
EPILOGUE

Self-Determining Subjectivity

When I say: I think, I act, etc., then either the word ‘I’ is used falsely or I am free. Were I not free, I could not say: I do it, but rather I would have to say: I feel a desire in me to do, which someone has aroused in me. But when I say: I do it, that means spontaneity in the transcendental sense.

– Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics, L₁*

The I shall be a self-determined I.

– J. G. Fichte, *Fichtes Werke, IV*

Freedom

1. When McDowell introduces the notion of ‘the space of reasons,’ he identifies it with ‘the realm of freedom.’ His project is to show how human beings’ standings in the space of reasons can be natural, and how this second nature endows each of us a *Cogito*, being a perceiver, knower, thinker, speaker, agent, person, and conscious / self-conscious subject. In my previous episodes, I have tried to describe and evaluate this project of McDowell. Since ‘the space of reasons’ and ‘the realm of freedom’ are virtually the same, we need to understand how McDowell understands the very notion of ‘freedom’ and how this understanding fits his thinking about the space of reasons as described above. The situation, however, is rather dim.

To be free, a subject must initiate its thinking and actions by itself; the *causes* of its thinking and actions must be part of the very idea of that subject. And by hypothesis, human freedom is located in the space of reasons. It follows that to understand human

freedom, human ‘self-determining subjectivity,’ we need to have an intelligible notion of ‘causation in the space of reasons.’¹ As I mentioned in my first episode, footnote 3, the notion of ‘cause’ can present in both the space of reasons and the realm of law. The reason for this, to rehearse, is that reasons can be causes, and to say we are free agencies is not to say that we live in a causeless world. Freedom is not random. As inhabitants in the space of reasons, we enjoy ‘space of reason causations.’ This is at odds with the scientific understanding of the world, but as we have seen, McDowell objects to this

scientific hijacking of the concept of causality, according to which the concept is taken to have its primary role in articulating the partial world-view that is characteristic of the physical sciences, so that all other causal thinking needs to be based on causal relations characterizable in physical terms.²

But as Gaskin notices, ‘this merely negative elucidation of the notion of space of reason causation cannot be regarded as satisfactory.’³ We learn that causality should *not* be restricted in the realm of law, and that the space of reasons is constitutively *sui generis*, i.e., *not* a special case of the realm of law. But one wants to know more about its positive features. To be sure, McDowell does say a lot about the space of reasons, and I myself think most of the relevant remarks make good sense. The trouble is that there seems to be something still left out after McDowell’s efforts. As I discussed in the first episode, Paul Bartha and Steven Savitt mistakenly think McDowell is willing to let the same kind of causality occupy both the space of reasons and the realm of law, but their misunderstanding is reasonable to some extent because McDowell does say less than he needs to say about causality in the space of reasons. In particular, philosophers of science try hard to understand causality and related notions in the realm of law, and for most of them that kind of causality is the only kind. To rebut this, McDowell and his followers need to at least say more about extant understandings of causality and in which respects they need to be improved.

We can say something on McDowell’s behalf. For him, the urgent task is to find a way of thinking that exempts us from the anxiety characteristic of our modern conception of the world. In doing this, one only needs to undermine the assumptions that generate the anxiety in question. And McDowell does exactly this. Nonetheless, one might still want to know more about the nature of self-determining subjectivity

¹ Richard Gaskin, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p.28.

² ‘Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism,’ p.178. For similar line of thought, see ‘Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind,’ in Mario de Caro and David Macarthur, (eds.) *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp.91-105.

³ *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, p. 31.

and causality in the space of reasons, for philosophy is not restricted to diagnoses. McDowell is quite right that we should stop and reflect our seemingly-unproblematic assumptions, but it shouldn't prevent us from trying to understand the nature of things. To understand more does not amount to engage in constructive philosophy.

2. In recent years, McDowell spends more time writing about self-determining subjectivity, especially in the context of German Idealism. As he says, '[a] stress on self-determining subjectivity is characteristic of German Idealism in general.'⁴ This descends the main theme of *Mind and World*: to have an appropriate understanding of subjectivity, we need a satisfying conception of *external* and *rational* constraint. In the paper I just quoted and another piece on Hegel⁵, McDowell further elaborates his thoughts about the shape of this crucial external constraint. In a piece on apperception in Kant and Hegel, McDowell talks about constraint from otherness.⁶ None of these, however, says directly how self-determining subjectivity *per se* is to be understood. We hear familiar McDowellian voice like the following:

One is *responsible* for how one's mind is made up. To *judge* is to engage in *free* cognitive activity, as contrasted with having something merely happen in one's life, outside one's *control*. So *freedom* is central to Kant's picture of *conceptual* capacities.⁷

My italics points to many interrelated notions that need to be understood together, and indeed McDowell has done a lot to shed light on those relations. But we hope to know more about exactly how reasons can be causes, what causality in the space of reasons looks like. To this McDowell might reply that we demand too much here, for maybe there are some 'reductive' impulses lurking in this kind of query. I am not sure.

Self-Determining Subjectivity defines 'I,' and as discussed in my fourth episode, McDowell thinks that 'there is no commitment to some peculiar extra ingredient, which would ensure determinateness of identity, in a person's make-up.'⁸ I said that I am hesitant to think with McDowell that 'there is no further fact.' Although I have not

⁴ 'Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint,' in Karl Ameriks and Jürgen Stolzenberg (eds.) *International Yearbook of German Idealism 2005: German Idealism and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy* (Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2005), pp.21-37, at p.21. Cf. my opening quotation from Fichte.

⁵ 'Hegel and the Myth of the Given,' in Wolfgang Welsch and Klaus Vieweg (eds.), *Das Interesse des Denkens: Hegel aus heutiger Sicht* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), pp. 75-88.

⁶ 'The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of "Lordship and Bondage" in Hegel's *Phenomenology*,' *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 47/48 (2003), pp. 1-16. Notice that McDowell insists that 'Hegel is not here talking about multiple human beings' (p.9), so 'otherness' has a rather special meaning in McDowell's context.

⁷ 'Hegel and the Myth of the Given,' p.79.

⁸ 'Reductionism and the First Person,' pp.378-9.

come up with any satisfying answer to this, I venture to put my very tentative thought like the following: there are further facts about the 'I' and its self-determining subjectivity, that is, they are *socially, as opposed to physically*, real. This is not to say that they are social *constructs*. Quite the contrary. They are as real as any physical phenomenon. It is just that their realities are constituted by social interactions, or in McDowell's term from Wittgenstein, by *forms of life*. Our task is to understand how those social institutions enable us to be 'us,' to be equipped self-determining subjectivity, through the space of reasons causations.⁹ I think this is central for any development in McDowell's vein, for what makes us distinctively human is the fact that we live in *the realm of freedom*. Furthermore, this makes the topic discussed in my previous episode more important, for the 'idea that we sometimes exercise freedom without being *aware* of it is at best awkward.'¹⁰

Wisdom

1. To reflect on our self-determining subjectivity is to touch the root of McDowell's overall project, and we shall remember that the root of the project is his use of the Aristotelian notion 'second nature.' It should be clear that the notion is essentially ethical and practical, though I do not pursue this line in the present essay. Consider this passage:

The practical intellect's coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities: a process that takes place in nature. The practical intellect does not dictate to one's formed character – one's nature as it has become – from outside. One's formed practical intellect – which is operative in one's character-revealing behavior – just is an aspect of one's nature as it has become.¹¹

In this final section, I do not intend to reopen the discussion about second nature. All I would like to do here is to remind that perhaps we can find some resources in this practical notion, since wisdom and freedom constitute the dual cores of McDowell's naturalism. In understanding and evaluating McDowell's thoughts in this practical domain, we shall bear the concerns and perhaps misgivings discussed in my previous section in mind: we know that he thinks our second nature endow us the ability to

⁹ Here I am inspired by Robert Brandom. During the conference in Taipei I asked a question about the self, and he says something in this line. Of course he holds no responsibility of my thoughts here.

¹⁰ 'Hegel and the Myth of the Given,' p.80.

¹¹ 'Two Sorts of Naturalism,' in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.) *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), pp.149-79; reprinted in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*, pp.167-97; at p.185.

exercise the space of reasons causations, in both practical and theoretical domains; the concern is that how that is supposed to get a foothold in our animal nature, given that before gaining abilities to be responsive to reasons, we are *mere* animals. It seems that in this practical domain the same challenge arises for McDowell and his followers.

This needs cooperation. As mentioned above, the notion of causality is a big topic in philosophy of science, but most of the people in that discipline, I presume, advocate bald naturalism. Bald naturalism may turn out to be true, but before that can be demonstrated, we need to leave room for the possibility of naturalism of second nature. Experts in philosophy of science need to have that possibility in view; otherwise, we cannot have the best players in the relevant field to work out the details about how reasons can be causes. Davidson offers a possible, and to some extent plausible, way for us to think about, but as evaluated towards the end of the fourth episode, that proposal tends to result in epiphenomenalism, to put it mildly. Most of McDowell's arguments for causality in the space of reasons are transcendental, but even for those who have accepted its ontology, how that is supposed to work is an independently interesting and important question. One of the merits of McDowell's works is that it arouses more attentions to an important alternative: instead of simply pointing to a conceptual possibility, he offers a strong case for that alternative. But we need more attentions, especially from those who specialize in the problem of causality and that of freedom of the will. Younger generations should take more responsibilities, for they (we) grow up in a century that heavily under McDowell's influence, in a very good way.

2. The western tradition has it that the hierarchy of understanding starts from data, information, knowledge and finally to wisdom. This reflects the atomist intuition, and even nowadays the intuition is still widespread and deep-rooted. If data means sub-sentential contents, the data-information order has been reversed by Frege. The order between information and knowledge is fine; as McDowell notices, the problem (if any) about intentionality is always conceptually prior to that about knowledge. But McDowell also reverses the knowledge-wisdom order: by his light, we need to be initiated into a tradition, understood in terms of 'practical wisdom,' in order to have thoughts and knowledge. This is compatible with the commonsense that we can learn most wisdom only after we are equipped with plenty of information and knowledge; McDowell's revolutionary move is that information and knowledge are constitutively dependent on wisdom, in the sense we have discussed throughout the essay: practical wisdom is what brings us from mere lower animals to mature human beings, from proto-subjectivity to genuine perceivers, knowers, thinkers, speakers, agents, persons, and (self-) conscious beings in the world. I hope the plausibility of this general picture

has been reinforced by my essay to some extent, and I hope the remaining question I tried to point out in this final episode is sensible and positive. Subjectivity in a broad sense has always been a central concern in western philosophy, and the key to have a satisfying understanding of it is to investigate the way self-determining subjectivity, which is able to exert causality in the space of reasons, relates to causality in the realm of law. I commit myself to this challenging task.