

The Shape of a Good Question: McDowell, Evolution, and Transcendental Philosophy  
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## 0. Introduction

In the fifteen years since McDowell first presented the lectures that became *Mind and World*, his work has taken on increasingly clearer shape as a serious engagement with the problem as to why we find ourselves beset by anxieties – the “transcendental anxiety” (McDowell 2009a, 243) as he has recently phrased it – about how to think of ourselves as the sorts of beings capable of “experiencing the world” (ibid.). The solution to these anxieties, he contends, lies in a correct description of how it is that the subjective taking-in of genuinely objective states of affairs, together with critically examining one’s world-view in light of those takings-in – is even possible in the first place. But in *Mind and World* itself, McDowell notes a further role that the correct description will play: the correct description of experience will allow us to distinguish between the sorts of questions that deserve to be taken seriously and those questions which ought to be exercised rather than answered.

In light of this, I want to examine how McDowell situates scientific explanations, and in particular evolutionary explanations, in relation to the description of our capacity to experience the world. Though he has little to say about evolutionary explanations, what

he does say deserves more scrutiny than it has hitherto received: “it is true, however, that the good questions we can raise in the evolutionary context come as close as good questions can to the philosophical questions I want to exorcize” (McDowell 1996, 124n12). This compressed statement raises a host of questions: what sort of questions does McDowell wish to ‘exorcize’, and how does such an exorcism proceed? How does thinking of *M&W* as concerned with the correct description of experience illuminate the need and possibility of such an exorcism? Why are the questions that arise in evolutionary explanations “the closest that a good question can come” to the questions that must be exorcised? Does McDowell’s embrace of transcendental philosophy subsequent to *M&W* alter our responses to these questions?

In what follows, I first draw on Strawson and Sellars to situate McDowell’s articulation of what I call “transcendental description” (§ 1). I then turn to what McDowell says, both in Lecture VI of *M&W* and in subsequent works, regarding what he takes to be a deep and important discontinuity between rational animals (i.e. normal mature human beings) and other animals (§ 2).<sup>1</sup> Rorty and Welchmann, both deeply influenced by Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism, criticize McDowell for his commitment to discontinuity in light of evolutionary explanations (§3). I shall then turn to McDowell’s few remarks in *M&W* on evolutionary explanations in order to explicate how McDowell understands the difference between transcendental descriptions and empirical explanations (§ 4). McDowell’s commitment to discontinuity must be understood in terms of the transcendental description of human beings as rational animals. A proper understanding the origins of this tension within McDowell’s deepest methodological commitments will

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<sup>1</sup> “Normal” is my addition; McDowell only insists on mature human beings.

put us in better position to assess the strengths and weakness of his contributions to contemporary philosophy (§ 5).

## 1. Philosophy as Transcendental Description: McDowell's Debt to Strawson and to Sellars

In the preface to *Mind and World*, McDowell acknowledges his debt to two philosophers above all, Peter Strawson and Wilfrid Sellars. Apart from the inspiration he draws from specific contributions they made to substantive issues, they also provided McDowell with a model of how to understand his own philosophical project:

I have been more strongly influenced than footnotes can indicate by P. F. Strawson, especially by his peerless book on Kant's First Critique. I am not sure that Strawson's Kant is really Kant, but I am convinced that Strawson's Kant comes close to achieving what Kant wanted to achieve. In these lectures ... my use of Kant in saying how we should conceive experience – the main thing I try to do here – is Strawsonian in spirit and often in detail. (McDowell 1996, viii)

Whether or not Strawson's Kant is really Kant, we can understand something of what McDowell takes himself to be doing by noticing how Strawson describes his own project in *The Bounds of Sense* and in *Individuals*, as well as Sellars' own use of Strawson.

At the outset of *The Bounds of Sense*, Strawson proposes that “[t]here are limits to what we can conceive of, or make intelligible to ourselves, as a possible general structure of experience” and that Kant's task consists of “[t]he investigation of these limits, the investigation of the set of ideas which forms the limiting framework of all our thought about the world and experience of the world” (Strawson 1966, 15). It is not an

investigation of what is imaginable or possible *per se*, but an investigation into the most general features of the conceptual frameworks which make possible our experience of the world, understood in the broadest sense as any experience of the world which is intelligible as belonging to the experience of beings recognizable as being like us in relevant respects (e.g. being both sensually receptive to the world and possessing conceptual frameworks about the world).

This task is subsequently identified as the “metaphysics of experience” in *The Bounds of Sense* and in *Individuals* as a “descriptive metaphysics” (Strawson 1959, 9). Rather than propose new systems of classifying or interpreting experience, one attempts to identify the most general features of possible experience for beings like us. The descriptive metaphysics of experience thus poses the ‘How possible?’ question for the most general, most pervasive aspects of whatever is intelligible to us as a possible experience. For Strawson’s Kant, the metaphysics of experience consists of describing how it is possible for us to enjoy experience of unified objects arrayed in spatiotemporal order and interacting with both themselves and with us according to well-defined principles that are both objectively valid and knowable *a priori*.<sup>2</sup>

The other principal intellectual debt McDowell mentions in the Preface to *M&W* is to Wilfrid Sellars. The importance of providing a descriptive ontology of everyday life is no less important for Sellars than for Strawson, and indeed Sellars indicates his debt to Strawson (as well as to Austin) at several points in *Science and Metaphysics* (1967). But there is also an important contrast between Strawson and Sellars. Whereas Strawson is content to proceed more or less *a priori* – ‘seeing ourselves from nowhere’ -- Sellars

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<sup>2</sup> As contrasted with what Strawson regards as the ‘transcendent metaphysics’ in the Critique, i.e. the *ideality* of space and time.

introduces two closely related distinctions. Firstly, he distinguishes between the descriptive ontology of everyday life and the scientific ontology that emerges from the natural sciences. Secondly, he stresses that both ontologies have a strongly historical orientation. Thus not only does he distinguish between what he calls the “manifest image” and the “scientific image” (1963a) – what he later calls “*sub specie Strawsonii*” and “*sub specie Smartii*” (1967, 11) – but also their historicity: “It is now 1966. Millennia have passed since the Ryleian community in which we placed ourselves, espoused the new way of mental acts and began the training which have shaped the Strawsonian framework in which we live, move, and have our being” (ibid., 88). Thus while Sellars appears to accept Strawson’s account of the descriptive metaphysics of experience, what is described is also bound up with history.

The historical dimension of Sellars’ thought allows him to consider the further revisability of the descriptive metaphysics of experience. This possibility plays an important role in his suggestion that some aspects of the manifest image will be eventually fused with the scientific image.<sup>3</sup> The descriptive metaphysics of experience which articulates the conceptual system of ‘Peirceish’ at the end of inquiry (“CSP”) will be Strawsonian in spirit but radically un-Strawsonian in letter.<sup>4</sup> The historicist orientation thus raises the question as to *whose* experience is being so described by the available conceptual framework – that is, the extension of the “our” in the notion of the descriptive metaphysics of our experience. Whether or not the historicity and revisability of

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of the fusion of the two images has been helpfully stressed by de Vries (2005), Rosenberg (2007), and O’Shea (2007).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Sellars 1966,140-50; Sellars 1963b, 170-4.

descriptive metaphysics poses a challenge for McDowell is an issue that I shall return to below (§5).

Yet McDowell goes beyond both Strawson and Sellars in several respects. Among them is his interest in the *critical* function of descriptive metaphysics as liberating us from partial, one-sided, or limited self-conceptions. Limited conceptions hold us captive by making certain questions seem compulsory for philosophical reflection.<sup>5</sup> McDowell thus aims at liberating us from the oscillations that he understands as plaguing analytic philosophy of mind and epistemology, such as that between coherentism and the Myth of the Given. In seeking to avoid the temptations of one, he argues, we find ourselves blindly stumbling into the other. If *M&W* is explanatory, it is not explanatory in the way that the sciences provide explanations; it is explanatory only insofar as it aims “at explaining how it comes about that we *seem* to be confronted with philosophical obligations of a familiar sort, and I want the explanation to enable us to unmask that appearance *as an illusion* ... [and] reject the appearance that we face a pressing intellectual task” (*M&W* xi; emphasis added). Thus, rather than present novel theories of knowledge and meaning -- perhaps theories which could be empirically tested -- *M&W* aims to provide a more adequate descriptive metaphysics which will illuminate how it is possible for us to hold a world-view, or stand under the obligation to reflect upon it (*M&W* 12; 126).

McDowell asserts that we cannot really do without the “minimal empiricism” which requires that our intellectual grasping of the world as an organized and coherent whole must be answerable to (in the Quinean phrase that McDowell appropriates) “the tribunal

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<sup>5</sup> Thus, Kant aimed at liberating us from the oscillations that animated traditional onto-theological speculation – that is, the rational psychology, rational cosmology, and rational theology against which the Transcendental Dialectic takes aim.

of experience” (*M&W* xvi). He intends to exorcise the illusion that minimal empiricism is intelligible if and only if there is experiential content which is entirely independent of all conceptualization – in other words, the Myth of the Given. The Given will tempt us so long as it seems that minimal empiricism is unsustainable without it, such that without the Given there is no alternative to mere coherentism, which McDowell famously disparages as “frictionless spinning in the void” (*M&W* 11). Nothing short of a way of seeing how experience can serve as a tribunal without succumbing to the allure of Givenness will allow us to disengage from the oscillation between the two false positions. A correct description of what experience is – that is, once we have a correct descriptive metaphysics of experience – we will have the tools we need for diagnosing the illusion and seeing through it. The picture will no longer hold us captive.

Whereas in *Mind and World* McDowell describes his project as an attempt to vindicate “minimal empiricism,” in more recent work McDowell argues that his defense of minimal empiricism requires “transcendental empiricism.” In his 1998 Woodbridge lectures, what will later be labeled as “transcendental empiricism” emerges as a further development of Sellars’ criticism of classical empiricism. In *EPM* § 38 (SPR 170), Sellars argues that classical empiricism is mistaken in holding that our higher-order theories of the world rest on the foundation of perceptual experience. Instead Sellars argues that if we are to successfully reject the Myth of the Given (in its empiricist version), we should recognize an interdependence of perceptual experience and theories. As with classical empiricism, Sellars maintains that theories are justified in terms of perceptual experiences, and that that dependence is straightforwardly epistemological. But there is another “logical

dimension,” which McDowell understands as a transcendental dependence, according to which perceptual experience is made possible by conceptual capacities:

[w]e can intelligibly credit perceptual experience with objective purport only in virtue of how the conceptual apparatus that constitutes their objective purport fits into the world-view that is, in the other logical dimension, grounded on the deliverances of experience. ... The new twist [on the Sellarsian picture] is that, with the conception of Kantian intuitions that I am urging, we can put into the picture a downward dependence that is not narrowly epistemological but, like the upward dependence that is already in Sellars’s picture, transcendental, a matter of requirements for it to be intelligible that the picture depicts directedness at objective reality at all. (McDowell 2009b, 36)

Transcendental empiricism insists on interdependence between perceptual experience and world-view. Without a world-view, perceptual experience as having objective purport would not even be possible; without perceptual experience, world-views as ways in which a view is taken on the world would not even be possible. The conditions of possibility of each lie in the other.<sup>6</sup>

With the turn to transcendental empiricism comes a different understanding of transcendental philosophy itself. Early in the Woodbridge Lectures, McDowell admits that he had previously understood transcendental philosophy as a “sideways-on view”: it requires that we peer around the outside edge of our conceptual capacities in order to see the external constraints to which we are subjected (McDowell 2009c, 17-18). Beginning

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<sup>6</sup> I take this transcendental interdependence of world-views and perceptual experience to be how McDowell satisfies what he takes to be the need for “equipose” between subjectivity (world-views) and objectivity (perceptual experience).



with the Woodbridge Lectures, and since, McDowell no longer identifies transcendental philosophy with that particular picture of it; instead, transcendental philosophy is identified only with the investigation of the conditions of possibility of “objective purport”.<sup>7</sup>

The rejection of the sideways-on view of transcendental reflection enables us to reject the distinction between the descriptive metaphysics of experience and transcendental philosophy *per se*. McDowell can now happily accept that the descriptive metaphysics of experience, though not a sideways-on articulation of transcendental philosophy, is a version of transcendental philosophy nevertheless.<sup>8</sup> I shall therefore use the term “transcendental description” to characterize McDowell’s position, both in *M&W* and subsequently, in order to motivate the contrast with “empirical explanation.” By “transcendental description” I mean a description of the necessary conditions of possible experience.<sup>9</sup> I emphasize that this is a *descriptive* project because (i) it does not aim at revising our basic concepts, such as “experience” or “world” and (ii) it does not result in empirically testable theories. Instead, as a *transcendental* project, it aims only at clarifying and elucidating whatever is necessary for beings like us to have the kinds of experiences that we have. I take it that the modality of the claim – what is necessary for any possible experience that belongs to a being recognizably like ourselves – distinguishes

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<sup>7</sup> In light of his acceptance of the Davidsonian point that objectivity and subjectivity are inter-dependent concepts, McDowell’s transcendental empiricism explains the conditions of possibility of subjective experience just as much as it illuminates the conditions of possibility of objective experience.

<sup>8</sup> See *M&W* 111n1: “Strawson’s Kant is more Hegel than Kant.” Strawson’s repudiation of the sideways-on view, which justifies his rejection of Kantian transcendent metaphysics in favor of the metaphysics of experience, converges, on McDowell’s view, with Hegel’s rejection of the picture of conceptual capacities as subjected to external constraint only if that constraint is understood as coming from outside the activity of conceptual capacities *überhaupt*.

<sup>9</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on just what a *transcendental* description is supposed to do.

transcendental description from empirical explanations and the concepts used within such explanations. The idea of a transcendental description will help us better understand McDowell's position on the difference between rational animals and non-rational animals.

## 2. The Significance of the Idea of a Rational Animal

McDowell's transcendental description turns on the idea that thinking of normal mature human beings as rational animals allows us to dismount from the oscillation between "bald naturalism" and "rampant platonism." "Bald naturalism" attempts to describe our conceptual capacities as occupying a position within nature as the realm of law, and thus described using the language of the natural sciences (*M&W* 73). "Rampant platonism" preserves the distinctiveness of our conceptual capacities vis-à-vis the natural sciences, but only by denying that our conceptual capacities are in any sense part of nature at all (*M&W* 77). In contrast, McDowell understands everyday experience as *necessarily* involving perceptual sensitivity permeated by rational responsiveness that is both natural for us as a kind of animal and *sui generis* vis-à-vis the conceptual framework of the natural sciences. Unlike bald naturalists, McDowell insists on the *sui generis* character of rational responsiveness distinct from the concepts used in the natural sciences. Unlike rampant platonists, McDowell insists that rational responsiveness should not be identified with an ontological domain distinct from the natural world. As rational animals, we are not threatened by a split between the natural and the rational.<sup>10</sup> Yet we might, after all, be

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<sup>10</sup> Importantly, there is no separate capacity which constrains or guides those conceptual capacities themselves; whatever normative guidance there is comes from within the conceptual sphere itself. Our world-views are constrained by something outside of them, namely, our sensory intake of objects. But this sensory intake is itself conceptual, insofar as our conceptual capacities permeate sensory consciousness. On McDowell's view, then, the

threatened by a split between the empirical and the transcendental. So McDowell needs to show that the transcendental/empirical distinction is innocuous, that the two perspectives complement one another.

That we are rational animals is not, however, an empirical fact about us, as our bipedalism and featherlessness clearly are, let alone any number of distinctive phenotypic or genetic markers.<sup>11</sup> When we think about the distinctiveness of human beings in biological or cognitive terms, we are still operating within the parameters of that particular vocabulary. By contrast, transcendental description aims at illuminating the very possibility of our having any sort of vocabulary, any sort of way of making the world of experience intelligible to us, at all. Thus, when we ask, “what sort of beings must we be in order to have any sort of vocabulary at all?” that question is not the kind of question that has a straightforwardly empirical answer to be provided by natural or social science. Instead, by thinking of ourselves as rational animals, and having that conception be part of a transcendental description of ourselves, we thereby understand that regarding ourselves as rational animals is one and the same with understanding that the sorts of conceptual capacities distinctive of rationality are actualized in sensory consciousness so as to generate perceptual experiences capable of constraining the operations of free and reflective thought, viz. world-views, vocabularies, and theories.

What, then, of the distinction between rational and non-rational animals? McDowell acknowledges his conception of rational animals is grounded “in the sense that is in play

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distinction between perceiving and judging consists in the distinction between passive actualization of conceptual capacities (in perceiving) and the active, free deployment of those same capacities (in judging). This distinction is internal to the conceptual sphere *in toto*, not a distinction between something conceptual and something non-conceptual, let alone a synthesis of the conceptual and the non-conceptual. Whether or not this view commits McDowell to “idealism” remains a hotly contested topic.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on this point.

in the *traditional* separation of mature human beings, as rational animals, from the rest of the animal kingdom” (McDowell 2007, 338; emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> The transcendental description of human beings – that is, *of ourselves* – as rational animals grounds the radical discontinuity between the capacities of mature human beings and the other animals. But why is it so important that this tradition be retained? It is certainly not important to McDowell that we retain Aristotle’s teleological physics. If Aristotle’s physics can be replaced by mechanistic physics, why not replace his biology and psychology by contemporary evolutionary biology? In short, McDowell finds himself confronted with a difficulty unknown to Aristotle or Kant: the problem of Darwin.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The Naturalist Challenge

The severity of the naturalist challenge can be seen in criticisms advanced against McDowell by Richard Rorty and Jennifer Welchman, both of whom are heavily influenced by John Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism.<sup>14</sup> Dewey was among the first philosophers to take seriously Darwin’s impact on philosophy, both for how we understand the philosophical enterprise itself and for how we understand what it is to be a

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. “We should not be frightened away from holding that initiation into the right sort of communal practice makes a *metaphysical* difference. ... Responsive to reasons, the very idea of which is inseparable from the idea of communal practices, marks out a fully-fledged human individual as no longer a merely biological particular, but a being of metaphysically new kind ...” (McDowell 2009d, 172; emphasis original).

<sup>13</sup> In invoking the name ‘Darwin’ here I only indicate the general shape of the problematic. Contemporary evolutionary biology is no more ‘Darwinian’ than contemporary physics is ‘Newtonian.’

<sup>14</sup> For reasons of space, I shall not discuss Lovibond’s (2006) fascinating treatment of continuity and discontinuity in McDowell’s work. In response, McDowell begins by saying “There is no conflict between insisting, for one purpose, on a discontinuity between rational animals and others, and acknowledging, for another purpose, a continuity that extends across that boundary. I welcome Lovibond’s clarity about that” (in Linkgaard 2008, 234). I shall argue that the distinct purposes McDowell identifies here are best thought of as transcendental description (for discontinuity) and empirical explanation (for continuity).

human being.<sup>15</sup> Dewey's naturalism seems to be both sufficiently nuanced to accommodate the conception of rationality important to McDowell, while on the other hand undermining the traditional separation, so central to Aristotle and Kant, between mature human beings and other animals. It seems that the traditional philosophical emphasis on discontinuity must be rejected in light of the modern scientific emphasis on continuity. I therefore turn to contemporary pragmatic naturalists to show how the 'Deweyan' challenge to McDowell has thus far taken shape.<sup>16</sup>

As Rorty sees it, there are "no breaks in the hierarchy of increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation – the hierarchy which has amoebae adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom, bees dancing and chess players check-mating in the middle, and people fomenting scientific, artistic, and political revolutions at the top" (Rorty 1991, 109). Since there are no breaks in the hierarchy, there is no room for the traditional separation between rational animals and non-rational animals: "as good Darwinians, we want to introduce as few discontinuities as possible into the story of how we got from the apes to the Enlightenment" (Rorty 1998a, 40). The Darwinian revolution, and the pragmatist enlightenment that came in its wake, shows that there is no longer any empirical basis for the traditional conception of rational animals as essentially different from all other animals in a way that other kinds of animals are not essentially different from each other. Rorty, following Darwin and Dewey, denies that the differences between humans and dogs are metaphysically more significant or interesting than the

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<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I shall emphasize two recent treatments of McDowell that draw on Dewey, rather than on what Dewey says about issues that are of concern to McDowell. For representative statements of Darwin's influence on Dewey, see "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" and *Experience and Nature*. The importance of Darwin for Dewey has recently been stressed by Popp (2007) and Rogers (2008).

<sup>16</sup> For another confrontation between Dewey and McDowell, see Godfrey-Smith (forthcoming).

differences between dogs and crabs. By contrast, McDowell wants to preserve some sense of the traditional separation between humans on the one hand, and dogs and cats on the other.

For this reason, Rorty does not deny that there are discontinuities of some sort between normal mature human beings and other animals, let alone other physical entities. He denies only that the discontinuities have the philosophical significance that McDowell attributes to them. Rorty develops this line of thought in a critical response to *Mind and World* (Rorty 1998b). Though Rorty does not deny that there a gulf between the space-of-reasons intelligibility that characterizes rational animals and the intelligibility that gives shape to other domains of inquiry, Rorty dismisses the importance of the gulf.

Contrasting rationality with the behavior we observe in other animals, Rorty skeptically asks whether we could show “that there is a bigger gap between rationality and elementary particles and avian monogamy and those particles” (393). In this respect Rorty and McDowell both appeal to Davidson’s argument for the irreducibility of the vocabulary of mental states to the vocabulary of physical states. But unlike McDowell, and perhaps unlike Davidson as well, Rorty contends that this gap does not give aid and comfort to the traditional separation of mature human beings and the rest of animal life that so concerns McDowell. Rorty concludes against McDowell that there is no need to fight off “bald naturalism” with “naturalized Platonism,” because bald naturalism is utterly innocuous.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Rorty, Welchman stresses the overarching similarity between McDowell and John Dewey. Both philosophers object to the dominance of a conception of nature which excludes values and meanings from the natural world, and accordingly both Dewey and

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<sup>17</sup> It is significant that McDowell’s response to Rorty (McDowell 2009e) takes the form of a transcendental argument.

McDowell want to show how values and meanings can be seen as part of nature, understood in a broader sense than ‘the object of physical scientific inquiry in its culturally dominant form’. However, she argues that McDowell’s stress on the discontinuity between rational intelligibility and scientific intelligibility generates unresolved tensions. Unlike Dewey, McDowell sees values and meanings as coming onto the scene only with the rise of rationality.<sup>18</sup> Non-rational animals, as bits of first nature, have nothing that they can regard as valuable or significant to them. As a result, McDowell’s emphasis on the role of norms within the space of reasons implies that nothing in mere “first nature” so much as corresponds to or even anticipates ethical deliberation, and nothing of first nature can shed light on the reasons that figure in ethical judgments.

Hence McDowell rejects the idea that the first nature of either ourselves or our evolutionary ancestors can illuminate our capacities as rational animals. The Deweyan alternative she recommends is a “piecemeal approach”: if “initiation into some kinds of nonlinguistic cultural practices through nonlinguistic modes of behavior modification could have awakened these individuals to certain kinds of reasons, then they might be able to inhabit a kind of space of reasons, if narrower than that inhabited by their linguistically competent fellows” (53). Welchman then turns to discussion of chimpanzee language experiments for a model of how piecemeal initiation into a narrower but recognizable space of reasons could have emerged.

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<sup>18</sup> In more recent work, McDowell has relaxed significantly his view of animals. Whereas *M&W* implies that animals, lacking second nature, are mere bits and pieces of the realm of law, McDowell now admits that animals, though non-rational, nevertheless display ways of making sense of their environments. This weakens the contrast Welchmann draws between McDowell and Dewey but does not undermine it.

Importantly, Welchman understands that human beings are not the only animals for which it is natural – in the sense of normal and appropriate for beings of that kind – to acquire a second nature. While dogs acquire a second nature through domestication by humans, humans do not. As Aristotle recognized, it is in our first nature to need a second nature. But something similar must be said about the great apes and perhaps also about some cetaceans. If we attend carefully to what has been discovered about the behaviors and capacities of these animals, then the great divide between rational animals and non-rational animals cannot be drawn as starkly as McDowell wants to draw it. If McDowell is sincere in his ambition to avoid any “transcendence of biology” (*M&W* 115) then the emancipation from immediate biological imperatives into a “free and distanced orientation” (*M&W* 116) must itself be reconstructed in terms of continuity.<sup>19</sup>

It is no part of my intention to criticize the Deweyan orientation taken by Rorty and by Welchman. Rather, my interest lies in understanding just why McDowell resists the emphasis on continuity. As I interpret McDowell, continuity is perfectly acceptable, but only in a restricted sense. The emphasis on continuity between rational and non-rational animals is a consequence of the empirical explanations of natural science. By contrast, the emphasis on discontinuity is not justified through an appeal to natural science, as perhaps it was for Aristotle (on some sufficiently broad conception of ‘natural science’). Rather it is justified on the basis of transcendental description. To see how McDowell understands the difference between scientific explanations (including evolutionary explanations) and transcendental descriptions, I turn now to McDowell’s attitude towards “the problem of Darwin.”

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<sup>19</sup> McDowell’s use of “free and distanced orientation” is borrowed from Gadamer (1989, p. 445). McDowell also appropriates Gadamer’s use of the distinction between environment and world. In an important sense, the question at stake here concerns the compatibility between *sub specie Deweyii* and *sub specie Gadamerii*.



#### 4. The Shape of a Good Question

McDowell both addresses and deflects the post-Darwinian emphasis on continuity, insofar as he acknowledges that we can pose what he calls a “perfectly good question”, namely, “[h]ow has it come about that there are animals that possess the spontaneity of understanding?” (*M&W* 123).<sup>20</sup> The very stress on our animality means that our continuity with the other animals must be taken seriously. One version of rampant platonism, after all, takes the form of the assumption that “our species acquired what makes it special, the capacity to resonate to meaning, in a gift from outside nature” (*M&W* 123).<sup>21</sup> What must be dislodged is not the doctrine of special creation per se, but rather the picture of the relation between our rationality and our animality which makes the doctrine of special creation look like the only coherent account of that relation. As with the oscillation between the Myth of the Given and coherentism, McDowell’s aim is to dispel the illusion that there are certain questions which *must* be asked in a certain way in order to appear as good questions *at all*.

Yet McDowell quickly dismisses any urgent need for evolutionary explanations. Although he is willing to grant that “[t]here was a time when there were no rational animals” (*M&W* 123), his reluctance to even suggest when that time might have been indicates his rather low interest in the question. So far as he seems to be concerned,

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<sup>20</sup> This is the theoretical side of the picture. There is also a practical side to the transition, in which animals capable of mere voluntary movement evolved into *agents*. If we take together the theoretical and practical aspects, what comes into view is an account of how primates evolved into *persons*.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Sellars, in “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” on “the last stand of Special Creation” (SPR 6). I suspect that this assumption plays a role in sustaining the intuitions on which modern creationism and the intelligent design movement feed.

reflection on the education (*Bildung*) of human beings is sufficient to undermine the temptations of rampant platonism; if we insist that “[h]uman infants are mere animals and nothing more, distinctive only in their potential, and nothing occult happens to a human being in ordinary upbringing,” then “[m]ere ignorance about how human culture might have come on the scene in the first place is hardly a plausible starting-point for an argument that initiation into it must actualize an extra-natural potential in human beings” (*M&W* 123-4). The urge that nothing short of special creation can accommodate rational animality is undermined simply by observing the normal course of human development. (One might wonder how this seemingly glib response would be met by a proponent of special creation.) McDowell concludes that an evolutionary explanation is not essential to the intelligibility or attractiveness of the account of human beings as rational animals.

Following that, however, McDowell introduces two important qualifications on what we ought to expect from evolutionary explanations. The first is that we must be clear on the right distinction:

And in any case, if we do speculate about how animals might have evolved into a way of living that includes initiating their young into a culture, we must be clear that that is what we are doing. It would be one thing to give an evolutionary account of the fact that normal human maturation includes the acquisition of a second nature, which involves responsiveness to meaning; it would be quite another thing to give a constitutive account of what responsiveness to meaning is. I have been granting that it is reasonable to look for an evolutionary story. This is not a concession to the sort of constructive philosophical account of meaning that I discussed in my last lecture (§ 3): something whose point would be to make the relevant sort of intelligibility safe for a

naturalism without second nature. That is a misbegotten idea, and there is no room for it here. (*M&W* 124)

In other words, merely allowing for an evolutionary story is no concession to bald naturalism, so long as we are clear on the distinction between evolutionary explanations and transcendental descriptions of rational animality. Bald naturalism rejects that very distinction; but so long as the distinction is maintained, evolutionary accounts of the emergence of rational animals are perfectly acceptable.

McDowell then makes a curious admission: “It is true, however, that the good questions we can raise in the evolutionary context come as close as good questions can to the philosophical questions I want to exorcize” (*M&W* 124n12). Although transcendental description exorcizes the bad questions that have vexed post-Cartesian philosophy, we can nevertheless accommodate the urge which generates those bad questions. If we are to understand just how evolutionary explanations do this, we need a clear sense of what the “bad questions” are supposed to be, and a clear sense of why these questions are supposed to be “bad.”

Of course something can be said about the emergence, over the prehistoric time-scale, of rational animals. If the question is put in a scientific vocabulary, it becomes one of how human culture evolved from the proto-cultures of our hominid and hominoid ancestors. Consider the evolutionary process as we now understand it: a process that led from extinct Miocene apes through the australopithecines and early species of *Homo*, to later species of *Homo* and the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.<sup>22</sup> This certainly seems to be a process which

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<sup>22</sup> Of the many excellent books on paleoanthropology, I have learned the most from Foley (1987). From an evolutionary perspective, *Homo sapiens* is, of course, a “unique species” – but only *another* unique species, and not any more unique than any other. Dobzhansky’s quip, “all species are unique, but the human is the uniquest” may

begins with mere animals and passes through apparently “proto-rational animals” and results in fully fledged rational animals. Thus the question about how rational animals emerged from ‘mere’ animals is a perfectly fine question for the empirical sciences to raise and answer, as best as possible, given the multiple and fragmentary lines of evidence drawn from paleontology, comparative genetics, morphology, and psychology. But this question is not only a perfectly acceptable question by McDowell’s lights; it is also “as close a good question can come to the bad questions” that he urges us to exorcise.

The “bad questions” arise from attempts to see our cognitive experience as the result of two separate faculties somehow brought together. The questions that need to be exorcised arise from a particular picture of what it would be “to bring understanding and sensibility, reason and nature, back together” (*M&W* 108). It is clear that while there must be *some* point at which the deliverances of the senses are taken up as material for judgment, the dominant conceptions of sensibility and understanding stand in the way of seeing *how* this can be so. As long as those conceptions compel us to think a certain way, we will have no choice but to either reject the *sui generis* character of the space of reasons or to accept that “an animal endowed with reason would be metaphysically split, with disastrous consequences for our reflection about empirical thinking and action” (*ibid.*).

But the impulse that generates bad questions arises from a problematic that lies at the heart of modern philosophy: the temptation to see ourselves as having two components, one natural and one supernatural. This temptation is a specifically modern one that lies in the identification of the realm of law with nature as such and the privileging of scientific explanations as the paradigm of understanding as such. McDowell’s project is a criticism

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express some truth, but it does not appear to be a truth that figures in empirically grounded explanations of hominid evolution.

of these identifications, which is why he discerns neo-Cartesianism not only in Searle but also, remarkably enough, Millikan and Dennett: “But on pain of losing our grip on ourselves as thinking things, we must distinguish inquiring into the mechanics of, say, having one’s mind on an object from inquiring into what having one’s mind on an object is” (McDowell 2009f, 275). The inquiry into the *mechanics* is classified as one sort of intellectual project, an empirical explanation, distinct from the transcendental description of *what it is* to have one’s mind on an object. Our understanding of knowledge and meaning should not be modeled on the sorts of explanations characteristic of modern science.<sup>23</sup> Rather, that kind of understanding belongs to transcendental description, not to empirical explanation. (It is also true, however, that the distinctive status of transcendental description could not be recognized until the cultural dominance of empirical explanations in their modern form.)

On McDowell’s view, transcendental description of the unproblematic second nature of a certain kind of tells us how to bring understanding and sensibility, reason and nature, back together through a “postlapsarian or knowing counterpart of Aristotle’s innocence” (*M&W* 109). The desired exorcism consists in rejecting the pictures of reason and of nature which control our thinking about them and which makes reconciliation seem either unnecessary (bald naturalism) or impossible (rampant platonism). We must reject both the picture of reason as abstract and disengaged and the picture of nature as disenchanting, the realm of law, fully explicated by the natural sciences. Thus the need for an understanding

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<sup>23</sup> Consider the history of modern philosophy as running from Descartes through Hume to Kant. The rejection of the Aristotelian picture, in which biology played a central role in a teleological onto-theology, allowed for the rise of the picture in which the world’s impacts on our sensory organs belonged to the realm of measurable mechanisms that obeyed strict laws. Since our cognitive apparatus did not seem to belong to explanations of that sort, the only alternatives were to exclude rationality from the physical world altogether or to concede, as Hume did, that rationality is not *sui generis* vis-à-vis the world as object of natural sciences.

of nature distinct from the realm of law, and the need for an understanding of rationality as practical (as *phronesis* – cf. McDowell 2007, 341-3), are complementary – each is necessary in order to reconcile fully nature and reason. The ‘badness’ of the bad questions arises from the failure to observe correctly the distinction between scientific explanations and transcendental descriptions.

The distinction between empirical explanations and transcendental descriptions also indicates what sorts of questions are the right kinds of questions to ask. In this sense the questions that arise in the evolutionary context – questions about how rational animals evolved from non-rational animals -- are the closest that good questions can come to the sorts of questions that must be exorcised. The correct understanding of McDowell’s odd aside (ibid. 124n12) is twofold. On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with appealing to scientific explanations of human origins in order to understand how reason emerged from mere nature. On the other hand, we should maintain a clear distinction between the intellectual vocation of scientific explanations and the intellectual vocation of transcendental description, at pains of losing our grip on our very sense of what it means to be a thinking thing *qua* rational animal at all.

## 5. Conclusion

What, then, of the continuities that contemporary Deweyans such as Rorty and Welchman accuse McDowell of under-emphasizing? McDowell’s response, it is now clear, must be that such continuities are perfectly acceptable, but only with respect to the scientific understanding of the world, and we must be exceedingly careful in how we

distinguish between scientific explanations on the one hand and transcendental descriptions on the other.<sup>24</sup> The need to somehow reconcile continuity and discontinuity, or strike the right balance between continuity and discontinuity, is not a need that deserves to be met. On the contrary – the need is dissolved once we embrace the distinction between empirical explanation and transcendental description and recognize them as distinct intellectual tasks. Just as importantly, McDowell’s insistent traditionalism on the separation between mature human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom is bound up with a conception of philosophy as distinct from science: scientifically (empirically), continuity; philosophically (transcendentally), discontinuity.

I wish to conclude by raising the question as to whether or not McDowell has taken the full measure of Sellars’ distinction, in “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” between the scientific image and the manifest image:

The conclusion is difficult to avoid that the transition from pre-conceptual patterns of behavior to conceptual thinking was a holistic one, a jump to a new level of awareness which is irreducibly new, a jump which was the coming into being of man. There is a profound truth in this conception of a radical difference in level between man and his predecessors. The attempt to understand this difference turns out to be part and parcel of the attempt to encompass in one view the two images of man-in-the-world which I have set out to describe. ... this difference in level appears as an irreducible discontinuity in the *manifest* image, but as, in a sense requiring careful analysis, a reducible difference in the *scientific* image. (1963a, 6; emphasis original)

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<sup>24</sup> Though neither a Darwinian nor a pragmatist, Fodor’s indifference to this distinction explains his *soi-disant* “polemical essay” on McDowell (Fodor 1996). Fodor simply does not think there is any point in calling for transcendental descriptions; cognitive science is sufficient to do everything that there is any point in doing. The rejection of this very distinction is indebted to Quine’s attack on ‘first philosophy’ and concomitant (bald) naturalization of epistemology.

In those terms, McDowell's transcendental description of mature human beings as rational animals is a fine explication of the manifest image – perhaps even one of the best explications presently available. But the scientific image, with its emphasis on continuity, nevertheless has epistemic authority, ontological commitments, and cultural influence that cannot be dismissed. But how we are to understand the relation between the scientific image, *sub specie Deweyii* and the manifest image, *sub specie McDowellii*? On this point, it is helpful to recall how Rorty understood the distinctiveness of Sellars vis-à-vis both Wittgenstein and Quine:

As a closing note, let me remark that the nature of Sellars' approach to philosophy, and the difficulty of his system, is determined by his attitude towards this clash [between science and common sense – CS]. He accepts the clash at face value and sees philosophy as having to provide a complicated and subtle set of distinctions in terms of which the two sides may be reconciled. By contrast, the Wittgensteinian tradition sees no clash, and sees the task of philosophy as dissolving the appearance of such a clash not by drawing elaborate distinctions but by adopting an instrumentalist approach to science. A third position is that of Quine -- who is as much a scientific realist as Sellars, but who would discard the notion of distinct conceptual structures as a relic of the analytic-synthetic distinction and would simply insist on the outright falsity of common-sense statements, given the superior explanatory efficiency of their scientific replacements. Both the Wittgensteinian and the Quinean positions are simpler, more elegant, and easier to grasp than Sellars'. But the price of elegance is paradox, and in the end we may have to do philosophy the hard way



and make all the sorts of distinctions Sellars claims we need. (Rorty 1970, 69-70).

McDowell has made trenchant criticisms of Quine and has contributed significantly to contemporary receptions of Wittgenstein. In doing so, however, he has perhaps underestimated the depth of the Sellarsian challenge to both positions. Despite McDowell's improvements over Strawson's articulations of the manifest image, as well as his criticisms of the sideways-on view he discerns in Sellars, the relation between the two images is as problematic for us as it was for Sellars. If we are committed to figuring out the right way to put together *sub specie Deweyii* and *sub specie McDowellii*, then we might well have to reject McDowell's Wittgensteinian quietism, and do philosophy the hard way, if we are find a fully satisfying philosophical naturalism.

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