-pass the doctrine of synthesis”, which is “superfluous to the essential structure of reasoning [in the Deduction], as an extra wheel, zealously but idly turning” (257). I agree that transcendental idealism is a self-imposed handicap, but it does not follow that we can rightfully dismiss everything Kant says under the picture. There are lessons to be learned in the idea of synthesis that we need to keep, that we can develop further and make sense of once we free it from the transcendental structure.

doing, in Strawson's reading, implies a "mind-made Nature"⁴². We are in effect the source of the empirical reality because they are the result of the synthesis by our faculties, by our application of concepts. It is the constructive activity of the mind that produces the unity of experience out of the sensory input. But I hope to show that, following Macbeth, there is another way to understand the notion of synthesis.

An object of experience, just in virtue of being *given* to us in intuition, is not yet accessible to the mind in any cognitively meaningful way. The object becomes an object *for me* only when the given manifolds in an intuitive representation are "united [into] a concept of an object".⁴³ That is, it is the act of combination – the exercise of understanding in accordance with rules of synthesis – that first brings about the unification of these manifolds into one consciousness. Only then is the matter given by sensation manifest to the mind *as giving an object*. This amounts to conceiving "spontaneity ... as the principle of the very sensibility that was previously characterized only as receptivity".⁴⁴ Not only is sensibility not able to confer cognition by itself; it is now not even a self-standing cognitive faculty. The object-giving function of sensibility turns out to rely *constitutively* on the unifying power of understanding.⁴⁵ Although Kant often refers to intuition as "that in which objects are given to us", the use of the word "object" in this expression is only a rough way of talking. Strictly speaking, there is no object given in the intuition until intuition and pure concepts are brought together for the first time under the unity

⁴² Strawson 1966, 86.

⁴³ B139. McDowell substitutes "into" for "in" in the Cambridge translated edition of the first Critique. For more details, see McDowell 2013, page 148, footnote3.

⁴⁴ Hegel 1977, 70.

⁴⁵ Granted, Kant often refers to intuition as "that in which objects are given to us". But as I've argued the use of the word "object" in such expressions is really just a rough way of talking. Strictly speaking, there is no object given in the intuition until intuition and pure concepts are brought together for the first time under the unity of apperception.

of apperception. This is what the IC thesis means that sensibility and understanding are *inextricably combined*.

The mode of involvement of pure concepts in intuition is of a peculiar nature. It is not an activity that transforms intuition into something *else* but is a realization of the intuition as *what it already is*, namely, as immediately of an object. Pure concepts do not shape what we thus experience as if the world is a product of our own making. Rather, involvement of pure concepts unfolds and actualizes what has been given and contained in intuition already. Therefore, we can say that pure concepts *complete* the role of intuition by actualizing intuition as what it is, i.e., that which gives objects to the mind.

The application of pure concepts to objects, so conceived, gives us a new model for spontaneity of understanding. Spontaneity does not fit with the old passive-active model, where passivity is equated with being affected by something while activity with producing something through an act of will. Through the apperceptive unity, the subject is conscious of itself as the subject that applies the concepts, not just as the passive receiver of bits of givenness. However, the active use of pure concepts in intuition is nothing like the activity from will. Cognizing is not decision-making; we do not decide how things are in the world. The use of concepts in spontaneity is a self-activity that is compatible with – indeed, central to – our *answerability* to how things are in the world. When experience works well, objects in the world reveal themselves in front of us in virtue of our actively combining intuition in accordance with concepts. Granted, the world that we can come to know and cognize is indifferent to the characters of our cognitive faculties and to whether there is a perceiver at all. But it is precisely because spontaneity is unbounded – because

pure concepts are essentially involved in experience – that *we* can be in cognitive contact with objective reality. As McDowell puts it, we must realize that "concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world".⁴⁶ This mode of involvement of concepts as self-activity, or self-actualization, is not so much a matter of what we *do* as of what we *are*. The application of concepts is not parallel to the activity of making up of one's mind; it is rather an expression of the rational nature of our being, a natural actualization of our conceptual capacities as rational knowers.⁴⁷

6. Objectivity and Truth

I've provided an account of concept-involvement in experience that I think solves the question of the conceptuality of experience in support of the IC thesis. It is worth noting that my development of the ideas contained in the Deduction is not how Kant would take himself to be saying. IC is a Kantian thesis – that spontaneity must extend all the way out – but Kant himself would perhaps not be willing to state explicitly this thesis. For the co-operation of sensibility and spontaneity in experience is a double-edged sword for Kant. Although any experience must necessarily involve both sensibility and spontaneity, spontaneity requires sensibility to first *give an object* to the mind. Sensibility provides the matter and spontaneity provides principles of synthesis. They are two different and independent faculties, but neither of them can truly be a cognitive faculty without the other. Thus for Kant the co-operation of the two faculties is simultaneously a restriction on their use. The necessary givenness of objects in intuition

⁴⁶ McDowell 1996, i.

⁴⁷ In *Realizing Reason*, pp. 192-193, Macbeth characterizes Kant's spontaneity as what she terms *expressive* freedom as opposed to *productive* freedom, the latter of which is the kind of freedom in play when we exercise our agency through construction and production.

conditions the use of concepts. Kant's own presentation of the ideas hence cannot demonstrate how spontaneity can be unbounded, although the ideas are already there.

This inconsistency is rooted in the general approach of transcendental idealism to which Kant commits himself. The insights in the Deduction come too late when an overarching transcendent picture has already been set up in the Transcendental Aesthetics. The formal conditions of our sensibility are conditions on objects of consciousness *independent of* conditions from the side of understanding.⁴⁸ In the Aesthetics, Kant argues that our experience is spatiotemporally oriented because space and time belong to our forms of sensibility. In other words, the given matter in intuition is transformed into what we can perceive in accordance with the form of sensibility. It is not an active imposition of the form on the matter, yet the space and time are constitutive of our experience.⁴⁹ Thus, for Kant, the knowable reality⁴⁹ is only an empirical reality, i.e., how things appear to us in experience, not how they are in themselves.⁵⁰ Apart from our perceptions, things are nothing for us at all. Therefore, the thesis that sensibility and spontaneity are inextricably combined is read by Kant both as a claim about the empirical unboundedness of spontaneity *and* about its transcendent restriction by sensibility. Kant grants spontaneity to extend all the way out to appearances but not to things in themselves.

⁴⁸ McDowell 2009 offers a compelling reading along this line.

⁴⁹ This perhaps helps explain why intuitions are given and, in particular, given *representations*. We can make sense of general concepts as representations because the faculty of spontaneity is a faculty that "produces representations for itself", i.e., a faculty of *representing*. However, the faculty of sensibility is receptive and, unlike spontaneity, not productive. Kant thus talks not about representing, but representations. Even though sensibility does not actively shape our experience as such but sets out the characterizations of cognition already.

⁵⁰ The distinction between appearances and things in themselves, although a metaphysical one, is not an ontological one. We should not read Kant as saying things in themselves and appearances are two kinds of entities that are nonetheless somehow causally related. It is not that there is one transcendent world consisting of things in themselves, and another empirical world, in which we live, consisting of appearances. There is only one world and we are in immediate contact with it and it is how things really are. But the immediacy is at the same time, as it were, a filter. The way in which things in the world can be presented to us must conform, according to Kant's Copernican turn, to the conditions from the side of the subject, i.e., the pure forms of sensibility and understanding.

Transcendental idealism is in a sense Kant's own response to the old questions of conceptuality of experience and objectivity of thoughts. Kant clearly sees the necessity that spontaneity must be unbounded. Yet it seems that only with some compromise can we save the notion of objectivity under the acknowledgment of the conceptuality of experience. The idea seems to be this. We must respect objective reality as it stands by itself and preserve its independent being. Additionally, if we still want experience to be structured by conceptual capacities that essentially belong to a cognitive subject we must make this subjective condition for cognition *not* infringe the status of things themselves as mind-independent existences. In other words, we are forced to distinguish between the conditions of the possibility of our *knowledge* of things from the conditions of the possibility of things *in themselves*, the distinction that marks transcendental idealism. We are thus required not to "hanker after the objectivity that goes beyond the pertaining relation to things as they are given to our senses", and exercises of spontaneity ends up limited by the formal conditions of sensibility.

Unfortunately, this compromise does not achieve anything other than making Kant a kind of subjectivist that undermines his solution to either question. For the prominent feature of transcendental idealism is that the necessary structures of experience all rest on our human cognitive constitution. "Whatever is a necessary feature of experience is so because of the subjectivity of its source."⁵¹ We inevitably perceive things as spatiotemporally oriented because our sensibility happens to be so and not otherwise. The two problems cannot be solved in this way by seeking a middle ground between them. As Macbeth points out, if knowledge of how

⁵¹ Strawson 1966, 115.

things appear to us does not constitute real knowledge of the world, then it “does give any account at all of how knowledge is possible”, leaving us in the same place as the Inside-Outside picture does.⁵²

To avoid Transcendental Idealism and to genuinely solve the problem of the objectivity of thoughts, we need to banish the notion of objectivity that belongs to the Inside-Outside picture. The mistake lies in the notion of objectivity as grounded in the givenness of objects *in the modern sense*. That is, objectivity is a foundational conception of judgment's answerability, according to which a bit of bare presence completely settles the truth value of a judgment as if the last step in the order of justification gets us to something outside the rational sphere altogether. This notion of objectivity seems to come from the idea of God's perfect knowledge. Since God's understanding is intuitive, indeed, productive – it produces the object of thought – God cannot be wrong with anything. But since our understanding is not intuitive, the object must be given to us from sensibility. The very idea of perfect knowledge draws us to crave for certainty, which finite beings like us nonetheless cannot entitle ourselves to, except being given from some third-party authority, that is, from external reality, and let it decide whether a thought is right or wrong *once for all*.

This hope for an external guarantee is toxic, as we've seen already in the Myth of the Given. Now if we give up the desire for certainty, then what is left in the idea of knowledge? The achievement of truth seems then undeterminable. It doesn't mean that we should discard the notion of truth altogether. Of course we can still call some statement true and some other false

⁵² Macbeth 2014, 198.

and we still bear a cognitive relation with reality. But we should not talk about the infallible state of knowledge of how reality really is. Following Macbeth, knowledge is not about its *product* but about the *practice*.⁵³ Namely, it is not primarily about achieving the goal of Truth but primarily about the practice of inquiry by the self-standing and unconditioned power of critical reflection.⁵⁴ As McDowell puts it, rational thinking is “under a standard obligation to reflect about and criticize the standards by which, at any time, it takes itself to be governed”.⁵⁵ Knowledge is essentially an *internal and dynamic* relation to reality mediated by our activity, not a correspondence relation with reality mediated by the given. This gets rid of the very idea of belief as a correct or incorrect representation of a picture of reality. Under the new picture of the subject-object unification I mentioned in section 4, reality is revealed in front of us because we bring our concepts to the world.

Objectivity is thus grounded not in the givenness of objects but rather in the unconditioned capacity for second thought. The truth of a particular belief may be conditioned – that I believe thus and so given the reasons available to me here and now. But the local status of individual beliefs as being conditioned at any particular time is situated in a broader process of inquiry where the principles of reasoning – the link between revisions of belief – is utterly unconditioned and self-legitimizing. The objective reality to which a judgment is answerable is not an independent external constraint *imposed on* thinking from outside, but rather is attained through the self-standing activity of inquiry. In other words, we are making progress, and the criterion of the very idea of progress is not truth-oriented but is reason's own criteria. We can be answerable

⁵³ Ibid, 157.

⁵⁴ The idea of rational inquiry as essentially grounded in reason's capacity for self-correction is a common theme in Sellars 1956, McDowell 1996, and Macbeth 2014.

⁵⁵ McDowell 1996, 81.

to the world *because* we are first and foremost answerable to oneself and one another. We become answerable to the world by being answerable to reason.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I start within a Kantian framework. I channel McDowell's Kantian thesis that experience must be essentially conceptual. Yet I've denied that the passive involvement theory can show how this thesis can be possible. McDowell proposes the idea of passive involvement of concepts in experience to resolve the tension between the passivity and the conceptuality of experience; I think this account fails. There need not be any tension, not because the involvement of concepts in experience are passive, but because the passive-active distinction itself falls apart.

I then identify an Inside-Outside picture that is due to revolutions in modern science in the West. The driving force of this picture is the tendency, as McDowell discerns to equate nature with the realm of physical laws. Under this picture, things in the world become objectified for the first and the human subject becomes a spectator that is outside the world. The greatest issue of the Inside-Outside picture is that it makes knowledge impossible because it raises two apparently irresolvable questions, of the conceptuality of experience and of the objectivity of thoughts.

I propose that we replace this picture with a more neutral and more natural picture - in the sense of fitting our natural history – in which the object and the subject are unified in experience.

Under the new picture, the meaning that the world has in our cognitive eyes is equally tied with both what we are and what the world is. It is through the two sides coming together that a theory of knowledge and experience becomes intelligible. We've been misconceiving the nature of

ourselves as living beings and as rational beings, on the model of understanding objects in the world in terms of natural laws. This unification is made possible by concepts. Experience no longer lives in an entirely different world of causes and issues constraint on thinking when thoughts bump against the world. Now experience itself is conceived as a kind of actualizations of the conceptual capacities.

For a more specific account, we can extract from Transcendental Deduction a line of thought that offers us an inspiring way to conceive spontaneity as self-activity that helps make sense of the role of concepts in experience. Of course Kant himself is a transcendental idealist but we can develop certain ideas in the Deduction and free them from the transcendental framework.

Concepts complete the role of intuition by actualizing intuition as what it is, i.e., that which gives objects to the mind. The application of concepts so conceived is an expression of the rational nature of our being, a natural actualization of our conceptual capacities as rational knowers.

Using Transcendental Idealism as a target, I suggest that the new subject-object picture, in which the thesis of the conceptuality of experience is situated, requires us to refashion our understanding of what objectivity means. The central mistake is the desire for certainty as a result of the Inside-Outside picture and the modern scientific approach. Giving up this notion of certainty, we should instead focus on the very practice of inquiry rather than the achievement of truth. Objectivity of thoughts is consequently explicable in terms not of the givenness of reality but rather of the self-standing capacity of self-scrutiny.

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