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Book Review

Meaning, Knowledge and Reality, by John McDowell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, December 21, 2001. Pp. ix + 462. Bibliography, index. ISBN: 0-674-00712-3. \$22.00, paper.

John McDowell's collection of papers will be valuable to anyone interested in epistemology and the philosophies of language and mind. The first section contains six papers largely devoted to developing a theory of meaning inspired by Davidson's strategy of using a theory of truth to fix the interpretation of a language. Two essays deal with Dummett's objection to any theory of meaning, like the one McDowell proposes, that fails to give an account of the concepts expressed by the primitive terms of the language. In the second section, McDowell turns to issues of intentionality, addressing them within the Davidsonian framework. McDowell then deals with questions of realism and anti-realism, arguing for a brand of direct realism against Dummett's own verificationist anti-realism. Finally, the fourth section takes up epistemological matters, such as knowledge by hearsay, and connects McDowell's thoughts on intentionality and anti-realism with a Sellarsian conception of the 'space of reasons.'

Rather than attempt to canvass McDowell's numerous contributions to these very broad issues, I shall consider his position on intentionality and mental content, a position he develops and deploys in many of these essays.

In "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space," McDowell challenges the 'Cartesian' view of the subject. McDowell's chief target here is the conception of the mental as an autonomous realm of facts that are invariably open to introspection. Once we accept this 'Cartesian' conception, McDowell thinks we will be forced to take seriously external world skepticism, for it is part of the Cartesian picture that a subject's psychological states can remain intrinsically identical in veridical and falsidical perceptual contexts. By contrast, McDowell argues that the fact that a given object figures in a thought is part of its 'intentional nature.' (Call this the Doctrine of Object-Dependent Thoughts, or DODT). When one makes a genuine (and not merely grammatically) singular statement, one is acquainted with the object referred to; moreover, we are acquainted not (or not just) with Russellian *sensa* but with real objects (see p.231).

DODT plays a fundamental role in essays 10-13, 15, and 18, and appears in many of the others. Before considering some of the uses McDowell puts it to, let us examine the argument for it. The reasoning designed to support DODT is not at all clear in these essays; in particular, it is rarely clear what is intended as justification for the doctrine as opposed to illustration of it. If there *is* an argument here, its nerve, I think, is the claim that unless we allow that thoughts have their object-directedness intrinsically, "it is a serious question how it can be that experience, conceived from [the Cartesian] point of view, is not blank or blind, but purports to be revelatory of the world we

live in” (p.243). Or again: “[S]cepticism about the existence of the objects of seeming singular statements is equally scepticism about the layout of the mental realm” (p.255). The skeptic takes for granted that thoughts have the content they do and then questions whether they map anything in the external world. But if the content of a singular thought literally includes the object it is about, the skeptic cannot take this for granted.

The claim, then, is that the picture of the subject isolated in a private realm makes it impossible to see how the alleged objects of that realm, thoughts, have the content that they do, or indeed any content at all. It is this claim for which I cannot find adequate support in the present volume. Although McDowell’s arguments against ‘Cartesianism’ provide indirect support, surely some direct argument is required. But simply decrying the skeptical consequences of a view is not enough, since the skeptic might, after all, be right. If McDowell simply asserts that if the skeptic were right, his thoughts would not (or could not be known to) have the content they do, he begs the question, since this presupposes DODT.

Nor do we find, apart from such indirect arguments, any substantial defense of DODT from the familiar objection that such anti-individualist theories of content entail that we do not have privileged, non-empirical epistemic access to the contents of our own thoughts. Suppose Bobo has a thought that p , where p involves mind-independent object x . If in fact x does not exist, then, contrary to our supposition, Bobo does not have *that* thought at all. Indeed, in such cases expressions like ‘that p ’ only *seem* to express thoughts; there is no proposition at all that Bobo entertains (see p.229). It is at least disconcerting to be told that we are sometimes mistaken, not about the *content* of our thoughts, but about whether we are having a thought at all. McDowell does little, however, to either accommodate or explain away the intuitions that underwrite the claims of privileged access. (For an argument that DODT cannot be reconciled with privileged access, see Jessica Brown, “Reliabilism, Knowledge, and Mental Content,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* vol. C (2000): 115-135).

Nevertheless, the positive picture that emerges from McDowell’s reflections on content is very much worth pursuing, particularly as it relates to questions about the ontological status of minds and their states. In “Putnam on Mind and Meaning,” he develops his view by using Putnam’s work on reference as a foil. Putnam’s famous argument runs roughly like this: since my Twin-Earth doppelgänger and I can share all the same psychological states and yet refer to different things by our natural kind terms, our psychological states cannot fix the reference of those terms. The natural reply is that Putnam begs the question by stipulating that my twin and I have the same psychological state: this is just the issue that is in question. Putnam’s conclusion seems obvious to him only because he considers only inert, intrinsically non-representational ‘symbols’ (such as words, images, or what have you) as plausible candidates for the contents of psychological states. But rather than endorse externalism about linguistic meaning, we might endorse externalism about mental contents themselves, and so retain the idea that meanings are indeed in the head.

This, of course, leaves us with the burden of tying thought, rather than language, to the world. The conspicuous failure of attempts to naturalize intentionality ought to give us pause here. One by one, we have seen teleosemantics and a number of other increasingly sophisticated revisions of causal theories of mental representation fall to devastating objections.

McDowell’s intriguing move is to eschew talk of mental representations. The real upshot of

Putnam's arguments, he suggests, is not the 'duplex' view of reference (whether of linguistic or mental representations), according to which such representations have their 'narrow' contents intrinsically but get their 'wide' contents through their causal connections with the environment. Instead, we can take seriously a view that Putnam never considers, namely, that 'the mind' is not a thing at all, and trade in talk of its representations for talk of representings. Putnam's central mistake is to acquiesce in the picture of the mind as an organ; once this is accepted, the project of tying the states of such a mind to the world becomes obligatory. On McDowell's view, by contrast, the question, how does thought hook on to reality, is just as illusory as its companion, how does language hook on to reality. Given DODT, mental states extend beyond the bounds of a person's brain or body, simply because they are not states of brains or bodies at all, but acts. The temptation to reify mental states as brain states would make the question of how such states hook on to the world pressing; but it also seems to make it unanswerable. So Jerry Fodor's *Hauptfrage* – 'how does this bit of gray matter come to be *about* something' – is itself a symptom of reifying the mind. This would be good news, since the prospects of satisfactorily answering Fodor's question have come to seem to dim indeed.

A closely related element in McDowell's thought is his hostility to reductionism: we need not feel a pressure to accommodate all of our talk of the mind within the vocabulary of physics. On the other hand, or so McDowell's approach suggests, we should not feel compelled to show how the irreducibility of mental states can be consistent with their having causal powers. The literature is replete with attempts to retain non-reductive physicalism in the face of Kim's exclusion argument. But if, with McDowell, we do not reify mental states, we will see both the reductive project and its non-reductive counterpart as equally confused.

From this brief précis, it should be clear that McDowell's attack owes something to Gilbert Ryle. This is especially clear in McDowell's thesis that treating the mind as an organ (or as an immaterial 'para-organ'), as he thinks Putnam does, will lead us to take some questions seriously that we ought not to. McDowell, true to form, sees behaviorism and psychologism as equally unattractive poles between which philosophy 'oscillates.' But navigating a third course is difficult, and McDowell sometimes drifts toward behaviorism (see esp. p.305).

One of the chief virtues of McDowell's work as a whole is his persistent efforts to question the core assumptions of the debates he engages rather than offer just another move within them. At the same time, it is often difficult to get a grip on the positive view he is putting forward. Whether this is due to my own difficulty in getting beyond the assumptions he calls into question or to serious flaws in McDowell's account is an issue I cannot yet settle.

Walter Ott
East Tennessee State University