

## McDowell, Transcendental Philosophy, and Naturalism\*

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0. I want to discuss the place of naturalism in the philosophy of John McDowell. There are some people who think McDowell is a naturalist in name only.<sup>1</sup> But I think there is an aspect of his thinking which merits the title. And I think it is an aspect he could well do without, in light of his recent attempt to understand his own philosophy as a Hegelian radicalization of Kantian themes.

In §1, I will pinpoint the essential features of McDowell's naturalism. In §2, I will describe how he thinks his philosophy corrects Kant's conception of experience along Hegelian lines. And in §3, I will suggest that his naturalism stands in tension with this Hegelian correction.

McDowell famously claimed a Hegelian influence in the Preface to Mind and World, when he said that he “would like to conceive [that] work [as] a prolegomenon to a reading of the Phenomenology [of Spirit]”.<sup>2</sup> He sheds light on this claimed influence in a recent essay, ‘Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant’.<sup>3</sup> I think a study of this essay enables us to see the extent to which McDowell's way of doing transcendental philosophy sits uneasily with a feature of his naturalistic outlook; a feature that – so far as I can see – is characteristic of the outlook of almost all contemporary Anglo-American philosophers.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ram Neta, ‘Review of Naturalism in Question by M. De Caro and D. Macarthur (eds.)’, The Philosophical Review, 116: 657-63 (2007).

<sup>2</sup> John McDowell, Mind and World 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996 [1994]), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> John McDowell, ‘Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant’, in his Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

1. McDowell claims to endorse a form of naturalism which rejects a conception of nature as ‘disenchanted’.

That conception concerns the constitution of items in nature. It says that these items admit of a complete constitutive explanation of a certain sort, viz. one that says what it is for an item to be the item it is without employing any concepts that belong to the “logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”.<sup>4</sup>

McDowell thinks this conception is the “mental block”<sup>5</sup> which prevents certain philosophers<sup>6</sup> from so much as considering the position he recommends: that conceptual capacities belonging to the higher cognitive faculty are actualised in the operations of our sensibility.<sup>7</sup>

The operations of our sensibility are items in nature. So, in light of the conception of nature as disenchanted, they admit of a complete constitutive explanation which does not employ concepts from inside the logical space of reasons. But to understand the operations of our sensibility as constituted by the higher cognitive faculty is to understand them as admitting of a constitutive explanation that does employ concepts from inside this logical space.

And now we seem to have a problem. Given that the operations of our sensibility admit of a complete constitutive explanation from outside the logical space of reasons, there seems to be no explanatory role left for concepts from inside this logical space to play. The fact that concepts from outside yield complete constitutive explanations seems to ‘screen-off’ the explanatory potential of concepts from inside.

There are a number of ways of avoiding this putative screening-off problem.

The first way claims that what it is for items to instantiate concepts from inside the logical space of reasons is simply for them to instantiate concepts from outside that

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<sup>4</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.) Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 288-9.

<sup>5</sup> McDowell, Mind and World, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> The philosophers he has in mind are Donald Davidson and Gareth Evans. He thinks they cannot endorse any of the ways of avoiding the screening-off problem that I mention below, because they think that the logical space of reasons is sui generis, that operations of our sensibility are items in nature, and that nature is disenchanted. As a result, they cannot but place the operations of our sensibility outside the scope of the higher cognitive faculty.

<sup>7</sup> The conceptual capacities in question are ones to which it is essential that “they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its rational credentials” (Mind and World, p. 47).

logical space.<sup>8</sup> As McDowell puts it, the logical space of reasons is not “sui generis”.<sup>9</sup> The hope is that the explanatory potential of concepts from inside will be, not screened off, but accounted for, by that of concepts from outside, thereby allowing us to accept that the operations of our sensibility implicate capacities which belong to the higher faculty, without denying that these operations are items in nature, or that nature is disenchanted.

The second way does not deny that the logical space of reasons is sui generis, and it accepts that nature is disenchanted. But it insists that the operations of our sensibility are not items in nature. And that ensures there is no reason to think these operations admit of a complete constitutive explanation from outside the logical space of reasons. So, there is no screening-off problem.

The third way is that favoured by McDowell: the logical space of reasons is sui generis, and the operations of our sensibility are items in nature, but nature is not disenchanted. There are at least some such items, such as the operations of our sensibility, which do not admit of a complete constitutive explanation from outside the logical space of reasons. So, there is no screening-off problem.

It is reasonable to wonder whether there is a real difference between the second and third of these ways, or whether the difference is merely that the latter is prepared to use the words ‘in nature’ to refer to the sui generis items, but the former is not. That there is a real difference is made clear in the following quotation.

[We] have to expand [our conception of second nature] beyond what is countenanced in a naturalism of the realm of law. But the expansion is limited by the first nature, so to speak, of human animals ...<sup>10</sup>

Some comments on this quotation are in order.

In Mind and World, McDowell spoke of a contrast between the logical space of reasons and the realm of law. But he came to reject this way of putting matters, because he saw that the contrast he is interested in is simply between those concepts that belong to

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<sup>8</sup> McDowell awards this claim the title “bald naturalism”. McDowell, Mind and World, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> McDowell, Mind and World, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> McDowell, Mind and World, p.109-10.

the logical space of reasons, and those that do not.<sup>11</sup> The idea of concepts that place their instances in lawful relations is not to the point; indeed, it is potentially misleading, in its suggestion that concepts from inside the logical space of reasons cannot do this, and concepts from outside cannot but do so. Talk of “a naturalism of the realm of law” should simply be understood as talk of a naturalism which insists that all items in nature admit of a complete constitutive explanation from outside.

McDowell distinguishes between our first nature and our second nature. Our second nature comprises those aspects of our nature which admit of a constitutive explanation from inside, to which both our sensibility and the higher cognitive faculty belong, according to McDowell. Our first nature comprises those aspects of our nature which admit of a complete constitutive explanation from outside; aspects of our biology, for example. And our first nature limits our second nature, in some way.

Can we say anything about this limiting? Well, I think we would expect it to have at least the following two dimensions.

The first dimension is suggested by McDowell himself.

[First nature] matters, for one thing, because the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them.<sup>12</sup>

The “shapings” of our second nature comprise the ways in which, at a general level, we experience and understand the world. So, the point might be put by saying that our first nature constrains how, at this general level, we understand and experience the world. For example, we cannot but experience objects as located in space and time, and we cannot but understand these objects as so located. To endorse naturalism is inter alia to accept that one source of these constraints is our first nature.

The second dimension is related to the first, and is nicely pinpointed by Mark Sacks.<sup>13</sup> At the moment we cannot but experience and understand the world in certain

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<sup>11</sup> See John McDowell, ‘Sellars on Perceptual Experience’, in his Having the World in View.

<sup>12</sup> John McDowell, ‘Two Sorts of Naturalism’, in his Mind, Value, and Reality (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Sacks, Objectivity and Insight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), part II.

ways. But “that is no more than a consequence of the way our mindset is fixed”<sup>14</sup> by the current shape of our first nature. The shape of our first nature is a contingent, empirical structure. We might think of it as a potentially shifting foundation, whose shifts may, for instance, cause the constraints it places on what we can experience to relax, thereby allowing us to enjoy experiences which were barred to us hitherto. We do not know that this will happen. But neither do we know that it will not happen. To endorse naturalism is inter alia to accept that, for all we know, these constraints on the structure of our second nature, and with it the structure of our experience, will change in this way.

What would a denial of McDowell’s naturalism look like?

The most natural way to deny it would be to say that our cognitive faculties are limitless; that is, immutable in structure, not constrained by features of the sort that fall under the head of first nature – or, indeed, by any other features, if such there be. Put differently: whereas McDowell asserts that the subject of his philosophy – the subject he refers to, when he speaks of our sensibility – is a conditioned subject, limited by first nature, this denial maintains that the subject is wholly unconditioned. This is a conception of the subject which seems to match that of the post-Kantian idealists – at least as these were memorably depicted by Josiah Royce in The Spirit of Modern Philosophy: a conception of the infinite self, the absolute ego; in effect, the Kantian transcendental ego, but purged of the empirical restraints with which the idealists thought it was shackled by Kant.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, contemporary Anglo-American philosophers are not known for their dalliance with the absolute. And this may explain their tendency to overlook the positive side of McDowell’s naturalism. That oversight is, I think, quite reasonable, if we operate on the terrain of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. But I want to suggest that, at least in his more recent essays, McDowell needs to operate outside of this terrain, because he signs up to a position that requires an absolute subject.

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<sup>14</sup> Sacks, Objectivity and Insight, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Royce, The Spirit of Modern Philosophy (Boston: Houghton, 1892). See also Frederick C. Beiser, German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism: 1781-1808 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) pp. 4-5. The purging happens in three stages, according to Beiser: first, the subject is said not to be an object of inner or outer experience; second, the subject is presented as having knowledge of things in themselves; third, the subject is depicted as the source not only of the form of experience but also of its matter. We will see (in §2 below) that – on a suitable understanding of what these stages amount to – McDowell wants to endorse the second and the third stage, but not the first.

It is McDowell's insistence on a conditioned subject that ensures there is a real difference between the second and the third way of avoiding the screening-off problem. To think the operations of our sensibility are items in nature is to think they are episodes in the life of a conditioned subject, limited by first nature. The third way of avoiding the problem thinks this is so. But the second way thinks it is not so. So, one way of putting my suggestion is that McDowell would do better to endorse the second, instead of the third, of the three ways.

2. I have said that McDowell thinks of his own philosophy as a radicalization of Kant, on Hegelian lines. It does not take long to say why this is so: contra Kant, but following Hegel, McDowell insists we bring not simply the form but the matter of our pure intuitions inside the scope of the higher cognitive faculty. But it will take some time to make this thought intelligible.

McDowell sees his Hegelian radicalization as a contribution to transcendental philosophy. And he understands transcendental philosophy – reasonably, if idiosyncratically – as philosophy that aims to dissolve problems for the possibility of objective purport. But what is objective purport?

McDowell speaks of “the intentionality, the objective purport, of perceptual experience”.<sup>16</sup> And his central claim is that experience cannot have objective purport unless it draws on conceptual capacities which belong to the higher cognitive faculty. That might lead us to think that he thinks an item cannot have intentionality unless it draws on these capacities. But this would be a mistake, because he thinks an item can have intentionality even in the absence of these capacities. He thinks that non-rational subjects, subjects lacking the higher faculty, can nevertheless enjoy episodes and states with intentional content.<sup>17</sup>

His claim is that experience, as it is enjoyed by rational subjects, cannot have its distinctive kind of objective purport unless it draws on capacities which belong to the higher faculty. For instance, our experience comprises what at least purport to be

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<sup>16</sup> McDowell, ‘Sellars on Perceptual Experience’, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> This is made explicit in John McDowell, ‘Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars’, Philosophical Topics, vol. 34, nos. 1&2 (2008), p. 318.

sensible intuitions, “sensory states that are immediately of objects”.<sup>18</sup> The intentionality of intuitions consists in their being of objects in a way which is distinctively immediate; the intentionality of purported intuitions consists in their purporting to be of objects in this way. This kind of intentionality contrasts with that of, say, judgements, which lack even purported immediacy. Intuitions are also cases “of having an object available for cognition”, viz. for knowledge.<sup>19</sup> So, their intentionality also consists in their making their objects available for knowledge, viz. in their affording knowledge of how things stand with their objects; the intentionality of purported intuitions consists in their purporting to do this. This kind of intentionality also contrasts with that of judgements, which lack even a purportedly knowledge-affording character.<sup>20</sup>

In his Woodbridge lectures, McDowell presents the project of making sense of the objective purport of experience as, inter alia, that of making sense of experience as comprising empirical intuitions. But in the later essay he clarifies the project as, inter alia, that of making sense of experience as comprising not only empirical intuitions but also pure intuitions, viz. not only intuitions with the capacity to afford empirical knowledge but also intuitions with the capacity to afford a priori knowledge, viz. knowledge of what is “necessary and in the strictest sense universal”.<sup>21</sup>

The project is to be executed, not only according to McDowell, but also according to Kant, according to McDowell, by seeing experience as informed by the categories, the pure concepts of the understanding. The understanding is the guise in which the higher cognitive faculty appears throughout almost all of the Critique.<sup>22</sup> So, the claim which McDowell endorses, and also attributes to Kant, is that experience has objective purport only if it is informed by the categories. To see experience as informed by the categories is to see the objects of experience as conforming to the categories. So, we might say that

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<sup>18</sup> McDowell, ‘Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant’, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> McDowell, ‘Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant’, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> McDowell uses “cognition” as a synonym for “knowledge” in John McDowell, ‘Avoiding the Myth of the Given’, in J. Lindgaard (ed.) John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason [1787], trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), B5.

<sup>22</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. It is not until the Architectonic of Pure Reason that it assumes the guise of “the whole higher faculty of knowledge” (A385/B863).

the claim is that experience has objective purport only if its objects conform to the categories.

But Kant thinks the claim faces an objection. And McDowell thinks Kant structures the B Deduction in order to avoid this objection.

The objection is that conformity to the categories on the part of the objects of our experience is not required for these objects to be given to our senses. It is required for our experience to be composed of intuitions which make these objects available for our cognition. So, it is required for our experience to have that sort of objective purport. But it is not required for our experience to have what McDowell calls “the ground-level case of objective purport”,<sup>23</sup> viz. not required for it to be composed of sensory states which are not yet intuitions but nevertheless relate to objects. And this is because the Transcendental Aesthetic has specified an independent condition for our experience to have this sort of objective purport, viz. that its objects conform to the spatial and temporal forms of our sensibility. In order to be given to our senses, the objects of our experience must conform to the forms of our sensibility. But they need not conform to the categories. We can still say that they are required to conform to the categories in order for our experience to comprise intuitions. But now that requirement “looks like mere subjective imposition, superadded to the requirement for things to be present to our senses, and nothing to do with the things themselves”.<sup>24</sup>

In structuring the B Deduction as he does, Kant aims to avoid this objection by stressing that conformity to the forms of our sensibility is not independent of conformity to the categories. Kant says that “all combination, be we conscious of it or not ... is an act of the understanding”.<sup>25</sup> So, even combination in conformity to the forms of our sensibility is an act of the understanding. McDowell dislikes this talk of an act, and thinks Kant’s point could be put better by saying that all cases of combination are cases of the kind of unity that is characteristic of the higher faculty, viz. cases of the kind of unity constituted by conformity to the categories. So, as we might put it: conformity to the forms of our sensibility involves conformity to the categories. In which case, far from preventing conformity to the categories from being required for the ground-level

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<sup>23</sup> John McDowell, ‘On Pippin’s Postscript’ (2007), in his Having the World in View, p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> McDowell, ‘Hegel’s Idealism as a Radicalization of Kant’, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B130.



objective purport of our experience, the fact that conformity to the forms of our sensibility is required for this objective purport ensures that the same is true of conformity to the categories. And with that Kant takes himself to have avoided the present obstacle, and to be entitled to claim that the categories apply to “whatever objects may present themselves to our senses”.<sup>26</sup>

Kant summarises the conclusion he takes himself to have established as follows: “All synthesis ... even that which renders perception possible, is subject to the categories; and since experience is knowledge by means of connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience, and are therefore valid a priori for all objects of experience”.<sup>27</sup> But McDowell thinks that Kant is not entitled to this conclusion. And he takes himself to follow Hegel in this assessment.

In the Aesthetic, Kant tries to ground a priori knowledge on the way our sensibility is formed. But [because] it remains a sort of brute fact about us – given from outside to the unifying powers of [the higher cognitive faculty], and not determined by their exercise (not even in the extended sense of being intelligible only in a context that includes their exercise) – that the pure intuitions that reflect the forms of our sensibility are intuitions of space and time ... it is problematic how we can conceive this knowledge as both a priori and genuinely objective. ... Transcendental idealism, which is just this insistence that the apparent spatiality and temporality of our world derive from the way our sensibility is formed, stands revealed as subjective idealism.<sup>28</sup>

Suppose we abstract away from the fact that the higher faculty informs our experience. We can no longer assume that our experience has objective purport. But, in the picture McDowell credits to Kant, something determinative of its objective purport remains: something supplied by our sensibility alone. The higher faculty contributes something to the objective purport of our experience: it ensures the unity of its pure intuitions. But our sensibility, our human sensibility, also contributes something: it

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<sup>26</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B159.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B161.

<sup>28</sup> McDowell, ‘Hegel’s Idealism as Radicalization of Kant’, p. 76.

ensures that its pure intuitions are intuitions of space and time. Put differently: it ensures that its empirical intuitions are intuitions of spatially and temporally ordered objects. Now we know that our human sensibility with its forms allows the formation of pure intuitions of space and time. But we do not know that there cannot be other sensibilities with different forms which allow the formation of different pure intuitions. So, although we know that our pure intuitions are of space and time, we cannot rule out the possibility of different pure intuitions with different objects. Put differently: although we know that the objects of our empirical intuitions are spatially and temporally ordered, we cannot rule out the possibility of different empirical intuitions whose objects are differently ordered. In which case, how can we know a priori, in virtue of the way our sensibility is formed, that all objects are ordered in space and time?

Well, Kant seems to answer this question in the Transcendental Aesthetic. And he seems to say that we cannot have this sort of a priori knowledge. We can possess a priori knowledge of objects, but only subject to a limitation to the objects of our sensible intuition. He makes the same point in regard to space and time. Here is what he says in regard to space.

The proposition, that all things are side by side in space, is valid under the limitation that these things are viewed as objects of our sensible intuition. If, now, I add the condition to the concept, and say that all things, as outer appearances, are side by side in space, the rule is universally valid and without limitation. Our exposition therefore establishes the reality, that is, the objective validity, of space in respect to whatever can be presented to us outwardly as objects but also at the same time the ideality of space in respect of things when they are considered ... without regard to the constitution of our sensibility. We assert, then, the empirical reality of space, as regards all possible outer experience, and yet at the same time we assert its transcendental ideality – in other words, that it is nothing at all, once we withdraw the above condition ...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A28/B44.

We can know a priori only that all appearances – all objects of our sensible intuition – are ordered in space and time. The ordering of all objects full stop is wholly beyond our ken. In this way, Kant depicts our knowledge as limited, conditioned – by our specifically human sensibility.

And this limitation is not confined to our a priori knowledge of objects' conformity to the forms of our sensibility. "Only our sensible and empirical intuition can give [the categories] body and meaning" for us, according to Kant. So, their extension "beyond our sensible intuition is of no advantage to us [because] as concepts of objects they are then empty, and so do not enable us to judge of their objects whether or not they are even possible".<sup>30</sup> In which case, Kant is not entitled to claim that the categories are valid a priori for all objects of experience full stop.

McDowell thinks Kant's transcendental idealism, so understood, makes it "problematic how he can conceive [our putative a priori] knowledge as both a priori and genuinely objective"<sup>31</sup> – that is, genuinely knowledge. It is knowledge – Kant thinks – only if it is conditioned, limited to our specifically human sensibility. But then – McDowell thinks – it is not genuinely a priori. It is a priori – McDowell thinks – only if it is unconditioned. But then – Kant thinks – it is not genuinely knowledge, because we cannot rule out the possibility of differently formed sensibilities. So, we have a new problem for making sense of objective purport. According to McDowell, one of Hegel's signal contributions to transcendental philosophy is to show how this problem can be removed.

Kant depicts our pure intuitions of space and time as the joint product of our sensibility and the higher cognitive faculty. The higher faculty is responsible for the form of these intuitions, for their having the kind of unity constituted by conformity to the categories. Our sensibility is responsible for their matter, for their being of space and time. So, we might say – with McDowell – that Kant depicts the form, but not the matter, of our pure intuitions as the product of the higher faculty. Hegel's contribution – according to McDowell – is to see both their form and their matter as the product of the higher faculty. Abstract away from the contribution of the higher faculty and some

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<sup>30</sup> Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B148-9.

<sup>31</sup> McDowell, 'Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant', p. 73.

condition determinative of their objective purport remains, in the picture McDowell credits to Kant. But abstract away from the higher faculty's contribution and no such condition remains, in the picture McDowell credits to Hegel.

How is this supposed to remove the new problem?

The problem arises because of Kant's claim that we do not know that there cannot be other sensibilities with different forms. When Kant speaks of our sensibility he is speaking of something that, for all we know, is not the property of thinking subjects as such, but merely the property of us human beings. And the same goes for the products of our sensibility, such as the matter of our pure intuitions. But when he speaks of the higher cognitive faculty, he means to be speaking of something that – in the guise of the understanding – is the property of thinking subjects as such. And the same goes for the products of this faculty, such as the form of our pure intuitions. So, if we could entitle ourselves to think that the matter of these intuitions is one of the products of the higher faculty, then – McDowell thinks – we could not persist in claiming that, for all we know, the matter of our pure intuitions is merely the property of human beings. That is, we could not persist in claiming that, for all we know, there might be sensibilities formed other than ours, which generate different pure intuitions.

The solution, then, according to McDowell, is to entitle ourselves to think that this pure matter is one of the products of the higher faculty, because then it will not be the case that we cannot rule out the possibility of different pure intuitions associated with differently formed sensibilities. The obstacle to our knowing a priori, in virtue of the way our sensibility is formed, that all objects are in space and time will thereby dissolve.

But we should note what McDowell takes to be the upshot of removing the problem in this way. In keeping the matter of our pure intuitions outside the scope of the higher faculty, Kant ensures that our a priori knowledge is conditioned, subject to a limitation. But by bringing this matter wholly inside the scope of the higher faculty, Hegel ensures that this knowledge is unconditioned, subject to no limitation whatsoever. So, there is no opening for the worry that a priori knowledge remains conditioned, perhaps not by our specific sensibility, but by sensibility as such, for the simple reason that sensibility does not lay down conditions of its own. Every condition relevant to the acquisition of a priori knowledge is laid down by the higher cognitive faculty. So, the

higher faculty is itself unconditioned. And this means that it cannot be said to assume the guise of the understanding. That is the guise of a conditioned faculty. But, as McDowell puts it, in Hegel's radicalization of Kant, "what first comes into view in the guise of the capacity of a finite understanding can be reconceived as the unlimited freedom of reason".<sup>32</sup>

This is not to say that our sensibility does not lay down conditions. The point is that the conditions it lays down, which determine that our pure intuitions are of space and time, just are conditions laid down by the higher faculty. To make this vivid we might say that the structure of our sensibility is not even partially independent of the structure of the higher faculty. Or as McDowell puts it, the forms of our sensibility are but "a 'moment' within ... the self-realisation of the Concept"<sup>33</sup>, the Hegelian counterpart to the pure concepts of the understanding. That is the picture McDowell assigns to Hegel. And it is a picture McDowell himself wants to endorse. Indeed, he thinks it is very like – as he puts it – "what I set out in my Mind and World (as improved and corrected by [my Woodbridge Lectures])".<sup>34</sup>

**3.** That there is a tension between McDowell's Hegelianism and his naturalism may be obvious. But I would like to conclude by spelling out its nature.

As we have seen, McDowell seeks to remove a problem for the possibility of a priori knowledge. He traces the source of this problem to a certain conception of the structure of our faculty of sensibility, which sees this structure as partially independent of the structure of the higher cognitive faculty. But I want to suggest the problem has another potential source, viz. a certain conception of the structure of our sensibility, which sees this structure as an aspect of the shape of our second nature, and so as limited by our first nature. Both conceptions seem to ensure that, for all we know, the structure of our human sensibility is not common to thinking subjects as such, but specific to human beings.

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<sup>32</sup> McDowell, 'Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant', p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> McDowell, 'On Pippin's Postscript', p. 195.

<sup>34</sup> McDowell, 'Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant', p. 89.

Here is a way of seeing that the latter conception generates this consequence. We are not merely thinking subjects, with a second nature that is limited by our first nature. We are also human beings, in virtue of the shape of our first nature. But, for all we know, the shape of our first nature will change, and with it the shape of our second nature. And, for all we know, we will survive this change as thinking subjects, but not as human beings. That is, after the change the beings presently constituted as human beings will not be so constituted because of the change in their first nature, yet will remain thinking subjects, because they continue to possess a suitable second nature. But if the shape of our second nature changes with our first nature in this way, the shape that our second nature has before the change may be said to characterise the second nature of human beings, but not the second nature of thinking subjects as such.

So, once we accept that the shape of our second nature is limited by the shape of our first nature – once we accept McDowell's naturalism, in other words – we must accept that, for all we know, the shape of our second nature that is ours qua human beings is not common to thinking subjects as such.<sup>35</sup> And because the structure of our sensibility is but an aspect of the shape our second nature, we must also accept that, for all we know, the structure of our sensibility that is ours qua human beings is not the property of thinking subjects as such.

It looks, then, as if the problem does have at least two different sources: a conception of our sensibility as independent of the higher faculty, and a conception of our sensibility as limited by our first nature. Indeed, if our sensibility is limited by our first nature, it cannot be an aspect of the higher faculty as Kant understands it, because if it was it would be the property of thinking subjects as such. So, it looks as if McDowell has not done enough to dissolve the problem. In order to bring the pure matter of our sensibility within the scope of the higher faculty so understood, he needs to abandon his naturalism; because short of doing the latter we cannot rule out the possibility that the structure of our sensibility is merely ours qua human beings.

And this is not all. McDowell's naturalism ensures that we cannot rule out the possibility that the structure of the higher faculty itself is merely ours qua human beings,

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<sup>35</sup> To put it in the terms favoured by Sacks: The structure of our second nature is supposed to provide transcendental constraints; but McDowell's naturalism ensures that it can only provide transcendental features. See Sacks, Objectivity and Insight, chapter 6.

precisely because of its insistence that the higher faculty belongs to our second nature. (And for this reason I do not think McDowell is really entitled to talk of ‘the’ higher faculty, as if he knows there cannot be others.) Bringing the pure matter of our sensibility within the scope of the higher faculty cannot serve to immunise the former from contingency unless the higher faculty is understood as immutable in structure.

Kant understands the structure of the higher faculty in this way. And, once it is so understood the subject to whom it belongs – for Kant, the transcendental ego – cannot be seen as a wholly conditioned self. However, if its categories depend for their “body and meaning” on something external to it (viz. the pure matter of sensibility, so understood) – as they do for Kant – neither can its subject be seen as wholly unconditioned, precisely because its higher faculty is constrained in this way. It is sometimes said that eliminating this externality ensures that the higher faculty is wholly unconstrained, and the self wholly unconditioned.<sup>36</sup> Or as we might put it: eliminating the externality allows the understanding to be conceived as the unlimited faculty of reason, and the transcendental ego to blossom into the absolute self.

In effect, McDowell is trying to ‘do’ Hegel-inspired transcendental philosophy without the absolute ego. He expressly rejects Kant’s transcendental ego: the self is simply the conditioned self, according to McDowell. This ensures that he cannot but see the structure of our cognitive faculties as the property of the conditioned self. And this ensures that his Hegelian move cannot be satisfactorily executed. The move is intended to liberate our sensibility from merely contingent, merely empirical shackles. But because the only self in the picture is the conditioned self, the effect is to keep our sensibility within those very shackles. And that is precisely the opposite of what McDowell, and Hegel, according to McDowell, intend.

So, I suggest that, if McDowell’s Hegelian move is to succeed, he must abandon his naturalism.

I say ‘suggest’; perhaps there are ways of successfully executing the Hegelian move in the context of naturalism – in effect, in the context of the first or the third of the three ways of avoiding the screening-off problem (see §1). Certainly there have been

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<sup>36</sup> See note 17 passim.

suggestions in this regard.<sup>37</sup> As I have not considered any of these suggestions here, I am not in a position to draw a stronger conclusion in this essay. But what I do think I am entitled to say is that there is, at the very least a significant, and as yet unresolved, tension between McDowell's aspirations in transcendental philosophy, and his naturalism.

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<sup>37</sup> See Sacks, Objectivity and Insight, for some very interesting suggestions in this regard. A fuller treatment would discuss these suggestions. Donald Davidson's paper 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1974) might also seem relevant here; see his Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). My view (which I cannot defend here) is that the argument of this paper is of no help when it comes to executing the move in a naturalistic context; see Adrian Haddock, 'Davidson and Idealism', in Joel Smith and Peter Sullivan (eds.) Transcendental Philosophy and Naturalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).