

LORENZO GUARDINI

LOOKING FOR THE I IN THE SPACE OF REASONS: John McDowell on Personal Identity and Selfhood

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1. Introduction: McDowell, Phenomenology, and Subjectivity

In confronting central questions in the philosophy of mind, T. Cheng observes that these topics are often approached with an implicit principle, which he calls «the division of labour» [Cheng 2021, 20-22]. According to this principle, when discussing a philosophical problem, it is partitioned into independent parts: a metaphysical position is assumed, yet not questioned, and then combined with an epistemological argument. The reason for proceeding in this way, Cheng argues, is that one thinks that the type of methodology assumed is indifferent regarding a certain metaphysical commitment. Although the division of labour remains a sound principle in philosophical discussions, it can lead to distortions. For instance, in the epistemological debate regarding the mind's knowledge of the external world or the place of the mind in nature, the division of labour creates the illusion that such a problem can be confronted by addressing the epistemological side of the question without questioning the

* ¹ I would like to thank G. Baron for the careful reading of the manuscript and her helpful suggestions.

sense in which the notion of world or nature is assumed. Cheng observes that the same issues arise with respect to the other side of the relation. In talk of the capacity of the mind to know, to perceive or speak about the world, it is often forgotten that the intentional act that is directed to the world is also a relation to a certain subject, who is a knower, a perceiver and a speaker, or, more generally, a human being. This latter incarnation of the abuse of the division of labour is often implied in debates concerning the problems of the self. By not addressing the relation of a certain subject of experience, this method leads to dismissing the notion of the self when discussing the topics about mentality, or, in extreme cases, to ruling out the existence of such a thing as the self when talking about the nature of subjectivity. Cheng argues that it is possible to resist this factorizing approach when one treats the concept of selfhood not as a third, discrete element, added in analysing the relation between the mind and the world, but as a structural element involved in this relationship [*ibid.*, 11]. This operation does not resolve all the problems in the philosophy of mind, such as the problem of consciousness, the mind-body problem or the ascription of mental states to the notion of the self, but rather it seeks to not dismiss the role of the self as secondary, or even superfluous, when discussing features of mental states or their intentional relation to the world. As Cheng writes in his book:

There is no sharp line between the problems about mentality *and* those about the self or subject, and the problems of the self or subject should be approached by understanding the *nature* of perceiver, knower, thinker, speaker, agent, person and (self-) conscious being, amongst others. This expels a possible wrong impression that in focusing on *subject* we have confined ourselves in a small region of philosophy of mind [*ibid.*, 11-12, *emphasis added*].

Cheng introduces his comprehensive reading of J. McDowell with these words. By engaging with phenomenology and cognitive science, he interprets the relation thoroughly analysed by McDowell between mind and world not as an encounter between two separate entities, but as a process of co-constitution, in which neither element can be excluded when discussing the other.

Even if McDowell is not a phenomenologist, his philosophy has already been compared with this influential tradition. However, besides

Cheng's book, most of the time phenomenology is brought into question to discuss how McDowell presents the mind's intentional relation to the world [Jensen 2013; La Rocca 2002], to understand his critique of reductive naturalism [Manca 2013] or the nature of perception [De Warren 2006; van Mazijk 2020]. Instead, I will endorse Cheng's proposal by focusing on the other, mostly underexplored, side of the relation. I will aim to examine how McDowell conceives the relationship that "stems inward", though not unilaterally, from the world to the subject, and analyse how the self is understood in its constitutive relationship with the space of reasons.

My reconstruction will start by presenting McDowell's criticism of D. Parfit's reductive approach to personal identity (2). McDowell's criticism of Parfit hinges on exposing the Cartesian assumptions in his reading of J. Locke's notion of personhood, which generate the pressure toward a reductionist conception of personal identity. Freed from this Cartesian framework, Locke's concept of personhood reveals the irreducibly first-personal and world-embedded unity of a human life, undermining the idea that psychological continuity can be understood from an impersonal, disembodied standpoint. From this thesis a conception of selfhood as diachronically situated within a lived, historical context, where personal identity is constituted and shaped by culture through first-person engagement with the world will arise (3). This aspect sheds light on the intrinsic historical character of the space of reasons, in which the diachronic unity of consciousness is experienced as a second nature.

Building on his critique of Parfit's reductionism, I expand his account of selfhood by presenting McDowell's response to the phenomenologist H. Dreyfus, who claims that habitual, absorbed engagement with the world, precludes the presence of subjectivity (4). McDowell argues that rational mindedness and self-identity pervade all cognitive activity, including pre-reflective and skilled coping, showing that subjectivity is immediate, historically scaffolded, and intrinsically linked to our embodied engagement with the external world. The space of reasons shapes, through language and conceptual articulation, our animal functions, thus establishing a continuity between our pre-reflective, embodied selfhood and our explicit, self-conscious personhood. In the final section (5), I will consider objections to this last aspect from schol-

ars interested in a phenomenological yet non-conceptual account of the embodied self. I will then introduce a possible reading of McDowell that is consistent with his notion of subjectivity while also accounting for the inclusion of non-conceptual content in the normative dimension of the space of reasons.

2. *The Cartesian Shortcomings of Reductionism*

In the essay *Reductionism and the first person* [cf. McDowell 1998a, 359-385], McDowell examines the reductionist view of personal identity advanced by D. Parfit. My main interest, however, is not to defend McDowell's claims about personal identity against Parfit, since a full critical assessment of Parfit's theses would require more space. Rather, the focus of this section is to understand what McDowell, by criticizing the reductionist approach, says about personal identity, and how his claims relate to his broader thesis, developed in *Mind and World (MW)*, concerning the relationship between the world and the knowing subject.

McDowell centres his criticism of the reductionist strategy around Locke's notion of person, namely a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself the same thinking thing across different times and places [Locke 1999, 3.27.9]. Parfit reads Locke's definition as a way to understand the unity of a subject's mental states without believing in the persistence of the same individual over time [cf. Parfit 1984, 356-382]. Drawing on science-fiction scenarios, Parfit examines cases in which an individual's body and brain are destroyed and replicated, progressively substituted with other bodies and brain cells, duplicated, or distributed among multiple copies of the original subject. By appealing to Locke's definition, Parfit argues that if the psychological connection between mental states (or a relevant portion of it) is preserved, we can conceive the survival and integrity of the subject's consciousness without invoking the concept of personal identity. «Personal identity is not what matters» [Parfit 1984, 398] for understanding subjectivity, and these imaginary cases, although fictional, can help us reconsider our real-world beliefs about what it means to conceive ourselves as thinking subjects. The criterion for personal identity, the idea that we ought to know in a determinate way whether

we are the same person over time, can be set aside once we grasp the essential core of the psychological unity of mental states.

McDowell raises several critical points in this reductionist reading of Locke by analysing the problems Parfit identifies in the Cartesian notion of the *Ego*. He argues that the reductionism evident in Locke's reading is unnecessary, since it arises directly from the Cartesian interpretation implicit in Parfit's arguments. According to McDowell [McDowell 1998a, 361], if we can revise our critical view of R. Descartes, we might not be constrained by a reduction-oriented notion of personal identity. At the same time, we can discover and appreciate Locke's genuine insight regarding the self. Thus, McDowell's position is not an anti-reductionist reaction to Parfit aimed at isolating essential features that reduction cannot accommodate. Rather, McDowell makes his own and applies the therapeutic method of Wittgenstein [cf. McDowell 2009c, 365-372], which questions and dissolves the assumptions that originally generated the perceived need for a reductive approach.

McDowell argues that Locke's notion of person is valuable not because it offers the conceptual means for a reduction, but rather because it reveals an essential aspect of what it means to be a living, individual human being. In the same way that I. Kant did not recognize this aspect in his critique of Locke in the *Paralogism* [McDowell 1996, 100], Parfit also misses an opportunity to appreciate the real value of Locke's definition of person. According to McDowell [McDowell 1998a, 366], what Locke says about what kind of thing a person is may seem to provide a circular definition. Still, it offers a significant insight into how humans can acquire self-knowledge by appealing to an intrinsic feature presented directly in conscious experience. The fact that a person can recognize herself as the same thinking being across time and space means that human beings can effortlessly obtain substantive knowledge of themselves by observing what is presented directly in their streams of consciousness. Yet, what is presented in the stream of consciousness is not a mere conjunction of mental states, but the continuity of a single life of an individual. Moreover, against Parfit, this type of continuity is not an additional belief or further fact that occurs when the individual ascribes a mental content to herself but is tied to the first-person character of conscious experience [McDowell 1998a, 361].

However, McDowell argues that the kind of self-knowledge that experience offers is different from the type involved in identifying a particular object across time and space. McDowell argues that this latter capacity requires skill and effort because it aims to track a thing's persistence in the world. Self-knowledge, instead, does not require this effort, because it is given directly as an intrinsic feature of the first-person standpoint at work in conscious experience [McDowell 1998a, 362]. McDowell contends that this effortless knowing is what is valuable in Locke's definition and what must also be acknowledged in the Cartesian model of the *Ego*. The Cartesian notion of the *Ego* shows that self-knowledge is a form of privileged access to our conscious experience, distinct from any kind of tracking or inferential activity.

Nonetheless, Parfit does not sufficiently appreciate this aspect in his reading of Locke because he is too focused on reacting to the metaphysical commitments of the Cartesian picture, namely, the existence of the self as an immaterial and spiritual substance [Parfit 1984, 277-278]. So, according to McDowell, the anti-cartesian framework that drives Parfit toward a reductionist account also prevents him from seeing not only what remains valuable in Descartes's theses about the *Ego*, namely, the fact that humans, *qua* thinking beings, have direct access to self-knowledge, but also that the postulation of an immaterial substance is not the real problematic aspect of Descartes's thought.

Descartes conceived self-knowledge as a self-evident, privileged view obtained within our mental states because this solution successfully addressed the epistemological challenges posed by skepticism. According to Descartes, self-knowledge could still be obtained under any circumstance, even after the method of doubt had been applied fully, radically eliminating reliance on any epistemic resources from the outside world. In the radicalized doubt scenario, the Evil Demon rules out every possibility of knowledge except that obtained in the isolation of the subject's inner space.

McDowell claims that the real flaw in Descartes lies precisely in the pressure that this form of skepticism exerts on his method. The intuition that one can obtain self-knowledge effortlessly, through first-person privileged access to the self, is correct, but the broader skeptical framework in which it is expressed distorts this view [McDowell 1998a, 368]. Privileged access is the result of recoiling into an inner space that is sev-

ered from the lived, empirical world and from the objective facts of life that determine one's identity. Yet the method of doubt may prevent us from acknowledging this latter possibility, because sensible experience can always deceive the knowing subject, leaving self-knowledge possible only if sheltered from external conditions in the "private theatre" of the subject's mind. McDowell's "diagnosis" is that the reaction to skeptical arguments, followed by the retreat of the *Ego* into a self-contained space, is the fatal flaw of the Cartesian model, from which the metaphysical commitment to the existence of a wholly spiritual entity is only an unfortunate symptom. For this reason, Descartes cannot provide an adequate understanding of what it means to be an individual self with a continuous life, since the type of self-knowledge implied in the inner-space model is fundamentally impersonal. It is impersonal because it cannot draw on the objective circumstances that ground our knowledge of ourselves as human beings who inhabit a world. Thus, McDowell argues that, according to a Cartesian model, the *Ego*, or the *I*, could be ascribed equally to Martians or other sentient entities [McDowell 1998a, 367]. However, even these types of beings could not have real self-knowledge without reliably accessing the information that constitutes their specific nature in the first place.

This problematic aspect of the Cartesian inner-space model remains operative in Parfit's reductionist reading of Locke's notion of person. According to Parfit, what matters for the survival of the subject is that any form of psychological connectedness is preserved, without requiring the series of mental states to be related to a single individual. The flow of experience is tied to the normal functions of the body and brain, yet it is also independent of any specific identity belonging to a single individual. By ruling out the necessity of self-identity criteria, Parfit also eliminates the epistemological resource of situations or contexts provided by sensible experience. In this way, the psychological continuity of the self is reduced to a mere geometrical viewpoint, detached from the lived and temporally extended context in which the content of mental states is applied.

McDowell shows how Parfit's willingness to oppose a Cartesian notion of the *Ego* by subtracting from the stream of consciousness the objective features that constitute the belief about our selfhood is, in fact, a disguised reformulation of the Cartesian skeptical reaction, sed-

imented in his reductionist reading of Locke. According to Parfit, it is possible to remove the physical and temporal boundaries that constitute the “existential coordinates” of an individual’s personal life because one can think about bundles of mental states from an impersonal, virtually disembodied point of view, severed from our relationship with the external world.

McDowell instead claims that the continuity of consciousness is not intelligible without the unity and continuity that the first-person standpoint brings into view. The unity in question is not the result of a mere detached viewpoint, but rather the unity of a life experienced and recognized by a particular human being who has a distinct experience of external reality. The need for reduction dissolves when one acknowledges that nothing is more essential to the unity of consciousness than the intrinsic relation between a specific kind of environment and the individual who inhabits it.

3. *Personal Identity and the Historical Nature of the Space of Reasons*

By showing the limits of this concealed inner-space model, McDowell gives a positive interpretation of Locke’s notion of personhood in the following lines:

Continuous «consciousness» is intelligible (even «from within») only as a subjective angle on something that has more to it than the subjective angle reveals, namely, *the career of an objective continuant* with which the subject of the continuous «consciousness» identifies itself. The subjective angle does not contain within itself any analogue to keeping track of something, but its content can nevertheless intelligibly involve a *stable continuing reference*, of a first-person kind; this is thanks to its being *situated in a wider context*, which provides for an understanding that the persisting referent is also a third person, something whose career is a substantially traceable continuity in the objective world [McDowell 1998a, 363, *emphasis added*].

Personal identity is not an inner, isolated feature of consciousness, but is essentially situated in a lived context. This is because the continuity presented in the stream of consciousness, which defines an indi-

vidual's life history, is not detached from its sensible engagement with the external world. Only in this way does Locke's definition bring into view the essential feature of our mind's unity, namely, its being inseparable from the continuity of our world-experience. Yet, unlike an object among others, personal identity does not need to be tracked, discovered, or inferred, because it is a stable feature that informs the continuity of our first-person standpoint.¹ McDowell reinterprets the Cartesian thesis of a self-transparent, privileged first-person access to our own mental states, inherited in Locke's definition, as describing an intrinsic feature of humans' intentional relation with their environment.

Before his critical reading of Parfit's reductionism, in *MW* McDowell makes a similar objection to Kant's notion of the *I* [cf. McDowell 1996, 87-107]. However, even if McDowell rejects the Kantian formal and *a priori* feature in favour of a naturalized, situated notion of selfhood, it nonetheless preserves the fundamental aspects of being a necessary condition for the unity of experience. The result, as McDowell observes in the fifth lecture of *MW*, is that the *I* becomes a stable feature of world-experience but not as a formal criterion. Instead of being a pure geometrical viewpoint, it becomes tied to our empirical and embodied persistence in the world. The capacity of human beings to recognize the continuity in their sensible perception of the world and their sense of selfhood are then mutually related aspects [*ibid.*, 102]. From their first-person standpoint, individuals have direct access to their identity because they learn to perceive the objective features that shape and give familiarity to their world, creating the unity of their life. The framework of the space of reasons provides a normative understanding of rational

¹ See McDowell, J [2008b, 186-203]. In discussing G.E.M. Anscombe's thesis about the non-referential character of *I* in self-ascriptions, McDowell argues that the fact that the subject of self-ascription is not always explicit does not imply that, when we express a belief about a subjective state in the immediate first-person mode, a stable reference to the subject is lacking. Unlike uses of *I* that refer to an objective state, the use of *I* to express a subjective state does not require making the subject as an object of observation, since it is something to which we are always acquainted. It is worth noting that, for McDowell, Anscombe's line of argument risks to endorse a broadly Cartesian framework, insofar as she assumes that allowing *I* to refer to a subject would commit one to a metaphysically immaterial *Ego*, severed from the external world.

subjects as individuals among others, constituted by experiences, intentions, commitments, and desires. However, McDowell reinterprets this idea, inherited from W. Sellars (and developed by R. Brandom), and argues that the normative and public sphere of the space of reasons is not intelligible outside the internal dimension of the subject [cf. McDowell 1998b, 395-413]. Reasons can exert their normative force on our beliefs, serving as reliable sources of knowledge, only if they directly affect the subjective experience of the world. Therefore, sets of commitments and practices that determine the individual «as a third person» and justify her existence in a world must become part of the first-personal standpoint and present themselves with a distinct phenomenological sense.

Memory is essential for understanding this dynamic. Memory enables subjects to develop a sense of identity in perceiving the continuity of external objects and themselves as the same person over time. However, memory, like perception or other activities of consciousness, can provide knowledge only because it is experienced as an impression that has meaning for an individual self. It is clear now that personal identity, far from being an accessory requirement, is what endows our mental states with epistemological potential.

Continuing his reading of Locke, McDowell discusses memory as an example of a cognitive faculty that is intelligible only in relation to personal identity [cf. McDowell 1998a, 370-374]. By criticizing Parfit's notion of quasi-memory, namely the idea that it is possible to gain knowledge from experiencing a memory that is not part of our individual experience, McDowell shows that it is not intelligible that we might obtain epistemic content from an experience that is impersonal or disconnected from the unity provided by the consciousness of a single life-history. Parfit introduces the notion of quasi-memory to show that self-ascription of the recollected content is an external condition of remembering, not part of its epistemic content [Parfit 1984, 283]. On this basis, ordinary memories may be interpreted as quasi-memories accompanied by an extra belief, namely the subject's identification with the remembered experience, which, however, does not belong to the mental state itself. According to Parfit, what really matters for being real knowledge is that the subject can reconstruct the causal connection that grounds the content recollected with the past experience itself. For

instance, if a subject A has been transplanted with memory traces of subject B, who has a view of Venice's landscape, then she is capable of remembering a trip to Venice as real knowledge by knowing that B has visited Venice at least once. In Parfit's example, quasi-memory functions exactly as ordinary memory. Still, the causal continuity of that epistemic content has not required the A's self-identification with that impression [*ibid.*, 281-82].

McDowell does not deny that analogues to quasi-memory can exist; however, he argues that these mental states cannot manifest as genuine memories that deliver real knowledge, because they lack the necessary connection to a single, continuous consciousness [McDowell 1998a, 377]. The epistemological authority that memory provides depends on the fact that the recollected event is experienced as part of our personal past. Yet Parfit seems not to consider the normative constraint that the first-person standpoint exerts on the recollected experience. However, the subject could not treat the recollected content as real knowledge of the past if she had known that it was not her experience but someone else's. This is because, in that case, the content would not appear as her own memory but as an illusion of memory, an indirect knowledge of other subject's experience. Even if this case remains possible, since one can gain knowledge from someone else's past by knowing their history, McDowell objects that this kind of knowledge is identical with a real memory experienced from the first-personal standpoint. This first-person standpoint is what gives sensible memory impressions epistemic potential and enables humans to rely on their cognitive resources to justify their beliefs. Even when memory content is false or altered, it still strikes as compatible with the history of our lives. Otherwise, there would be nothing in that experience to invite us to treat that impression as direct knowledge of the past. Quasi-memories, as impersonal experiences, are unintelligible because they lack this essential relation to a specific life-history. According to McDowell, impressions have epistemic authority because they cannot exempt themselves from referring to the diachronic continuity of our world-experience.

McDowell's response to the reductive account of selfhood and memory not only expands the theses about the self presented in *MW* but also sheds light on an overlooked aspect of his notion of the space of reasons. According to McDowell, the space of reasons becomes part of the realm

of nature as a given endowment for human animals. This is because culture in the form of a linguistic tradition shapes human infants' perceptual capacities, creating a second nature that, once they become mature, enables rational engagement with reality [McDowell 1996, 84]. Now, it is possible to see how this process of enculturation not only provides the necessary conceptual and linguistic resources for experiencing objects but also scaffolds the subjects' selfhood historically.

In the sixth lecture of *MW* McDowell frames language as the *repository* or *embodiment of tradition* by invoking H.-G. Gadamer's notion of *Bildung* [cf. *ibid.*, 108-128; 184]. The fact that McDowell discusses language being an *embodiment* of a tradition in which the human animal is born and raised can be read as an appeal to an intrinsic historical dimension of humans' first-person experience in the world. The space of reasons not only shapes the subject's perceptions but also provides an essential historical scaffolding, through which every subject recognizes her identity by directly examining experiences that are both world-disclosing and self-disclosing. The space of reasons is then no less natural than it is historical, and by being part of it, human animals gain self-knowledge by perceiving the unity of their life as an irreducible feature of their context. This historical dimension makes it possible for sensible impressions to have an intrinsic epistemic authority, since they can present themselves as second nature shaped by an individual's career of experiences.

In the next section, I will further explore the implications of McDowell's account of personal identity by focusing on his theses about mindedness and subjectivity as presented in his debate with Dreyfus. This will enable us to see how the situated and historical character of personal identity rests on an embodied notion of selfhood, which also permeates the pre-reflective aspect of experience. This reconstruction will help situate McDowell's theses within the contemporary discussion on the embodied approach to the self, thereby creating a more explicit confrontation with the phenomenological approach to these topics.

4. Subjectivity and its Intentional Pervasiveness

In what has been recognized as the "Dreyfus–McDowell debate", Dreyfus criticizes McDowell's conception of rationality as something

always present in the subject's immediate engagement with the world. Dreyfus calls the view of a receptive or passive spontaneity, capable of experiencing conceptual reasons in our everyday practical involvement with the world, "The Myth of the Mental." Drawing on the phenomenology of M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, and J.-P. Sartre, Dreyfus argues that the practical relation that ties the subject to the world, framed in contemporary scientific literature as embodied or skilled coping, cannot be pervaded by subjectivity [cf. Dreyfus 2013, 15-40].

According to Dreyfus, when the subject is practically engaged in a worldly context, such as in habitual practices, she is absorbed in a "mindless" execution of a task and thus cannot experience her self-consciousness. Only when the immediate relation to the world is interrupted does the individual access inner subjectivity to decide what to do next and/or reflect. There is no *I* in skillful coping; the subject's receptivity may present a form of intelligibility (the optimal execution of a task that becomes automatized by the agent's training), but it does not constitute a form of subjective mindedness. Drawing from Heidegger, Dreyfus claims: «When *Dasein* is totally merged with the world, there is no place for content, neither experiential nor propositional – there is nothing that is in any sense inner» [*ibid.*, 29]. Conceptual activity actualized through language is required to express self-awareness in the propositional form of "I think." Still, this form of mindedness occurs only when one interrupts the flow of action to gain distance and monitor experience. For this reason, McDowell's notion of conceptuality in perception, namely the idea that human beings receive sense impressions directly as conceptual content, is claimed to be incompatible with the world of forces and *solicitations* that drive the subject's experience in total absorption [*ibid.*, 18].

McDowell responds by accusing Dreyfus of subscribing to another myth, the "Myth of the Mind as Detached" [cf. McDowell 2013, 41-58], and argues that we cannot conceive rationality as divided between a non-conceptual, "mindless" activity and a conceptual, self-monitoring dimension. Opposing this dichotomy, he insists that conceptual rationality pervades all our intentional relations to objects, including our embodied engagement with the external world. For this reason, McDowell contends that Dreyfus's claims about the relation between a non-conceptual absorbed mechanism of action and a conceptual reflec-

tion that interrupts the flow of coping misunderstands the nature of his notion of mindedness.

It is worth noting that in his debate with Dreyfus, McDowell already works with a revised notion of conceptuality, now broader than the one proposed in *MW*, in which the conceptual was equated with propositional, discursive judgments. In this revised framework, conceptuality is not reducible to propositional activity, though it still depends on it. Now rationality is the capacity to extract (*to carve out*) conceptual contents from experience, rather than merely receiving them in the form of propositional judgments [McDowell 2008a, 263; cf. McDowell 2008b, 308-323]. However, against Dreyfus' objections, McDowell emphasizes that concepts are not extrinsic additions, disconnected from one's actions and added retrospectively, but are already present in the action itself in a tacit, pre-reflective form [McDowell 2013, 44]. Rationality is thus a form of mindedness that recognizes conceptual content in intuition and brings it to awareness. While McDowell grants to Dreyfus that making explicit in language what one is doing requires breaking the flow of action, this does not imply that conceptual determination was absent from the action itself. McDowell calls this the "pervasiveness thesis" and frames the activity of extracting conceptual content from immediate sensible experience as a matter of "I do" rather than "I think." The *I* does not accompany sensible experience from the outside but is a form of practical mindedness that acknowledges what one is doing in pre-reflective, skillful coping by emerging from it. Inspired by Aristotle, McDowell stresses that conceptual activity or spontaneity does not only occur as contemplative or deliberative thought, but primarily as «cultivated rationality at work» [McDowell 2013, 47].

The critique that McDowell moves to Parfit's reductionism now proves helpful not only in addressing Dreyfus's objection to the "Myth of the Mind as Detached," but also in clarifying McDowell's account of personal identity. The model of a self-contained subject at work in Parfit's reductionism mirrors the one underlying Dreyfus's framework. In both cases, a Cartesian assumption is present, albeit in a different disguise. If, in Parfit's reductionism, the separation between the subject's mental states and the worldly context leads to dismissing the concept of personal identity, in Dreyfus' case, it detaches the notion of selfhood from the intentional and immediate relation with the external environ-

ment, producing a form of dualism. Both Parfit and Dreyfus endorse a notion of rationality and subjectivity in which humans' capacity to self-ascribe mental events is placed extrinsically atop a blind, instinctive mode of behaviour, shared with other kinds of animals. According to this "high common factor model", rationality would amount to an extra condition imposed on a homogeneous notion of animal nature, in which subjectivity loses its unity with the sensible aspect of human capacities, and comes into view only when the animal's functions are interrupted. This results in a depiction of human nature as a kind of "part-time" animal identity [Dreyfus 2007, 354-55].

Against this picture, which has been framed as an additive model of rationality [cf. Boyle 2016, 527-555], McDowell's pervasiveness thesis aims to maintain the overall unity of human subjectivity by proposing a transformative model, in which the specific qualities of humans, developed through cultural upbringing, inform "all the way down" their animal nature. According to the transformative model, human identity is not a feature independent from animal functions, but it is defined by the specific type of natural organism through which it is realized. In other words, the difference between rational and non-rational animals is not the presence of a different property on top of a common factor feature (the animal's functions or sensibility). Rather, it is a difference in the specific mode of relating to the same external context. If animals that lack linguistic capacities can sense and react only to an environment, human animals, by undergoing a process of enculturation (*Bildung*) in the space of reasons, become perceptually acquainted with a world shaped by conceptual meaning, which takes the form of a second nature [McDowell 1996, 115]. Under this new light, it becomes intelligible how, according to McDowell, mindedness is pervasive of all the subject's cognitive capacities, including his "animal functions" such as habitual practices, and, more generally, the pre-reflective aspects of our interactions. Moreover, it is possible to see the notion of second nature, the system of habitual practices shapes the subject's mind in the space of reasons, also as a historical process of sedimentation that can be brought to awareness by an individual's rational capacities. This is for enculturation provides the necessary scaffolding that informs our habitual and embedded relation to the external context, keeping individuals always in touch with their selfhood, also at a pre-reflective level.

I have now presented the necessary resources to engage with McDowell's account of the self with a more constructive dialogue with phenomenology, particularly with respect to that phenomenological tradition that, by confronting empirical findings, stresses the embodied and situated aspect of cognition. In the next section, I will attempt to sketch this encounter, but not before considering some critical points that a phenomenological notion of embodied subjectivity can move to McDowell's thesis.

5. Reasons Broader than Concepts: Expanding McDowell's Notion of Selfhood

By reconstructing his critical engagement with additive and reductive views of subjectivity, McDowell's thesis can now manifest an explicit sympathy with the phenomenological tradition which emphasizes the lived, embodied character of first-person experience. However, in discussing the implication of McDowell's pervasiveness thesis about the mind, D. Zahavi and S. Gallagher [Gallagher 2016, 140; Zahavi 2013, 326] express the concern that by relegating subjectivity primarily to conceptual activity, McDowell's insight about the unity and pervasiveness of the self might overlook relevant aspects of non-conceptual experience, which are not, *pace* Dreyfus, mindless mechanisms. Various contributions argue for the genuine existence of an embodied notion of the self and its relevance to our first-person experience [cf. Bermudez 2011, 157-179; Cassam 2011, 139-156; Fuchs 2016]. However, even if there can be a legitimate sense of self in our embodied activity, this form of selfhood is not necessarily the result of applying concepts or language acquisition. For this reason, McDowell's commitment to a conceptual notion of subjectivity risks falling into the same flaws as Dreyfus, resulting in a restricted, intellectualized account of selfhood that overlooks non-conceptual, yet phenomenologically relevant features of the self. Moreover, K. Musholt observes that there is a clear distinction between a content of experience that is *self-related*, such as the one at work in our embodied engagement with the world, and a content that has a conceptual form and is *about oneself*. According to Musholt, non-conceptual theories of the self are incomplete because they cannot account for the latter notion of

selfhood [Musholt 2013]. However, the same objections can be applied to a fully conceptual theory of selfhood. McDowell, by conceiving the continuity between a pre-reflective and reflective form of mindedness as always a conceptual activity, seems not to address the distinction between self-related content and content being about oneself.

McDowell seems to have no interest in what is experienced as non-conceptual content because he still operates within the limits set by the framework of the Myth of the Given. According to the Myth, sensible contents cannot affect our first-person belief if they are not already given in a conceptual form, because non-conceptual contents lie outside the domain of explanation proper of the space of reasons². Since they are not taken up and shaped conceptually as second nature, sense data fall under the scientific explanation of our “first nature.” Such explanations can describe our behaviour from a sideways-on standpoint, appealing to causal, neurophysiological phenomena. Still, they do not capture the first-person aspect of experience that enables individuals to motivate their projects and interests, including the beliefs about themselves [McDowell 1998a, 193]. Nonetheless, McDowell’s commitment to the Myth of the Given poses a dilemma: the non-conceptual can be either a bare given with no phenomenological value, resting on our “first” nature, or a conceptual givenness that is part of second nature, being shaped by language and culture. From this perspective, McDowell’s placement of selfhood exclusively in the realm of conceptual appears tendentious, since it rules out the possibility that a non-conceptual form of selfhood could directly affect our subjective angle and inform our culturally and historically developed sense of personal identity.

If the space of reasons could include a form of rationality not limited to conceptual content, McDowell’s account of personal identity could benefit from a richer dialogue with the phenomenological aspect of embodied selfhood developed by Merleau-Ponty. J. C. Berendzen notices that the two authors could be read more closely than one might think, as long

² Although McDowell rejects Sellars’s claim that the Myth of the Given rules out sensible contents as direct justifiers of our judgments, McDowell still upholds the Sellarsian thesis that non-conceptual content is explainable only in terms of causal relations proper of scientific empirical descriptions. This commitment makes impossible to ascribe to non-conceptual content any normative constraint on our beliefs.

as one does not «underestimate Merleau-Ponty's rationalism nor overestimate McDowell's» [Berendzen 2009, 166]. Cheng provides a concrete possibility to this claim, attempting to dissociate McDowell's thesis about the pervasiveness of rationality from his commitment to conceptual content in perception, while at the same time respecting the spirit of McDowell's framework. Since *MW*, McDowell has shown a deeper concern in explaining how the rational nature of human animals, realized in the space of reasons, could be seen as a natural endowment. This strand of argument about rationality is inherited from Sellars, who, against McDowell's framework developed in *MW*, stressed that in humans, natural behavior cannot be conflated with rational conduct. Cheng shows how McDowell's argument concerning rationality can be read independently of the argument concerning the conceptual nature of sensible content, which is inherited from the debate with D. Davidson about the scheme-content dualism [Cheng 2021, 130]. If this reading is possible, as Cheng thinks, then the rational character of the space of reasons does not have to be constrained by a rigid dichotomy between non-conceptual contents of our first nature and the ones shaped conceptually by second nature. Cheng thinks that McDowell should focus more on the notion of structure and rational potential rather than on the label "conceptual" [Cheng 2021, 140]. In this way, even non-conceptual contents could be part of our rationality if they have the capacity to appear as experiences with a certain structure, rather than being raw sense data. Presenting some empirical studies of the phenomenon of attention, Cheng demonstrates how the first-person standpoint is directly influenced and responds to structural variations that are not dependent on the application of concepts. In this context, it is always an embodied form of reason that *carves out* meaningful content from these structures of sense. Still, the focus shifts to the process and the capacity for something "natural" to *become* conceptual, rather than something natural being given as *already* conceptual [McDowell 2013, 43]. This implies conceiving the relation between the animal environment and a reality shaped by culture and language not as a two-worlds view, but as a dynamic relationship within a spectrum. As Gallagher observes: «it's neither environment all the way up nor world all the way down. It's rather a precarious mix» [Gallagher 2016, 88].

One major obstacle to such a project would be preserving this broader notion of rationality without falling into the Myth of the Given. Alternatively, one could, with the help of phenomenology, evaluate if

the Myth poses a real threat to McDowell's notion of rational capacity in the first place. However, the result would be a more comprehensive account of selfhood, made possible by dialoguing with empirical findings that study how non-conceptual contents, far from being raw sense data, sediment and directly affect our identity as self-conscious, historical animals in the space of reasons.

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Keywords

John McDowell; Selfhood; Personal Identity; Space of Reasons; Phenomenology; Second Nature; Embodied Cognition.

Abstract

This paper examines John McDowell's notion of subjectivity (*selfhood*) to assess its theoretical potential for a deeper engagement with the phenomenological approach. Through a reconstruction of his theses on personal identity and situated, embodied subjectivity within the space of reasons, it shows how McDowell offers an effective response to reductionist or dualist accounts of the subject-world relation. He presents *selfhood* as an irreducible element for justifying the psychological continuity of mental states, one that thoroughly informs intentional relations with the surrounding environment, both pre-reflectively and reflectively. However, to fully exploit McDowell's perspective in dialogue with phenomenology, it is necessary to ask whether the promising outlook of naturalizing the space of reasons can emancipate itself from the McDowellian thesis that epistemically relevant content must necessarily possess conceptual form.

Il seguente articolo esamina la nozione di soggettività (*selfhood*) nel pensiero di John McDowell per valutarne le potenzialità teoriche in vista di un confronto più approfondito con l'approccio fenomenologico. Attraverso la ricostruzione delle sue tesi sull'identità personale e sulla soggettività incarnata e situata all'interno dello spazio delle ragioni, si mostra come McDowell offra una risposta efficace alle concezioni riduzioniste o dualiste sul rapporto soggetto-mondo. Egli presenta la nozione di *selfhood* come elemento irriducibile per giustificare la continuità psicologica degli stati mentali, che informa fino in fondo la relazione intenzionale con l'ambiente circostante, sia pre-riflessivamente che riflessivamente. Tuttavia, per sfruttare appieno questa prospettiva in dialogo con la fenomenologia, occorre chiedersi se la promettente prospettiva di una naturalizzazione dello spazio delle ragioni possa emanciparsi dalla tesi mcdowelliana per cui un contenuto esperito come epistemicamente rilevante debba necessariamente possedere forma concettuale.

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