

van Mazijk, Corijn. 2022. *Perception and Reality in Kant, Husserl and McDowell*. New York/Abingdon, Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-367-44180-7. 174 pages.

Van Mazijk's book *Perception and Reality in Kant, Husserl and McDowell* (henceforth *PRKHM*) is devoted to a criticism of McDowell's views on perception and his distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law. It consists of two chapters on Kant, two on Husserl and two on McDowell. However, the last two chapters are meant to be central to the argument of the book. The chapters on Kant and Husserl are meant to "supply the more detailed investigations required to sustain these criticisms [of McDowell]" (*PRKHM*, xvii). More specifically, Van Mazijk takes issue with what he calls McDowell's 'strong conceptualism'. He attempts to show the shortcomings of this view and argues in favour of 'weak conceptualism', according to which non-conceptual content can play a role in an account of how our senses gives us access to reality (the central issue of the book, according to the review by Hanna, who emphatically claims that this is the fundamentally important issue in contemporary philosophy, See Hanna 2021). Van Mazijk finds support for 'weak conceptualism' in his readings of Kant and Husserl. Since it is the self-professed main aim of the book to engage with McDowell, I concentrate on Van Mazijk's discussion of his work. In order to understand what is at issue, I first describe how McDowell introduces his views in his seminal book *Mind and World*. I then discuss Van Mazijk's criticisms of McDowell, and I end with some critical comments on the argumentative structure of *PRKHM*.

If contemporary epistemology addresses the question of how to justify perceptual knowledge (a topic McDowell already dealt with in one of his first publications, a translation and commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*), it is confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, there is Davidson's insistence that rational justification can only be provided by items that can be true or false and thus are conceptually structured. A point of view that Davidson has captured in his famous slogan 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief' (Davidson 1983, 141). Consequently, experiences merely play a causal role in acquiring beliefs about the world, but they do not provide reasons for rational perceptual beliefs and intentional actions.

Opposition to this idea takes the form of an affirmation that non-conceptual experiences provide normative constraints on our perceptual beliefs about the world. Following Sellars, McDowell thinks this is the mistake of 'the myth of the given', the mistake of accepting non-conceptual items as justifiers or warrant of conceptually structured perceptual beliefs.

McDowell's way out of the dilemma is to reject Davidson's slogan, because it does not "accommodate the role of experience in making beliefs rational

intelligible.” However, McDowell does not reject Davidson’s slogan all together; “He could have made the same substantial point if he had said: nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except something else that is also in the space of concepts – for instance, a circumstance consisting in its appearing to a subject that things are thus and so” (McDowell 1994, 140. See also McDowell 2009b, 137).

The intuition that there is something ‘given’ in perception can be assuaged by emphasizing the passive character of experience, which contrasts it with the active capacity of thinking. In experience conceptual capacities are passively brought into play. Experiences are equipped with conceptual content (McDowell 1994, 25) and they can thus play a role in justification. They are the result of a joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity (the capacity to think). At this point McDowell appeals to Kant: “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75) (See McDowell 1994, 3, 9, 41, 51, 97).

McDowell insists on the inseparability of receptivity and spontaneity, because he emphasizes that only the involvement of conceptual capacities in experience “enables us to credit experiences with a rational bearing on empirical thinking” (McDowell 1994, 52). He explicitly rejects Evans’s non-conceptual content account of experience, because Evans’s claim that “judgements of experience are “based upon” experiences” [...] masks the fact that the relations between experiences and judgements are being conceived to meet inconsistent demands: to be such as to fit experiences to be reasons for judgements, while being outside the reach of rational inquiry” (McDowell 1994, 53). The transition from non-conceptual contents, that cannot be the object of propositional attitudes, to conceptual contents, that can be the object of propositional attitudes, is mysterious.

One reason for McDowell to emphasize the self-scrutiny of active thinking is that he retains several coherentist aspects of Davidson’s position. The conceptual system has to be improved from within, just like in Aristotle’s ethics. Our conceptual system is autonomous. McDowell even appeals to Neurath’s ship in this regard (McDowell 1994, 81).

We cannot reduce our conceptual capacities to independent facts about human nature. This is supported by McDowell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein on rule-following. If we engage in thinking, the rules we follow are autonomous and cannot be explained, let alone justified, by reducing them to underlying scientific (neurophysiological) facts. Science can only explain why there are certain enabling conditions that need to be satisfied, if we want to exercise our conceptual capacities.

McDowell emphasizes the circularity of understanding, very much in the spirit of Heidegger (See Lievers (forthcoming)) and he rejects a reductive, sideways-on perspective on concept-possession and understanding.

At this point mention should also be made of the influence of David Wiggins, that is neglected in the secondary literature, whose ‘conceptualist realism’ (Wiggins 2001, chapter 5) is presupposed throughout *Mind and World*, as can be exemplified with the following quote:

Our claim was only that what sortal concepts we bring to bear upon experience determines what we can find there – just as the size and mesh of a net determine, not what fish are in the sea, but which ones we shall catch. It is true that the individuating conceptions that are brought to bear at any point will come with notions about the ways in which things of a given kind behave. These notions will bear on persistence conditions. But this does not imply that, once things of a given kind, *f*s or *g*s, are lighted upon, the individuating scheme we bring to bear will itself determine something further – a principle of activity or a persistence condition.

WIGGINS 2001, 152

McDowell too is a conceptualist realist, and his realism is also evident from the fact that he is an externalist in the philosophy of mind (see f.i. McDowell 1986). Conceptualism (idealism) and common sense realism cohere. As he writes: “Any idealism with a chance of being credible must aspire to being such that, if thought through, it stands revealed as fully cohering with the realism of common sense.” (McDowell 2009b, 141) “[...] if we say the world is everything that can be truly thought to be the case, [...] thought and the world must be understood together. The form of thought is already just as such the form of the world. It is a form that is subjective and objective together [...] Here we have, at least programmatically, an idealism that does not diverge from common-sense realism” (McDowell 2009b, 141).

Van Mazijk has set up McDowell’s position differently. He emphasizes quite heavily that McDowell is engaged in transcendental philosophy, rather than in an epistemological enterprise. McDowell’s question is not whether our thinking puts us in a position of knowledge (McDowell 2009a, 243), but in the conditions of the possibility of our empirical thinking having empirical content. This is why Van Mazijk groups Kant, Husserl and McDowell together: all three belong to the tradition of transcendental philosophy (*PRKHM*, 1).

In what follows I question whether there is an equivocal meaning of the term transcendental that is applicable to Kant, Husserl and McDowell. I then

criticize Van Mazijk's objections to so called 'strong conceptualism'. His favoured alternative 'weak conceptualism' comes down to Evans's non-conceptualism, which McDowell rejects. I argue that Van Mazijk has failed to appreciate McDowell's non-reductionism, and as a result his invocation of *Bildung* as a development of second nature. The root of these misunderstandings is a fundamental different conception of philosophy.

In assembling Kant, Husserl and McDowell under the header of 'the transcendental tradition in philosophy', Van Mazijk invites the question what he means with the notion of transcendental. He claims that these philosophers "worked their way to answering the question of reality by advancing from the same key insight. The insight is roughly this: that reality is inevitably something that is given to us, and more precisely, given to us through our senses." (*PRKHM*, 1). This claim, however, is at the very least problematic and certainly in need of clarification, which Van Mazijk does not provide.

Kant's use of the term is notoriously problematic (See O. Duintjer 1966). He introduced the notion as follows: "I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible a priori. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 149, A12/B25). 'Transcendental', because Kant is concerned with the conditions for the possibility of experience, and, as Walker remarks, these are the same as the conditions for the possibility of knowledge (Walker 1978, 10). The transcendental method is then an attempt to justify the objectivity of empirical knowledge with transcendental arguments.

Husserl can be interpreted as being engaged in a similar project of justifying the possibility of objectively valid knowledge (see Bell 1990, 156–157), but his transcendental phenomenology employs a completely different methodology. Fundamental in this methodology is the *epoché*, the bracketing of the existence of objects in reality. It is a transcendental reduction that is a procedure for reducing all ontological commitments (See Bell 1990, 161–172, and Ströker 1993, 53–83). The world and its objects are then regained in a process of constitution, that is meant to justify the objectivity of knowledge. Husserl's methodology thus has affinities with Kant's, but also fundamental differences as he himself describes (Husserl 1924). In connection with McDowell one of the fundamental differences between him and Husserl is that Husserl's methodology leads to internalism in the philosophy of mind, whereas McDowell defends externalism (See Dreyfus 1991, 74, Dreyfus and Hall 1982. For a dissenting interpretation see Zahavi 2004 and 2008).

McDowell's use of the term transcendental has been the matter of some debate (see A. Haddock 2008 and 2009, and Virvidakis 2006), but it is clear

what his starting point is: ‘la condition humaine’, what De Gaynesford has called ‘*the Default*’ (De Gaynesford 2004, 6). McDowell is practising descriptive metaphysics. Perception provides us, humans, with reasons for action, with justification for beliefs about the world; perceptions can be revised in the light of new information or critical reflection. What is the precondition for the possibility of perceptions having empirical content that is “able to come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking”? (McDowell 1994, 53). McDowell claims that this precondition is that conceptual capacities are active in perception, which enables us to say that experience is “an openness to the lay-out of reality” (McDowell 1994, 26). He writes:

Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. *That things are thus and so* is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the world.

MCDOWELL 1994, 26

For a proper understanding of this quote it is necessary to invoke McDowell’s interpretation of Frege’s notion of sense. Just like Evans (Evans 1982, 16) McDowell interprets sense as a way of thinking about the referent. Senses are object dependent. “[...] the sense of a singular term, and the sense of any proposition in which it occurs, is dependent for its existence and identity on the existence and identity of the particular object is about or directed on” (De Gaynesford 2004, 128, and McDowell 1977, 1984a, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1998a). This also constitutes the basis for McDowell’s externalism in the philosophy of mind and his disjunctivism. Thoughts are object-dependent. “[...] so where there is reference-failure there cannot be a thought of the appropriate kind to bear a truth-value” (McDowell 1986, 143).

So McDowell’s answer to the question of what the precondition for the possibility of perceptions having empirical content is, is that experiences cannot stand in rational relations to reasons, unless they are conceptually structured. In that respect he does stand closely to Kant, but it is Strawson’s Kant, without transcendental idealism. Indeed, McDowell shares Strawson’s philosophical objective of “aiming at general human conceptual self-understanding” (Strawson 2003, 12).

This is not how Van Mazijk interprets McDowell. In his reconstruction of McDowell’s position Van Mazijk assigns a central place to the distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law (which Van Mazijk labels ‘the space of nature’). According to Van Mazijk the dilemma contemporary

philosophy faces when asked to justify perceptual knowledge of ‘a frictionless spinning in the void’ and ‘the myth of the given’ is the result of “the idea of two spaces of explanation.” He then admits that the division of spaces is not the source of the dilemma, but on the same page he seems to contradict this: “The modern problem, or so McDowell argues, is one of being trapped in a dilemma that is said to result from the perceived relations between these spaces” (*PRKHM*, 123). A remark he repeats in the next chapter: “In *Mind and World*, among other places, McDowell identifies a dilemma which is said to result from a certain conception of how these two spaces would be related” (*PRKHM*, 147).

This reconstruction of McDowell’s position prevents Van Mazijk from appreciating the way McDowell poses the transcendental question. Its starting point is not a division of the space of reasons and the realm of law, but human life; a meaningful engagement with the world in which perceptions are reasons for actions, therefore they have to be conceptually structured.

Van Mazijk call McDowell’s thesis ‘strong conceptualism’ and he questions it throughout his book, to such an extent that he even wants to resist the attribution of this view to McDowell. He turns it into an issue (*PRKHM*, 125–127) whether McDowell is a strong conceptualist, but that isn’t an issue at all. McDowell is a strong conceptualist, as Van Mazijk himself concludes (131) after a rather superfluous discussion of the matter.

As against McDowell, Van Mazijk rejects strong conceptualism. Unfortunately, this rejection is short and not very argumentative. He demands to know:

which concepts do play a role in the experience. If, for instance, my perception does not present me with a cardinal when I see one, does it at least still present me with a bird? What about the concept of ‘animal in general’ or ‘thing in general’? If perception is informed by concepts, as McDowell tells us, then which concepts play this informative role?

PRKHM, 129, see also 131

But which concepts are activated does not matter as long as concepts are involved. The decisive point is that the understanding makes a contribution, as McDowell underlines. You perceive a person who walks past you on the pavement; a few seconds later you realise that you have walked past your PhD supervisor. This critical reflection is only possible, if your initial perception was already conceptually laden.

Similar considerations apply to Van Mazijk’s rejection of McDowell’s view on what distinguishes our perceptual experience from those of non-rational

animals. According to McDowell animals see things in the outer world as we do. Van Mazijk thinks this implies a rejection of strong conceptualism.

[McDowell's] message [...] is clear: animals see things or items in the outer world 'no less' than we do. But it is difficult to see how this fits into the conceptualist thesis as discussed so far. For wasn't the whole idea of conceptualism to take the very givenness of things as a result of conceptual functions of an understanding only rational creatures like us enjoy? It seems that by saying that 'items in the outer world are perceptually given to such creatures no less than to us' (TFKG [McDowell 2018], 2)¹, McDowell contradicts his own conceptualism, which rests on the idea that the sensible presentation of things in the outer world relies on functions specific to rational creatures like us, namely on concepts and the capacity to judge.

PRKHM, 131

This is wrong for two reasons. First, McDowell, following Wiggins, is a conceptualist *realist*, not a conceptualist *idealist*. There is a readymade world out there; we need concepts to single objects out determinately. As Wiggins has put it: "The mind *conceptualizes* an object that is there to be conceptualized, even as the object *impinges* upon the mind that has the right thought to single out that object." (Wiggins 1986, 180). Secondly, the difference between the experience of non-rational animals and ours is qualitative. As Wittgenstein has put it: "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein 1953, 190).

Non-rational animals do not possess human concepts, but that there is more to their experiences, than activation of nerve cells in their senses is obvious. Since this is an empirical question, McDowell can leave it to science to discover and examine what these capacities are. That is why McDowell does not address the questions Van Mazijk raises for his strong conceptualism. Van Mazijk turns McDowell into an ontological idealist by attributing to him the view that the givenness of things is a result of conceptual functions, but the mind only *construes* reality; it does not *construct* it.

In an article that Van Mazijk does not discuss nor mention McDowell explicitly addresses the question of the relationship between the sensibility of non-rational animal and that of rational animals:

¹ McDowell (2018).

Our sensibility should be our version of something non-rational animals also have. What functioning sense-organs yield for a non-rational animal is not items exhaustively describable in a way that relates them solely to the animal as modifications of its state. Sensibility provides an animal with representations – awarenesses in some sense – of features of its environment. [...] Thanks to the higher faculty that distinguishes us from non-rational animals, our sensory representations can have the status of cognitions, as theirs cannot. But the higher faculty is not needed for what sensibility yields to be representations. It is by virtue of the higher faculty that the representations we receive through sensibility are cognitions, but not that they are representations *überhaupt*.

MCDOWELL 2009b, 117–118

The way McDowell handles ‘the finesses of grain objection’ to the claim that perception is completely conceptual establishes conclusively that Van Mazijk misconstrues McDowell’s position. Evans rhetorically asks the question: “Can we really understand the proposal that we have as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can sensibly discriminate?” (Evans 1982, 229). McDowell affirms this question as follows: “My visual experience represents something as being of *that* shade. [...] We can ensure that what we have in view is genuinely recognizable as a conceptual capacity if we insist that the very same capacity to embrace a colour in mind can in principle persist beyond the duration of the experience itself. In the presence of the original sample, “that shade” can give expression to a concept of a shade; [...]” (McDowell 1994, 57).

Van Mazijk’s rejection of McDowell’s position on the basis of these arguments is therefore not very convincing and comes down to the claim that his favoured position is to be preferred. The positions he favours is *weak conceptualism*, which he characterizes as the view that “sense experience is open to propositional explication in thought; all intuitions and perceptions are for us at least open to conceptual exercise” (PRKHM, 4).

Van Mazijk’s weak conceptualism closely resembles Evans’s position in *The Varieties of Reference*, that McDowell critically discusses in the third chapter of *Mind and World*. Weak conceptualism is an instance of the myth of the given, because it presupposes that what is open to propositional exercise is given; there is ‘given’ non-conceptual content that is waiting to be conceptualized.

This is closely connected to the second main objection Van Mazijk has against McDowell’s position, to which he dedicates the sixth chapter of his book. This objection is that McDowell draws the line between the space of reasons versus realm of law in such a way

that only that part of our mental lives relevant to responsiveness to reasons – the conceptual part that is allegedly unique to humans – allows taking in a viewpoint from which it is considered outside of the realm of natural law. Non-conceptual mental contents, by contrast, would fit unproblematically within the explanatory framework of the space of nature.

PRKHM, 146

And this leads to the accusation that “the transition from the non-conceptual to the space of reasons (*Bildung*) cannot be clarified on the basis of this division of spaces” (*PRKHM*, 146).

The basis for Van Mazijk’s rejection of the way McDowell draws the distinction between the space of reasons and the realm of law is that he simply denies that beliefs cannot be based on anything we could designate as extra-conceptual (*PRKHM*, 151), or, to remove the double negation: Van Mazijk claims that perceptual beliefs can be based on something extra-conceptual, and the gist of the argument in his book is that this is non-conceptual content. Once again he thus adheres to a position resembling that of Evans who wrote that judgements of experience are ‘based upon’ experience (Evans 1982, 227), which McDowell explicitly rejects, as we have just seen.

Van Mazijk appeals to Husserl in particular in order to argue that there are other mental accomplishments, non-conceptual sensations, that are experienced and thus available to consciousness. Husserl, however, provided a constitutive analysis of the phenomenology of perception. McDowell can even grant this, but he is engaged in a different project: his point is that experiences “must be able to come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking” (McDowell 1994, 53). McDowell appeals to Aristotle to illustrate what he means. (McDowell 1994, 78). In Aristotle’s ethics virtues are developed by practical wisdom, which McDowell glosses as “a responsiveness to some of the demands of reason” (McDowell 1994, 79). Such reflective criticism is autonomous and can be compared with Neurath’s ship, as I described above (McDowell 1994, 81). McDowell requires that the deliverances of the senses are available for rational scrutiny: what did I see? Was it a dog or a wolf? In order to be able to ask these questions perceptual content needs to be conceptual. The autonomy of critical self-reflection, the coherentist aspect of McDowell’s position, is manifest from his remark that it is a “historical monstrosity” to attempt to reduce these critical requirements “out of independent facts about human nature” (McDowell 1994, 79).

Van Mazijk ignores the strong anti-reductionist tendencies in McDowell's views, that can be traced back to his earliest writings, in which he rejected proposals to reduce the conceptual capacity to understand meaning to more basic behavioural capacities (See f.i. McDowell (1977) and (1981)). Van Mazijk also ignores the influence of the later Wittgenstein, who also stresses the autonomy of rules and that justifications of those rules comes to an end. McDowell quotes approvingly from the *Philosophical Investigations* §217:

“How am I able to follow a rule?” If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in *this* way in complying with the rule.

Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”

MCDOWELL 1984b, 240

Wittgenstein's antireductionism is also clearly expressed in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations* xii, § 365:

If concept formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn't we be interested, not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature? – We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest is not thereby thrown back on to these possible causes of concept formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

The neglect of the influence of Wittgenstein explains why Van Mazijk doesn't understand the use McDowell makes of the concept of *Bildung* and the notion of second nature. He writes:

Unfortunately, McDowell's theory of *Bildung* is quite abstract, and it does not generate any substantial insight as to how intellectual life would spring out of something more basic.

PRKHM, 150

From this quote it is clear that Van Mazijk, unlike Wittgenstein and McDowell, does want to reduce conceptual capacities to 'something more basic'. That explains why he states that McDowell's naturalism is 'unsubstantiated' (PRKHM, 151) and 'unattractive' (PRKHM, 150).

Van Mazijk's reductionism precludes him from seeing what McDowell's position is: human beings dance the tango or the quickstep, they speak different languages, they eat food with fork and knife or chop sticks. These are natural facts, but they cannot be reduced to underlying naturalistic facts that belong to the realm of law. These facts of second nature would not be possible, were it not for the fact that human beings have two legs, a tongue, a vocal cord, a thumb that that is opposable to fingers. These are *enabling conditions* for performing acts whose actualization is determined by rules that are learnt by growing up in a particular community. This is *Bildung* and a development of second nature.

This shows that Van Mazijk has an altogether different conception of philosophy than McDowell. McDowell's philosophy is an insightful description of the human condition, while Van Mazijk seems to think that philosophy is in the business of explaining things. That is why he is baffled with McDowell's remark that he shrugs his shoulders about the question "What constitutes the structure of the space of reasons?" (McDowell 1994, 178, *PRKHM*, 150). Van Mazijk ignores that McDowell explicitly refers to Wittgenstein's quietism on the page he quotes from. He accuses McDowell of not explaining reasons:

McDowell, as I understand him, meets these concerns halfway in accepting that an explanation in terms of natural law isn't possible at least where reasons are concerned. However, he falls short of giving any real *explanation* (my italics) as to how any mental state or content could nonetheless be regarded as a natural phenomenon. [...]

PRKHM, 155

This quote clearly shows that Van Mazijk is engaged with a different project than McDowell, and that he thinks that transcendental philosophy should be explanatory, as a kind of speculative science.

The critical chapters on McDowell are preceded by two on Kant and two on Husserl. The focus in the Kant-chapters is mainly on the issue of whether Kant accepts a notion of non-conceptual content; a discussion in the secondary literature inaugurated by McDowell. Although the amount of literature discussed by Van Mazijk is impressive, the choice of the material is selective. Longuenesse's *Kant and the capacity to judge* is only briefly mentioned, while a thorough engagement with this book is highly relevant for Van Mazijk's criticisms of McDowell and the entire argument of his book.

By contrast, the chapters on Husserl are largely expositive and defend the idea that Husserl's division between the space of nature and the space of consciousness is to be preferred over McDowell's distinction between the space of

reasons and the realm of law. Husserl is also praised for developing a far more detailed theory of perception than Kant and McDowell have done.

This book leaves the reader with rather mixed feelings. On the one hand the attempt to connect McDowell's work with Kant and Husserl does justice to its importance. On the other hand, the discussion of McDowell's work is abrasive and too schematic, without paying attention to the careful wording and details of his position. Van Mazijk's disagreement with McDowell is based on a fundamental different conception of philosophy, which results in serious misconstruals of McDowell's position. There is a lot of repetition in the book and its main argument could have been presented more clearly and more precisely.

The book would have benefited from better editing. Instead of placing the two chapters on McDowell at the end, these should have been the first two, with clear conclusions about the shortcomings of McDowell's position. The chapters on Kant and Husserl could then have shown how these philosophers offered better answers to the problems McDowell addressed. Now the cart has been put before the horse.

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