

# John McDowell on Reason and Nature



By Sandra M. Dingli

from reconciling the dualistic forces of reason and nature is the naturalism of modern science where phenomena are explained in law-like terms.

McDowell's position incorporates the controversial claim that our rationality is natural too. This comes about by his '*reminding*' us of a concept drawn from Aristotelian ethics – that of second nature. We are initiated into second nature through our upbringing (that is, our *Bildung*, as McDowell prefers to call it) through which we acquire our rational faculties. Since *Bildung* (which translates into 'self-formation or cultivation') actualises a potential which is present in the first nature of human beings, it is perfectly natural.

Kant's views on sensibility and understanding play a key role in McDowell's work. Kant assumed that there are two distinct faculties, sensibility and understanding, through which we obtain knowledge. Sensibility, or perception, involves the sense organs, while understanding involves the manner in which the mind makes sense of the information it receives. McDowell clearly states that 'the original Kantian thought was that empirical knowledge results from a cooperation between receptivity and spontaneity' (MW, p.9). His aim is to present a '*picture*' which reconciles spontaneity and receptivity.

Why should our thoughts about the world prove to be an accurate guide to reality if the world has its own mind-independent nature? McDowell claims that 'our philosophical anxieties are due to the intelligible grip on our thinking of a modern naturalism, and we can work at loosening that grip' (MW, p.177). This is done through 'second nature' which, he claims, goes back to Aristotle. In Aristotelian ethics, the acquisition of 'practical wisdom' opens our eyes to the requirements of reason. McDowell uses 'practical wisdom' as a 'model for the understanding, the faculty that enables us to recognize and create the kind of intelligibility that is a matter of placement in the space of reasons' (MW, p.79).

John McDowell (b. 1942) is a South African philosopher, currently at the University of Pittsburgh. This article explores his ideas on the mind-body problem and the new direction he proposes to unravel this persistent issue that still faces philosophers today.

Philosophers have proposed various theories in response to the mind-body problem. Consensus has, however, not been achieved as there appears to be no satisfactory solution to the question: How can our thinking be linked to an external law-governed world and how can we know whether the subject matter of our thoughts pertains to a reality that is independent of our thinking? There is considerable evidence that the external physical world is subject to natural laws. On the other hand, human thinking and reasoning appear to belong to a special rational sphere of their own which is not subject to natural laws.

In *Mind and World* (MW)(1994,1996), McDowell attempts to 'dissolve' dualisms including that of reason and nature. The conception of nature that prevents us

McDowell claims that 'second nature' is 'all but explicit in Aristotle's account of how ethical character is formed, where practical wisdom is considered to be 'second nature to its possessors' (MW, p.84). In his view, 'human beings are intelligibly initiated into this stretch of the space of reasons by ethical upbringing, which instills the appropriate shape into their lives. The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature' (MW, p.84). McDowell's concept of 'second nature' broadens the meaning of what is normally conceived as 'natural' in order to accommodate spontaneity and thought, that is, to accommodate our mental faculties too.

*Bildung* plays a key role in this process as it involves the process of 'having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature' (MW, p.84) which is a 'central element in the maturation of human beings' where language 'already embodies putative rational linkages between concepts' (MW, p.125). *Bildung* comes about as a result of our being initiated into the language, customs and traditions of the culture into which we are born and raised. It is through *Bildung* that we develop the skill to discern between what is right and what is wrong and through which we acquire our values and ethical principles.

For McDowell, human beings are born mere animals, yet they 'mature into being at home in the space of reasons or ... living their lives in the world' (MW, p.125) by means of initiation into language and culture through which the human potential for acquiring mind is actualised. 'If we could achieve a firm hold on a naturalism of second nature ... it would be to have achieved 'the discovery that gives philosophy peace' (MW, p.86).

McDowell's quest to find peace for philosophy is influenced by the later Wittgenstein who said: 'The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.'

The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question' (1953, 1995, §133).

McDowell is convinced of the picture he proposes, but whether he succeeds in convincing others is another matter. This makes it difficult to accept his ideas on second nature and *Bildung* as 'peace giving'.

Criticism has been directed against McDowell by philosophers such as Brandom (1998) who states: 'McDowell contents himself with making his commitments explicit ... without showing just how he would propose to show himself *entitled* to them' (p.370).

McDowell's views raise a number of questions. Is McDowell's concept of 'second nature' sufficient to explain the situation of human beings within nature, yet not completely governed by the realm of law due to our second nature? Does McDowell's 'second nature' create a new dualism, that of nature and second nature? Is McDowell merely making a change in the language we use to refer to the mental by calling it 'second nature'? If we adopt McDowell's ideas, do we still require the concept of (first) nature or does it become superfluous? McDowell has pointed towards novel possibilities related to the mind-body problem, but a satisfactory solution still seems to be far away.

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