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| <p>Indian<br/>Philosophical<br/>Quarterly</p> |
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| Vol. XLVI<br>Numbers 3-4     | Contents   | July-Dec.<br>2019 |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| RAVINDRA K. S. CHOUDHARY     | : Radhakrishnan on Wittgenstein  | 1                 |
| PRAGYANPARAMITA<br>MOHAPATRA | : On Rule-Following: Kripke's<br>Wittgenstein  | 16                |
| R. LEKSHMI                   | : The Phenomenological Experience<br>of Seeing-in of Images                                      | 32                |
| MANOJ KUMAR PANDA            | : Experience, Thought and the<br>External World: Davidson and<br>McDowell                        | 43                |
| PREETI SAYEED                | : Engendering Ethics: A Constru-<br>ction of Care-based Moral Agency                             | 65                |
| TSERING NURBOO               | : Does Dharmakīrti Diverge from<br>Dignāga on Perception?  | 79                |
| ARKA PRATIM MUKHOTY          | : <i>Upamāna</i> : A Controversial Case  | 107               |
| K. BHIMA KUMAR               | : Epistemic Conditions of Inference:<br>The Buddhist Perspective                                 | 118               |
| AKOIJAM THOIBISANA           | : The Framing of Post-modernism:<br>A Philosophical Study  | 141               |
| ARPANA RAMCHIARY             | : Judith Butler's Notion of Onto-<br>logical Transition from the Self to<br>the (social) Subject | 162               |

ARCHANA P. DEGAONKAR : Ashvini Mokashi: *Sapiens and Sthitaprajña: A Comparative Study in Seneca's Stoicism and the Bhagavadgītā* 183

**Statement Concerning Ownership and other Particulars  
about the Journal**

**INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY**

**Form IV (Rule 8)**

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|---|--|
| <b>Place of Publication</b>   | : Department of Philosophy,<br>Savitribai Phule Pune<br>University, Pune-411007              |
| <b>Periodicity of its Publication</b>                                   | : Quarterly  |
| <b>Printer's Name and Address</b>                                       | : The Registrar, Savitribai<br>Phule Pune University,<br>Pune-411007                         |
| <b>Publisher's Name and<br/>Address</b>                                 | : The Head,<br>Department of Philosophy,<br>Savitribai Phule Pune<br>University, Pune-411007 |
| <b>Whether Citizen of India</b>   | : Yes  |
| <b>Name and Address of the<br/>Institute which owns<br/>the Journal</b> | : Department of Philosophy,<br>Savitribai Phule Pune<br>University, Pune-411007              |

# EXPERIENCE, THOUGHT AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD: DAVIDSON AND MCDOWELL<sup>1</sup>

MANOJ KUMAR PANDA

## Introduction

One of the significant problems of modern philosophy is how to understand human beings' relation, as a rational being, to the natural world. This problem has many manifestations and one of those is, "How are we to understand our thoughts' relation to the experience of external world?" John McDowell's approach to this problem that we are facing an uncomfortable situation or, stuck at a very critical juncture in our reflection about our relation to the natural world due to the rise of modern science with its specific conception of nature.

McDowell's position can be described as seeking a way out from what he calls a "pair of opposing pitfalls."<sup>2</sup> One pole of this oscillation is a version of the "Myth of the Given," which seems to offer "exculpation at best where we need justifications"<sup>3</sup> for our empirical thoughts. Nonconceptualists<sup>4</sup> argue that though there is a rational relationship between experience and thought, our experience is nevertheless nonconceptual, a 'Given' without the involvement of conceptual or rational capacities of human beings. The second pole is Davidsonian "coherentism" which does not acknowledge any rational external constraint on our thinking and thereby makes the role of spontaneity as "frictionless spinning in the void"<sup>5</sup> devoid of any empirical content. In a sense, it threatens us to disconnect thought from reality which is a dangerous possibility for it cannot make any room for

empirical content at all. On the one hand, we find that Davidson's coherentism could be a response to the problems created by nonconceptualist account of perception. Nonconceptualist account of perception, on the other hand, could also be a solution to the problems created by Davidson's coherentism. But both these positions lead to a difficult situation in understanding our thought about the world. Hence McDowell suggests that in order to find way out of this difficult situation which arises due to the intolerable oscillation between Davidson's coherentism on the one hand and nonconceptualism on the other hand, we need to understand the cooperation between the faculty of sensibility and the faculty of understanding (using Kantian terminologies) in a specific way in the context of empirical knowledge and thought.

Following McDowell, we can see that the question of "how empirical content is possible?" is asked in contemporary philosophy against certain background assumptions; if we analyze those we can get the conclusion that empirical content is not achievable at all. The background assumptions of the above theories about intentionality in particular are mistaken and based on non-compulsive obligations. There could be several background assumptions in this regard. One, for example, is Davidson's view that our perception of the world cannot be a source of justification for our empirical beliefs. If perception of the world cannot be the source of justification, then it is difficult to realize how the world itself could be the source of justification for our thoughts about the world. Another assumption in this context is that for Nonconceptualists our perception of the world itself is devoid of any of our rational capacities. If this is the case, then the question arises, how could our perception be rationally justified without involving any of our rational capacities? If we hold on to these assumptions then it would be difficult for us to understand the possibility of thought about the world. These assumptions, in McDowell's opinion, apparently have not been questioned enough by philosophers. It seems that we do not have any other option but to fall into the 'intolerable oscillation'. If we really want to make ourselves liberate from asking this question, then we have

to ask the above question with a different attitude while questioning these assumptions. McDowell's point is that the problem of how our minds are directed towards the world is transcendental anxiety and those philosophers who are in the grip of the anxiety, are not fully aware of the problem that is bothering them. The problem of the relationship between mind and world is not merely an empirical problem for many philosophers including McDowell. Hence the solution we are actually looking for in this context is neither merely an empirical solution nor does it entirely depend on empirical conditions of both epistemic and mental states. If the problem of intentionality is a transcendental problem, then an empirical account would not suffice to explain it. A transcendental account of intentionality is needed to explain the relationship between mind and world. McDowell's approach to the problem of mind-world relationship is also transcendental rather than merely epistemological. It seems, in our reflection on mind-world relationship, as if we are as a human subject already detached from the external world and we need a theory which will make ourselves connected to the external world. McDowell, in this context, sets himself to exercise the philosophical problems that we face about the relation between mind and world.

An alternative conception of the relationship between experience and thought is present in Davidson's coherentism according to which experience cannot be rationally connected to thought and our belief systems. Davidson's coherentism makes the point that the phenomena of experience occurs outside the purview of our belief system or space of concepts. If that is so, then for giving justifications and reasons to our beliefs and thoughts about the world, our experience cannot become a legitimate source where we can ground our thought. This is because if we admit that the source of justification is grounded in experience, then, according to Davidson, we fall into the trap of "scheme and content dualism" ("the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content") and, according to him, a wrong picture of the relationship between mind and world. Before we discuss McDowell's critique of Davidson's

coherentism, we need to understand the background against which Davidson argues for the mere causal relationship between experience and thought.

### **Experience and the Scheme-Content Dualism**

Davidson, while criticizing dualism of the conceptual scheme and uninterpreted content, wanted to get away from the problems of empiricism. By conceptual scheme and content, Davidson understands,

The scheme may be thought of as an ideology, a set of concepts suited to the task of organizing experience into objects, events, states and complexes of such; or the scheme may be a language, perhaps with predicates and associated apparatus, interpreted to serve an ideology. The content of the scheme may be objects of a special sort, such as sense data, percepts, and impressions. Sensations, or appearances; or the objects may dissolve into adverbial modifications of experience...<sup>6</sup>

He holds that committing to the dualism of the conceptual scheme and uninterrupted experience in theorizing about knowledge and thought of the external world is a deep mistake. This dualism, according to him, is the third dogma of empiricism and the last dogma because if we abandon this distinction then there we can abandon empiricism itself.<sup>7</sup> One can, following Davidson, say that the whole framework of empiricism is based on the distinction and the dualism between conceptual schemes and empirical givens and that is the dualism which needs to be rejected. The dualism is formed out of a wrong picture of the relationship between mind and world and that is due to taking function of mind "... as a passive but critical spectator of the inner show."<sup>8</sup> In fact Davidson gives a different name to the "Myth of the Given"; he calls it "Myth of the Subjective"<sup>9</sup>. For him, Myth of the Subjective is a product of falling into the dichotomy between conceptual scheme and content. Inner objects of thought are said to be ghostly entities which the mind is said to contemplate in its directed awareness

of the external world. The dualistic picture of the relation between scheme and content encourages the view that our thoughts about the world must have to gather ultimate sources of evidence from the outside world in order to justify them. But according to Davidson this is not the actual case. Our thoughts do not necessarily have to wrap up the evidence from the external world in order to give justifications to our empirical thought. The elements which are not touched by conceptual interpretation and is said to be controlling our thought from outside are “some version of Kant’s intuitions, Hume’s impressions and ideas, sense data, uninterrupted sensations, the sensuous given.”<sup>10</sup> According to Davidson, there are no such objects before the mind when we have sensations or thought. The dichotomy of “uninterpreted experience” and “conceptual scheme” is closely related to the dichotomy of subjective and objective which needs to be discarded. Conceptual schemes are usually characterized as subjective due to their roots in a particular tradition and culture whereas uninterpreted experiences are generally described as elements of the objective world. So, the dichotomy between conceptual scheme and uninterpreted experience has its root in the dichotomy between subjective and objective.

We found that the reason behind Davidson’s rejection of empiricism is to dismantle the scheme-content dualism which is responsible for a wrong picture of the relation between mind and world. In the next section, we will see how Davidson has denied the role of our experience in giving justification to our thoughts while trying to reject scheme-content dualism.

### **Davidson on the Relationship between Experience and Thought**

Davidson suggests that if we appeal to experience to justify our judgements or beliefs, then we will fall into the “Myth of the Given” because, according to this picture, sensibility occurs outside the constitutive ideal of rationality. The “space of reasons” does not extend more than the “space of concepts” (may be in the context of Davidson, we can say that the space of “constitutive ideal of rationality” does not

go beyond the space of beliefs), to acquire bare reception of the given for its warrant. To this extent we can see Davidson and McDowell agree. But, according to the latter, Davidson makes the mistake when he identifies experience only with extra conceptual impact on sensibility. For Davidson, since space of justificatory relations does not have a presence beyond the space of concepts and beliefs, it cannot reach to the phenomena of experience. So, as a result, Davidson renounces the role of receptivity, the role of the external world in giving rational constraint to our thought. Neither perception nor facts of the external world can give reasons for our thought. Coherentism as propounded by Davidson makes the role of “spontaneity” as “frictionless spinning into the void”<sup>11</sup> and it is this very idea that makes us in our reflection attracted to nonconceptualism. The worry that we find in Davidson’s picture is that it cannot explain or account for the sort of bearing our reality has for our empirical contents. His account of empirical content cannot explain properly how we can rationally ground our thought in the empirical world. This very problem in Davidson’s position makes a necessary appeal to the nonconceptualism because nonconceptualists suggest that we must reach the outside world and our experience for getting justifications for our thoughts. So on this conception, our experience of the world is rationally connected to the thought and in that way we can ground our thought in the empirical world.<sup>12</sup> Davidson, while renouncing empiricism, thought that we cannot come out of the picture of dualism if we do not deny experience having any rational role. In order to get rid of various pitfalls of empiricism, he rejected experience itself.

Describing the relation between experience and thought, Davidson says,

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs



and in this sense is the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.<sup>13</sup>

For him, though experience due to its extra conceptual nature, cannot rationally justify our thought about the world, he himself admits that there is a given which is outside of the “space of reasons” that causally relate to the subject’s beliefs and judgements. Davidson believes that the relation between experience and thought is causal and this explanation is outside the boundary of concepts or beliefs. A belief, according to Davidsonian Coherentism, in order to be justified must be a part of a coherent belief system. According to him, since experience cannot constitute rational relations, it must remain outside the sphere of rational relations. Davidson, by substantiating his point, says, “... nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”<sup>14</sup> Since beliefs are the part of rational relations, whereas experience is not, so experience cannot stand in justificatory relation to our belief systems. For him, if we can justify our thought, for example, belief, by remaining within a coherent belief system, then there is no need of constantly referring to an uninterpreted given for getting justification for our beliefs. But the question is: What exactly is the role of experience in Davidson’s picture of empirical knowledge as a causal input to our belief systems? Is it not then a “Myth of the Given?” Davidson by merely saying that our experiences are just causal inputs to our thoughts, has not been effectively able to get rid of “Myth of the Given” because experience on a purely causal account is nothing but an instance of the “Myth of the Given.”

Arguing against Davidson, McDowell writes,

Davidson recoils from the Myth of the Given all the way to denying experience any justificatory role, and the coherentist upshot is a version of the conception of spontaneity as frictionless, the very thing that makes the idea of the given attractive... Davidson’s picture depicts our empirical thinking as engaged in with no rational constraint, but only causal influence, from outside.<sup>15</sup>

In order to get rid of “Myth of the Given,” Davidson defines the whole phenomena of experience as the extra-conceptual happenings in terms of the external world’s impact on our sensibility, which, according to him, must remain outside of the boundary of our belief systems. The upshot of this view is that the external world does not stand in a rational relation to our thought, but is related only causally to our thought. Now the question arises: can we justify our thought about the world, without letting the world enter into the source of justifications? If our thoughts are about the world, then the world itself must be the reason for our thoughts. If believe that it is raining on the basis of my experience of rain, then following Davidson my experience of rain does not justify my belief. The problem here is that, the role of the external world only as a causal constraint does not assure us that our thought has sufficient justification to be regarded as a thought of something or about something. It is the external world which provides content to our thought without which our conceptuality or rationality would become contentless. For McDowell, it is necessary that we should appeal to experience in order to ground our thought about the world.

Davidson confined the space of reasons to the space of concepts, excluding experience and world from it. Getting outside of our thought in order to get reasons from experience and the external world is not possible because of the obvious reason (for him) that “...we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware.”<sup>16</sup> McDowell argues, though it is not possible to get out of our skin in the literal sense, there is no need to suppose that we need to get out of our skin in order to get outside of thought. Davidson seems to be completely wrong about the directedness of our thought about the external world. There is no need to get out of our skin in order to make our thoughts about the world possible. Getting out side of our skin or being confined to the internal happenings are not crucial to understand the world directedness or aboutness of our thoughts. When we say that our thoughts are about or directed towards various aspects of the world, we do not really step out of our skin.

The detached notion of rationality, in McDowell's opinion, makes the picture of our thought vulnerable to fall into the trap of the "Myth of the Given." Davidson's notion of rational justification by keeping experience out of its purview has turned into "frictionless spinning in a void"<sup>17</sup>. If we go with the Davidsonian line of thinking, then the nonconceptual inputs from the external world would remain as "brute impacts from the exterior." i.e. detached from our rationality. Davidson's arguments are not equipped with the necessary clues to get rid of this "Brute impacts from the exterior." The problem that arises is: can we have empirical thought at all with genuine content, if we deny experience as having any justificatory role? It seems that Davidson does not have a satisfactory answer to the question: How thought can be contentful? Davidson does not do anything to modify the contents from the causal impacts of the world on our sensibility into the rational content. He just rejects them for the purpose of giving rational content. At this moment of our reflection, when the possibility of our empirical thought is at stake due to Davidsonian line of thinking, "Myth of the Given" appears as an alternative solution to the problem. To deny the role of experience in providing content to our thought is to deny the role of the world in shaping up our thought which again is to fall into a picture that creates a gap between our mind and world. For McDowell, we, following Davidson, do not have to deny the phenomena of experience as having the role of justification in order to avoid the "dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content." To provide a way out from this problem, McDowell suggests that experience has the ability to justify our thought only if concepts are invoked at the level of our perceptual intake from the world.<sup>18</sup> By doing this, we can avoid both the fear that are coming out as a result of "brute impacts from the exterior" and "frictionless spinning in the void". But, following Davidson's account, I think there is a need of looking into the role of causal stimulation of the world in our thought. McDowell by characterizing Davidson's account of spontaneity as frictionless as spinning in void has perhaps undermined the role of causality in providing content of the world to our thoughts.

The availability of causal stimulation in our thought certainly carries with it some content of the world. Whether this content is rational or not is of course is a different issue.

In order to escape from this “intolerable oscillation,” we have to understand the relation between mind and world in a very particular way and that way must bring in concepts all the way into the level of experience itself. According to McDowell, only concepts mediate the relationship between mind and world without creating any form of dualism.<sup>19</sup> We have to understand the fact that the impressions of the sensibility already have a conceptual content. The faculties of the spontaneity or the conceptual abilities go all the way with experience to give rational control to our thought from outside our thought. Spontaneity is drawn into operation in sensibility itself. To understand this relation between experience and thought in a particular way is to suggest that the faculty of spontaneity is already operative in the operation of receptivity which gathers “perceptual intake from the world.” According to him, there is an external rational constraint on our thinking, but that constraint cannot come from an outer boundary of conceptual realm. The external rational constraint on our thinking is the conceptual realm itself. It is not any extra-conceptual impingements from the world or bare sensations.

McDowell realizes that this position may be difficult to defend because we are often supposed to be placed with a choice between one of the pairs of “the intolerable oscillation.” When we think that we need a rational constraint on our thinking and judging faculty, there is a possibility to suppose that these external constraints are grounded outside the conceptual realm. This is unquestionably the goal of the “Myth of the Given” which according to McDowell is not a plausible alternative.<sup>20</sup> But in his opinion, Evans is right, unlike Davidson, on the point that impacts of the world from outside of thought give reasons for our thought. But on the other hand, as against Evans, Davidson is correct in claiming that all reasons for our thought and action must be within the space of concepts. According to Evans, though our perception

of world is nonconceptual, there is nevertheless a rational relation between perception and thought. That means the content of perception can justify our thought without itself being conceptual. Against this McDowell would argue that the content of perception cannot stand in rational relation to our thought without being conceptual. The non-conceptualist account of Evans, in McDowell's opinion, falls in to the myth of the Given according to which when we are given the worldly content through our perception, there is no involvement of any of our rational or conceptual capacities. This account of Given in our perception, according to McDowell, is a myth i.e. the myth of the Given. However, Evans is right against Davidson in thinking that our perception can give us justification for our thought.

McDowell holds that experiences are receptive in operation and this is the fact which ascertains that there must be an external constraint on our thinking. Experiences are receptive in the sense that they provide the worldly content to the subject who is having these experiences. But the notion of receptivity does not have the power to disqualify experiences from playing a role in justification as coherentism does. The faculty of receptivity itself plays a justificatory role in our thinking of the world. My experience that it is raining is certainly the cause of my belief that it is raining. This very experience that it is raining is the reason for my belief that it is raining. But for that our minds must be credited with conceptual content. The joint operation of the receptivity and spontaneity, of sensibility and understanding make it possible for us to understand how our mental states are directed to the external world. The justification for holding the thought about the world cannot be from outside of the conceptual sphere. By maintaining that our experience is conceptual, we can retain the normative and natural characteristics of our experience.<sup>21</sup> To get a satisfactory picture of intentionality is the primary aim of McDowell's reading of Kant. McDowell is one of the neo-Kantian philosophers according to whom "there is no better way for us to approach an understanding of intentionality than by working towards understanding Kant."<sup>22</sup> For him,

when Kant says that “thought without content is empty,” he is not making a tautological statement.<sup>23</sup> The phrase “without content,” for Kant, is not just the substitute for “empty”. Thought without content, rather, would significantly lack representational content in the sense that thought without content would fail to be called a thought at all. Here Kant is not “drawing our attention to a special kind of thought which is an empty one.”<sup>24</sup> The representational content of thought arises out of interplay of concepts and intuitions. Similarly, by the remark, “intuitions without concepts are blind”; Kant surely does not mean that there is a possibility of blind intuitions. The term ‘blind’ refers to the fact that intuitions without concepts do not make any sense. So, there must be some role for both receptivity and spontaneity for empirical thought to have a bearing on reality. Here McDowell used the word “receptivity”<sup>25</sup> whereas Kant used the word “sensibility” i.e. the faculty used to capture the sensations of the object from the world. He suggests that receptivity or intuition does not make any theoretically separate contribution to the cooperation between sensibility and understanding in acquiring empirical knowledge. According to McDowell, the non-conceptualist account of Kant gives rise to the dualism of concept or content or conceptual scheme or given. Kant’s (sometimes) misleading way of discussing the relation and the distinction between sensibility and understanding, may lead someone to affirm that he accepts that there are two kinds of content that are produced differently by the faculty of sensibility and the faculty of understanding respectively. These two kinds of content can be said to be non-conceptual and conceptual. It may seem that according to Kant, the “faculty of understanding” which produces the capacity of thinking and concepts comes to the picture at a later stage after the “faculty of sensibility” has made its contribution. On this interpretation, the faculty of sensibility is capable of producing the perceptual content all on it alone. For McDowell, this is not the way in which one should understand Kant. The true spirit of Kantian account of the relation between sensibility and understanding for the possibility of empirical thought is that the faculty of sensibility

is not capable of providing the perceptual content absolutely on its own without any contribution from the faculty of understanding. When we are given with the worldly content through our experience, space of concepts is transcendently brought into operation. If we say that the faculty of sensibility, which is possible due to space and time, is responsible for our perceptual experience without involving the faculty of understanding or our conceptual capacities, then we are led to fall into the “Myth of the Given.” However, on McDowell’s interpretation, Kant himself is a rigorous critic of the idea of the “Myth of the Given”.

### **Davidson’s Constitutive Ideal of Rationality and Natural World**

Here we shall very briefly reflect on Davidson’s view on rationality and its relation to the natural world in the context of his view on the relationship between perception and thought. It is pertinent to ask: why did Davidson want to ensure that experience does not have any rational role to play in our belief formulation and constitutive ideals of rationality? The answer to that lies in his account of the relation between “constitutive ideals of rationality” and the natural world. There is a deeper reason why Davidson is making such a move.

For him, if the working of our sensibility is something which is placed in the realm of natural laws as conceived by natural sciences and if it is characterized in terms of causal laws, then the perceptual experience or sensibility cannot be normative. And on the other side, our thinking and knowing which are governed by constitutive ideals of rationality cannot be rationally connected to our experience because as previously formulated our experience is something which is obviously natural on the modern scientific conception of the term natural and our conception of rationality figures in a unique space different from causal laws. That means our perceptual experiences of the world cannot be both natural on the modern scientific conception and be part of a normative and rational sphere. Therefore, In Davidson’s opinion, the phenomena of perceptual experience produce intuitions as natural

happenings in the world which are devoid of concepts and it is a product of disenchanted and brute nature independently of spontaneity.

Scientific naturalism or what McDowell calls bald naturalism is the view that the natural world and the place of mind in it can be fully explained by the mechanism of the realm of physical laws without remainder. On this view, the elements of our rationality and conceptual capacities can be understood or reconstructed out of scientific laws of nature. Scientific naturalism, “in its crudest form” is defined by McDowell as “the claim that absolutely all the things we can talk about- all objects, all properties and relations, all facts- are capturable by means of the conceptual apparatus that is characteristic of the natural sciences”<sup>26</sup>. What we find here is that Davidson did not raise any problems against the bald naturalistic interpretation of nature as such. He somewhere took for granted that the natural scientific conception of nature is the only conception of nature. However, if that is the case, then, for him, it is impossible to naturalistically understand our “spontaneity” and normatively understand our experience. In his opinion, it is correct to make a contrast between the space where constitutive ideals of rationality operates and natural scientific-understanding of nature.

The constitutive factor of the very idea of being mental is rationality. McDowell, interpreting Davidson’s position says that “a special irreducibility of concepts of the mental to concepts of the natural sciences and their kin in everyday thought and speech- is central to an authentically Davidsonian philosophy.”<sup>27</sup> Davidson points out that our mental phenomenon is governed by “constitutive ideals of rationality.” Concepts of the mental phenomena which are governed by “constitutive ideals of rationality” cannot be reduced to concepts which figure in a way of thinking and talking that are not governed by constitutive ideals of rationality.

So, Davidson opposed scientific naturalism’s way of explaining our idea of rationality not by raising problems with it, but by taking away the sphere of rationality from what is called natural. He did not



simply feel the need to encounter the bald naturalism's way of naturalizing our conception of nature. In his opinion, our mental phenomenal or propositional attitudes by being governed by constitutive ideals of rationality are the proper abode of meaning. Realm of law, on the contrary, cannot be home to meaning and "constitutive ideals of realm of law" cannot capture the idea of what it is to be rational and exercise freedom in empirical thinking. McDowell is in agreement with Davidson on the above point. But the problem, one can find in Davidson's view, is that he did not question the idea of nature that is handed over to us by "bald naturalism or scientific naturalism." In his opinion, the interpretation of experience, nature and rationality, given by natural scientific interpretation is not problematic. For Davidson, though the constitutive ideals of rationality and the "constitutive ideals of realm of law" give rise to different kinds of intelligibility quite in contrast to each other, the subject matter of these two kinds of space is the same. The categories in the space of rationality are causally available in the space of natural world. In McDowell's words, Davidson's "ontological claim"<sup>28</sup> argues - "the things which satisfy the *sui generis* concepts in the space of reasons in principle already available to an investigation whose concern is the realm of law."<sup>29</sup> Since natural scientific understanding of experience is perfect and it is something natural, Davidson takes away our power of spontaneity from the realm of the natural. But for him, the conception of natural as depicted by natural science is the only concept of nature which is available and it is complete.

According to Davidson's ontological thesis, concepts in our *sui generis* space of rationality are also located in the realm of law. However, these concepts gain their unique nature not by virtue of their placement in the realm of law. Our rationality is located in nature by virtue of its causal relation, not by virtue of its rational relation with the nomological reality. This does not seem to be a problem for him. Our perceptual experiences which are part of our natural interaction with the external world cannot contribute to the unique intelligibility of "constitutive ideals of rationality" in a rational way and hence the impact of experience

on our propositional attitudes is causal, non-conceptual and not normative. For Davidson, the items in the space of reasons are present in the natural world causally. They have a causal root in the space of nature. But these items gain their distinctive nature only by remaining in the “space of reasons.” One important question that arises in this context is that, if the items in the space of reasons are only causally related to the natural world, then how can the space of reasons be an autonomous space? The causal elements, on Davidson’s conception, are outside the “space of reasons” and “space of concepts.” It can dictate the space of reasons by itself remaining outside of the boundary of rational sphere. It is in that context, the space of rationality cannot be a free space. However, one should not miss significant agreement between McDowell and Davidson regarding many issues. Here I wish to highlight two such agreements. For both of them, our experience understood in terms of mere causal interaction with the world cannot provide rational constraint to our thoughts. But this point leads Davidson to exclude experience from the sphere of rationality. Both of them also agree on the point that placing something in the constitutive ideal of rationality or space of reasons is a different kind of intelligibility in comparison to placing something in the realm of physical laws. Our thoughts about the world cannot be explained properly by placing them in the realm of law. Both of them are significant critiques of scientific naturalism. But Davidson while rejecting scientific naturalism excludes natural world from the sphere of reasons and this leads to an ontological gap between mind and world. McDowell, on the other hand, argued that the sphere of rationality itself is natural. But it is not natural the way scientific naturalism makes its natural. It is in this context that McDowell refers to a unique conception of nature i.e. second nature. For him, rationality is not something which is superimposed on our animal life. Rather rationality is very much part of our life. Our animal life is very much determined by our rationality to the core. This idea is also present in Aristotle’s ethics by which McDowell’s conception of second nature is inspired. In Aristotle’s

ethics, we find that a normal human being is rational. McDowell describing the nature of second nature says,

“Our nature is largely second nature, and our second nature is the way it is not just because of the potentialities we are born with, but also because of our upbringing, our *Bildung*. Given the notion of second nature, we can say that the way our lives are shaped by reasons is natural, even while we deny that our structure of the space of reasons can be integrated into the realm of law.”<sup>30</sup>

In the context of human beings, normative is not over and above natural. Rather the normative character of our rationality is deeply integrated with our animal nature. But in Davidson, we do not find such a conception of nature. As I have mentioned before, the only conception of nature which was available to Davidson is the modern scientific conception of nature according to which our natural world can exhaustibly be explained by physical laws. Since, the space of reasons, for Davidson, cannot be explained by the realm of physical laws, it lead to an unbridgeable gap between reason and nature. The unbridgeable gulf between rationality and natural world is the source of the problems regarding placing mind in the natural world. But, for McDowell, the natural world for human beings is a normative world. One should, however, in this context, be careful in making a contrast between McDowell’s and Davidson’s positions. Both of them, as mentioned before, agreed to the point that the way in which natural world is explained by following scientific naturalism is different from the way in which our rationality is explained. If following Davidson, the above view leads to the gap between reason and nature, then one may ask—why the same is not the case in the context of McDowell, why does McDowell’s view not fall into the same problem? For McDowell, scientific naturalism is a kind of intelligibility which is different from the intelligibility in terms of which we place elements in the space of reasons. But the difference between these two kinds of intelligibility should not lead to an unbridgeable gap between rationality and natural

world as such because there could be other kinds of intelligibility pertaining to the natural world. For Davidson, on the contrary, scientific naturalism is the only conception of naturalism available to us. Hence he identified the very conception of natural world with the kind of intelligibility scientific naturalism provides and as a result his conception of natural excludes the sphere of normativity. But according to McDowell two kinds of intelligibility in relation to natural world and sphere of rationality should not necessarily lead to a gap between nature and reason. Following McDowell's conception of second nature, one can say that human nature is both normative and natural. But, from this, how can we reach at a conclusion that the natural world itself is normative? Elements of the natural world may become normative in relation to human nature. But how these elements themselves are normative? How the causal relations in the natural world themselves are normative? Scientific naturalism is obviously a kind of intelligibility. But the realm of laws or causality itself is not merely an intelligibility. Causal relations are ontologically real. Now the question arises, how to accommodate the sphere of causality in the space of reasons? McDowell does not seem to have a clear answer to these questions. In his account of the relationship between mind and world, McDowell in a specific context argues that the space of concepts is unbounded.<sup>31</sup> But we see that in Davidson's account the natural world remains outside of the space of reasons. Following McDowell, if we think that the space of reasons is unbounded, then the natural world with its causal relations must be part of it. To put it in a different way, the causal relations themselves must be normative relations. In order to maintain this position, it is not sufficient enough on the part of McDowell to merely state that normative relations are operating in causal happenings between human beings and the external world. Merely exercising the philosophical traditions or questioning the background assumptions of philosophical theories as McDowell does is not enough for him to show how causal relations themselves are normative. The problem that we find with McDowell's position is that if there is no gap between reason

and nature as such, then why do we need different kinds of intelligibility in relation to these? If there are two very distinct intelligibilities, then there is a possibility of leading to two distinct ontological realities.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that our experiences of the world must give us not only causal stimulation but also rational justification for our thoughts without which our thoughts would not have genuine worldly content. But I think Davidson's account of thought does not fall into the problem of "frictionless spinning in the void" because for him thought necessarily involves causal content if not rational content. Hence "spontaneity" in his account cannot be entirely void as McDowell thinks it to be. A satisfactory account of the relationship between experience and thought cannot be given unless we address the root cause of the problem i.e. the relationship between rationality and the natural world. I agree with McDowell on the point that there should be a rational relation between experience and thought and in this context scientific naturalism is not the only conception of naturalism available to us. Davidson is right in saying that placing our knowledge and thought in constitutive ideal of rationality is a different kind of intelligibility in comparison to placing something in the realm of laws. But the problem with his account is that it leads to an ontological gap between normative and natural, between mind and world. Though McDowell tries to bridge the gap with his account of second nature, it remains unclear how bare causality could be part of the space of reasons. It is possibly not easy for McDowell to argue that there are no causal relations outside of the sphere of normativity. If the causal relations to a certain extent are situated outside of the sphere of rational relations, then there remains a dualism between the sphere of causality and the sphere of rationality. I agree with Davidson on his claim that traditional empiricism is based on scheme-content dualism. But we do not need to deny our experience for giving empirical justification to our thought in order to deny empiricism. The notion of experience we inherit from the traditional

empiricism is certainly not the only conception of experience we can work on while developing an account of the mind-world relationship. McDowell, on the contrary, in his account does not want to give up the experiential content of the world for giving justification to our thoughts. According to him, we should not step outside of the space of reasons i.e. space of concepts (for McDowell) in order to acquire justification. He, in addition to this, gives emphasis to the point that the world remains outside of our thought, as a result of which we can have genuine content or genuine constraint from outside on thought. But the external world, he thinks, does not remain outside of our space of reasons which for him is nothing but the space of concepts. How can the external world at the same time remain outside of our thought and be part of our realm of the conceptual? How the realm of the conceptual is extended beyond the realm of thought? It is one of the most difficult philosophical positions to maintain.

### Notes and References

- 1 I am greatly indebted to my teacher Manidipa Sen of Jawaharlal Nehru University from whom I learned about various debates and issues in philosophy of mind and epistemology.
- 2 Ibid., p. 46.
- 3 Ibid., P. 46.
- 4 McDowell in *Mind and World* specifically discussed Gareth Evans' Nonconceptualism. I am not going to discuss nonconceptualism in this paper.
- 5 Ibid., 11.
- 6 Davidson, Donald. *Subjective, Intersubjective and Objective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001a, p. 41.
- 7 There is a great deal of discussion regarding the relation between this third dogma and other two dogmas that have been rejected by W. V. O. Quine. We are not going to discuss that debate here.
- 8 Davidson, Donald. 2001a, p. 52.
- 9 Ibid., 39.
- 10 Ibid., 40.
- 11 McDowell, John. 1996, p. 14.

- 12 However, Nonconceptualists argue that a justificatory relation between experience and thought is possible even if our experience is nonconceptual.
- 13 Davidson, 2001a, p. 143.
- 14 Ibid., P. 141.
- 15 McDowell, 1996: 14.
- 16 Davidson, 2001a, p. 144.
- 17 McDowell, 1996: 18.
- 18 There are severe implications of McDowell's conceptualism. I am not going to discuss these here.
- 19 When we say concepts mediate the relation between mind and world, it should not mean that we are not directly aware of the external world. The ontological gap between mind and world can be bridged if we stress that it is not only experience but also the fact of the world that give rational content to our thought. Concepts should not be taken as intermediaries between the world and mind as if the mind is cut off from the world and concepts bring them together.
- 20 For the detail and critical discussion of McDowell's view on Myth of the Given, see Panda, Manoj Kumar. "McDowell on the Myth of the Given", *Journal of All Odisha Philosophical Association*, January, 2018.
- 21 However, a concern might arise that by saying that experience is conceptual, we might lose the genuine worldly content. McDowell has addressed this issue in detail. I am not going to discuss it here.
- 22 McDowell, 1996: 3.
- 23 Ibid., 4.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 McDowell, John. "Responses", in *John McDowell: Experience, Norm and Nature*, ed. Jakob Lindgaard, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 216.
- 27 McDowell, John. *Having the World in view: Essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009, 208.

- 28 Davidson's ontological claim about the relation between rationality and natural world which he calls "anomalous monism" is expounded in detail in his article, "Mental Events." I am not going to discuss this here.
- 29 McDowell, 1996, pp. 74-75.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
- 31 I am not discussing this issue here. For a detail critical discussion of the unboundedness of the conceptual, see Panda, Manoj Kumar. "Unboundedness of the Conceptual and External World", *Ravenshaw Journal of Philosophy*, Volume III, 2017.