
EPISODE N

The Many Faces of Human Subject

Know thyself.

– Plato, *The First Alcibiades*, quotes Socrates and The Delphian Inscription

The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*

World

1. The present essay is an attempt to understand human subject and its place in the world through explicating John McDowell's philosophy. This attempt includes the question part and the thinker part, and I shall explain them in turn. The way I put the question makes it sound like the leading question in contemporary philosophy of mind, that is, 'what is the mind's place in nature?' This question is theory-laden, for often the notion of 'nature' involved is 'physical nature,' the domain of physical laws. This implication is neutral between reductive and non-reductive physicalism: even those who regard 'supervenience' as the key notion of their theories use 'nature' as an abbreviation for 'physical nature.' Indeed, 'naturalism' and 'physicalism' are often, if not always, interchangeable terms.¹ I intend to avoid this implication in the formulation of my leading question. The notion of 'world' is also theory-laden, to be sure, but it will become clear that the implication I choose to avoid is a much more relevant one.

¹ 'Materialism' is also their kin, but it has become less popular since few decades ago, mainly for non-philosophical reasons, I believe.

2. Through a quick browse of my table of contents, or indeed a glimpse of the title of this introduction, readers would notice that what I focus is the subjective, as opposed to the objective side. A natural query suggests itself: why I initiate my discussion with the title ‘world,’ rather than ‘subject’? To answer this I must anticipate part of the dénouement: *the world and minded human subject are constitutively interdependent*. This statement is extremely vague or even empty before further elaborations, but I shall leave it for my later episodes and concentrate here on how it justifies my writing strategy. The query states that why I start with ‘world,’ and the reply ‘the world and minded human subject are constitutively interdependent’ is at best incomplete. Now obviously a writer needs to start somewhere, and given that for the writer ‘world’ and ‘subject’ have the same importance, theoretically speaking it is up to him to start with one among them randomly. It follows that I choose to start with ‘world’ for practical concerns.

Recall the familiar leading question in philosophy of mind, about the mind and its place in nature. As I said, the notion of nature here is heavily theory-laden, and even if I try to avoid this by substituting it with ‘world,’ it is still quite possible for the implication and some related thoughts to slip in. Besides, the notion of ‘world’ also has different implications for different philosophers. The best way to cure this, I believe, is to start my discussion with some clarifications of this objective side.

But there is a theoretical obstacle here: if ‘world’ and ‘subject’ are interdependent in some significant sense, how can I say anything substantial about one of them without also saying something substantial about the other? Now I think I can dodge this if in what follows I only give my readers some reminders of *neutrality*: do not take the absolute independence of the world for granted; it should be regarded as one of the central issues in the present essay, and it is controversial. Almost everyone agrees that we need to retain some important kind of independence for the world, but whether it is independence *simpliciter* is an issue to be discussed. To see what is at stake, consider the traditional way of conceiving the problem of perceptual directness: do we (at least sometimes) enjoy direct contacts with the world through perceptions? The territory is often divided by direct realism, indirect realism, and idealism. First one decides her metaphysical position: if for her the world is mind-dependent, she is an idealist; if she thinks the world is mind-independent, then she needs to choose from direct and indirect realism. In *The Problem of Perception*, which is arguably the most important book on this topic during the last decade, A. D. Smith writes:

[T]he topic of this work in the philosophical position known as ‘Direct Realism’ – a position that *combines* this issue of directness with a Realism about the physical

world. Such Realism holds that the physical world has an existence that is not in any way dependent upon its being ‘cognized’...[And it] is opposed to Idealism: the view that whatever seems to be physical is either reducible to, or at least supervenient upon, cognitive states of consciousness.²

Here Smith implies that the metaphysical part of one’s position can be determined independent of, and therefore prior to, the epistemic part. This is exactly the thought I want to resist. But as I said, to argue against this I need to say more about *both* the subjective and the objective sides, and of course I cannot do this in this introduction. What I can do here is just to ask my readers stay neutral about whether we can reasonably conceive the situation in *this* factorized way; in other words, let’s not take this ‘divide-and-conquer’ way of thinking for granted, *pace* Smith and many others. Whether this way of thinking is justified is an important issue to be evaluated, not the self-evident starting point. This is, unfortunately, not recognized by most philosophers in the analytic tradition, probably because of the persisting negative attitude towards the notorious ‘German Idealism.’

To divide the question into the metaphysical and the epistemic part reflects, at least partially, the ideal of division of labor. This methodology as such is innocent, but it doesn’t follow that it won’t cause any problem in certain contexts. In our case, the thing to be remembered is that epistemology is a *relation to the world*: notions like ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’ are factive ones. So if we want to understand how, for example, perceptual directness is possible, we need to be careful about both poles of this epistemic relation, that is, the world and the epistemic subject. Perhaps it will turn out that Smith and many others get things right, but that needs arguments. To assume otherwise is to beg the question against some other positions.

The point of division of labor is well taken, for if all philosophers start their reflections from refuting global skepticism, or vindicating free will, the intellectual progresses of the whole community will be stagnant. So I think Smith, and indeed all of us, are justified to restrict ourselves to some extent. What I would like to stress is that he restricts too much. To rule out idealism temporarily is fine, but to characterize the world as he does is excessive. What he should do is to insist that in what he is going to do in the book is to neglect the view that refuses to acknowledge the independence of the world *in any sense*. To do this, there is still room to contemplate upon *the sense* in which the world is independent. I cannot here argue that Smith’s way of dividing the territory is indeed problematic, but I invite my readers to take an adventure with me, and indeed, with McDowell, to see if we were in fact too naïve

² *The Problem of Perception* (Harvard University Press, 2002), p.1-2, my italics. This will be more relevant when I discuss how McDowell replies to the charge of idealism. See my second episode, footnote 70.

about what the world is like.

The situation discussed above is an example that methodology infects ontology. Another relevant example goes the opposite direction. Smith and many others assume the absolute independence of the world; the opposite example refuses to acknowledge the independence of the world altogether. The notable representative of this is René Descartes. To be sure, Descartes' contempt against the world is only methodological, indicated by the label the '*Method of Doubt*.' But this method assumes that the constitution of the mind is totally independent of the world. Although with different directions, this strategy and Smith's one are in effect of the same spirit. The philosophers in question are well aware that they shouldn't assume metaphysical theses before they start their argumentations, and that's why they painstakingly emphasize the *methodological* nature of their presuppositions. But this line of reasoning assumes that methodological considerations are irrelevant to ontological propositions anyway, and this is what I want to resist. If one thinks he needs to have a full understanding of human being before he goes on to understand gender, he assumes a false ontology of human being in his methodology. Almost no one would commit this kind of mistake here, for in this case the falsity is obvious. In our case, by contrast, the truth or falsity of the metaphysics is far from obvious, so many people have wrongly thought that their methodologies are metaphysically innocent. Again, I invite my readers to *bracket* the sense in which the world is independent, to see whether we are really right about the world in our daily lives and philosophical inquiries. The Cartesian Method of Doubt will be a central target throughout the essay, but we should also bear Smith's case in mind in our investigations.

Subject

1. To repeat, the leading question in this essay concerns human subject and its place in the world. A human subject is a *Homo sapiens* with a *Cogito*; that is, a human animal with mentality. So to understand human subject is to understand mentally equipped human animal. Mentality has different aspects, and to understand mentality is to understand the nature of those aspects. A human subject exhibits their mentality when it perceives, knows, thinks, speaks, acts, and feels; in this essay I venture to understand these varieties of mentality by explicating McDowell's thinking. Again, let me focus on questions and phenomena before saying more about the philosopher. In a recent article, Eric Olson proposes various relevant questions that 'are typically not about "the self" at all.'³ His examples include personal identity, first-person reference,

³ 'There is No Problem of the Self,' in Brie Gertler and Lawrence Shapiro (eds.), *Arguing about the Mind* (Routledge, 2007), pp.262-77, at p.274.

the unity of consciousness, moral agency, reflexive thought, and self-knowledge. This is of course, as he himself acknowledges, not an exhaustive list. The underlying thought is that there is no single, well-defined problem of the self.

I cannot agree more. Since I was new to philosophy, I have always been confused by the fact that there is a philosophical question under the title ‘the problem of the self.’ It is not identical to the mind-body problem, though the two are definitely related. It looks like the problem of personal identity, but they are still different. The problem of consciousness is obviously relevant, but again they are not one and the same. I came to think that there is no problem of the self as such; instead, there are problems concerning the *functioning* self: the self functions as a perceiver, knower, thinker, speaker, agent, person, and (self-) conscious subject, among others. In the following episodes I investigate these aspects respectively.⁴

Some readers might notice that I begin this section by talking about ‘mentality,’ but soon the key concept became ‘self’ or ‘subject.’ Do I change the *subject* matter? Yes and no. Yes, because as a matter of fact, the questions concerning the self, notably personal identity and free agency, are only a portion of philosophy of mind. No, because I do not think issues concerning mentality and those concerning the self should be studied separately. Like the problem of the self, the problem of mentality can also be divided into various different sub-questions, such as perception, knowledge, thought, language, action, (self-) consciousness, among others. Now it would be highly unnatural to think that we can, say, investigate *perceiving* without also investigating *perceiver*. To think we can is to imply a three-fold picture: world, mind, *and* self. I do not think we can make any good sense of this.⁵ Philosophers of mind often talk about propositional attitudes, constituted by mental states (attitudes) and mental contents (propositions), but we need to remember that every propositional attitude goes with a self, functions as a perceiver, knower, or others. It doesn’t make good sense to confine the problems concerning the self in a corner of philosophy of mind. To be sure, there can be certain branches concentrating on those problems in particular, but it does not follow that in most regions of philosophy of mind we can just forget about the self. Again, division of labor seems to be the trouble maker, though the method as such is innocent.

The two points I just argued can be put in this way: there is no sharp line between the problems about mentality and those about the self or subject, *and* the problems of

⁴ Professor Christian Wenzel once asked me why I am so interested in topics surrounding self and subjectivity. At that time I couldn’t come up with a satisfying answer; now I hope the present paragraph can serve to be an improvement: I have very broad interests in mentality; I am curious about perception, knowledge, thought, language, action, and consciousness, and I have come to think that all these phenomena should be understood together with the functioning self. So my special interest in self and subjectivity is actually derived from my broad interests in various mental aspects.

⁵ And I think this echoes what McDowell identifies the ‘inner space’ model, to be discussed especially in my second episode.

the self or subject should be approached by understanding the nature of perceiver, knower, thinker, speaker, agent, person, and (self-) conscious being, among others. This expels a possible wrong impression that in focusing on ‘subject,’ I confine myself in a small region of philosophy of mind. By investigating various aspects of the self or subject, I hope to have a more comprehensive understanding of human mentality.

A remaining question to be answered is this. So far I use the notions of ‘self’ and ‘subject’ interchangeably; does this mean that I do not think there is any distinction between them? Grammatically speaking, ‘self’ is a *reflexive* pronoun. This implies that questions under this title may be primarily about *higher-order* mentality.⁶ It should be clear that I am not only discussing that kind of mentality, however. That’s why I use ‘subject’ exclusively in my later discussions. I also use ‘self’ in this section because in bringing out my points I invoked Olson’s discussions, and what he uses is the notion of ‘self,’ though he does not intend to confine himself with higher-order mentality. His usage is understandable, for his opponents often conduct their discussions with ‘self,’ rather than ‘subject.’ In any case, I believe only the notion of ‘subject’ is broad enough to accommodate the aspects I would like to investigate in the present essay. Therefore throughout the discussions I will talk about human *subject*, as a perceiver when it perceives, a knower when it knows, and so on and so forth.

2. I said that I will conduct my discussions through explicating John McDowell’s philosophy, so I shall say something very general about him here. In late 60’s, McDowell started his career in Oxford. At that time he concentrated on Greek ethics and epistemology, including Aristotle’s and Plato’s thinking. Later he spent lots of time and energy doing philosophy of language, under Gareth Evans’s ‘non-stop barrage of intellectual stimulation.’⁷ He has also been highly influenced by P. F. Strawson’s inspiring interpretation of Kant’s first critique and his own descriptive metaphysics⁸, by Donald Davidson’s thinking on action, meaning, and rationality⁹, and by Wilfrid Sellars’s ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.’¹⁰

⁶ Some use it to capture the crucial difference between oneself and others, for example Thomas Nagel asks, ‘how can it be the case that one of the people in the world is *me*?’ See ‘The Incompleteness of Objective Reality,’ in *Arguing about the Mind*, pp.36-49, at p.36. Professor Timothy Lane does not think that this question makes good sense, but I am not determined about my own attitude.

⁷ *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p.viii.

⁸ *The Bounds of Sense* (Methuen, London, 1966); *Individuals: an Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (Methuen, London, 1959), respectively.

⁹ I will refer to particular papers of Davidson when I discuss McDowell’s engagements with him in my later episodes.

¹⁰ ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,’ in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1 (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1956), pp.253-329.

Later in 80's he moved to Pittsburgh, where he met his colleague Robert Brandom. He has been influenced by Brandom through both writings and conversations, notably his exposition of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Brandom's famous teacher, Richard Rorty, also shapes McDowell's thinking through his best-known work.¹¹ These contemporaries' influence on McDowell is acknowledged in the preface of his Locke Lecture, *Mind and World*. Like those who have influenced him, McDowell does not restrict himself to one or two branches in philosophy. His works range from history of philosophy, ethics, philosophy of mind and language, epistemology, and metaphysics. This may partially explain why he is often skeptical about the 'division of labor' methodology discussed above.

In addition to these contemporary influences, McDowell also invokes resources from important thinkers in the history of western philosophy. As we shall see in later episodes, he adopts Aristotelian notion of 'second nature,' Kantian conception of the discursivity of experience, Hegelian absolute idealism, Wittgensteinian notion of 'form of life', and Gadamerian distinction between 'world' and 'environment,' and so on. In response to critics from other backgrounds, he also discusses Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. This makes it extraordinarily difficult to approach McDowell's thinking. In the present essay I will restrict myself not to get into exegeses of those abstruse materials, though I still need to say something about them from time to time.

The nature of McDowell's philosophy poses a serious challenge to anyone who is willing to conduct a large-scale exposition of his thinking: given that he touches so many divergent issues in various branches of philosophy *and* so many unfathomable thoughts of various important philosophers in a highly systematic way, either the question-oriented way or the figure-centered way of exposition will very likely be unsatisfying. If one chooses the former, it will be very hard for one to give due weight to the convoluted relations between issues and those big names; if one adopts the latter, one will probably neglect detailed objections and replies in specific issues. Either way, the exposition is open to objections about its writing strategy.¹² Although these two styles do not strictly exclude each other, still it is quite challenging for commentators to reach equilibrium.

¹¹ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979).

¹² Anthologies aside, to my notice nowadays there are three introductory books exclusively on McDowell's philosophy. The first is *John McDowell* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004) by Tim Thornton. This one is very question-oriented, taking care of different areas of McDowell's thinking in a detailed fashion. In the same year, *John McDowell* (Polity Press, 2004) by Maximilian de Gaynesford was also published. This one is question-oriented too, but the author concentrates more on McDowell's own thinking. The third one, *On Thinking and the World: John McDowell's Mind and World* (Ashgate Publishing, 2005) by Sandra M. Dingli, emphasizes the relations between McDowell and other important thinkers, like Kant, Heidegger, and Davidson. All of them try to strike a balance between the question-oriented approach and the figure-centered one. The distinctiveness of my interpretation is that I focus on the very idea of 'subjectivity,' which is relatively absent in extant interpretations.

So obviously I need to make a choice. In the present essay I tend to structure my argumentations with the figure-centered approach. The principal reason is that McDowell's philosophy, as an interconnected system, has not been well understood. This is of course a highly vague and bold verdict, but I will not defend it here. In any case, I think we should understand how he integrates miscellaneous elements from divergent areas and thinkers into a unified whole before going deeper in specific questions. Besides, at different stages of the essay, I will evaluate debates between McDowell and other important contemporary philosophers, in order to bring out McDowell's place in contemporary philosophy. Let me illustrate my approach with an example. In discussing McDowell's view on perceptual experience, I will concentrate on how his view in this area connects to his broader concern about the nature of the world and human subject, and how he confronts his important contemporaries, notably Robert Brandom, but won't get into how he responds to, say, some experiments in psychology concerning the discursivity of experience. It is not that psychological experiments or criticisms from less important people are valueless or irrelevant; it is just that they do not fit my present purpose. To recapitulate, in this essay I am closer to the figure-centered approach; 'figure' here includes McDowell and his important contemporaries. I take this stance because I hope to offer a more comprehensive exposition of McDowell's thinking, *and* further I want to place McDowell's thinking as a whole on the map of contemporary philosophy, and this requires me to focus mainly on other 'big names.' This does not mean that I will only scratch the surface, but I can prove this only through carrying my project out.

3. Let me connect these abstract considerations about the essay structure to my actual contents. The main theme, to repeat, is to understand human subject and its place in the world. There are two strands in this project: first, how does a *Homo sapiens*, an animal, can nevertheless be a *Cogito*, i.e., having the capacities to be responsive to reasons? Second, how does this minded human animal be a perceiver, knower, thinker, speaker, agent, person, and (self-) conscious being in the world? The former question pinpoints the tension between our animal, biological nature and spiritual capacities, and the latter concerns how our biologically-rooted spiritual capacities enable us to navigate in the world through varieties of our mentality. In this essay I start with the tension but concentrate on the applications. In my first episode I introduce the tension and discuss how McDowell manages to dissolve it and thereby find a place in the world for minded human subject. From the second to the fifth episodes, I discuss how McDowell's resolution to the putative tension applies to various mentalities, including perceiver and knower, thinker and speaker, agent and person, conscious and self-conscious subject; I discuss how McDowell avoids

Brandom's charge of residual individualism, how he criticizes Kripke's Cartesian way of construing the skeptical paradox, how he objects to Dummett's 'full-blooded conception of theory of meaning,' how he finds Davidson's and Brandom's 'I-thou' conception of the publicity of intentionality unsatisfying, how he replies to Dreyfus's accusation of 'the Myth of the Mental,' how he discerns a Cartesian line of thought in Parfit's view of personal identity, and how he thinks Kant unwittingly lapses into the 'narrow assumption,' and so on. In my epilogue, I will discuss the root of those varieties of mentality, that is, our *self-determining subjectivity*. As we shall see, McDowell thinks human subject is special in the sense that it lives in the logical space of reasons, and this space is exhausted by conceptual connectedness, and finally, this space of rational-conceptual connectedness is identical with *the realm of freedom*. So arguably the heart of McDowell's thinking is his elaboration of this self-determining subjectivity. As the closing episode of my essay, it can hardly provide a full-fledged construction of that important notion, but I shall try to gesture at possible directions for us to think about.

A few words about McDowell's 'quietism.' This Wittgensteinian component of his thinking is often understood as a refusal of offering positive or systematic accounts. So conceived, my present project is at odds with this attitude. However, quietism should not be understood that way. It is a reminder about our ways of seeing issues; it says that before engaging in substantial discussions, one should slow down and see whether there is any compulsory reason for us to accept the challenge in question. 'Quietism' itself is a big issue, especially when one takes it to be a discussion about Wittgenstein scholarship. However, in this essay I adopt a rather weak understanding of it, as just briefly characterized above. Therefore, I will not go into this in the rest of the essay.¹³

¹³ Here I am indebted to my committee member Cheng Kai Yuan for reminding me about relevant qualifications.