

**John McDowell**

*The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays.*

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*The Engaged Intellect* is the fourth volume in a series that collects together the essays of John McDowell. Like its companions, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (1998), *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (1998), and *Having the World in View* (2009), it contains nineteen unrevised pieces originally published between 1982 and 2007, which are very loosely associated by a common theme. In this case, the common theme is engagement, which is artfully conceived to highlight the threefold character of McDowell's work: its focus on the intertwinement of the mind and world, its articulation through critical reflection on the work of others, and its ongoing development in response to a number of critics. Throughout the book, McDowell seeks to refine his explanation as to how we can frame such an intertwinement of the mind with things in a way that resists 'a rationalistic conception of the intellect...that disengages reason, which is special to rational animals, from aspects of their make-up that they share with other animals' (vii).

As in earlier writings, McDowell here again seeks to articulate his unique position indirectly by showing why we must avoid two common but tempting alternatives. The first alternative, as the quote above suggests, is a kind of rationalism that seeks a foundation outside of the familiar capacities for sensation and feeling with which we are endowed by nature and equipped by culture. The second is what can seem to be the only sensible response to the perceived failure of this first alternative, namely the adoption of an anti-rationalistic position, which either seeks to reduce overt talk of truth and of veridical representation to that of actualizations of more primitive context-dependent human capacities, or encourages us to entirely abandon the notions of objectivity or truth, in favor of ideals such as intersubjective agreement and warrant. Both alternatives are defective, in McDowell's view, because they leave us disengaged from a view of the world of direct experience as a genuine constraint on our rational activities and because, in the final analysis, they are unable to provide an adequate account of the practice they endeavor to explain. McDowell's general strategy is to defuse their attraction by rendering unproblematic the idea that our engagement with what seem to be mere natural capacities can, in the right conditions and through the right education, put us in an immediate position to make claims about how the world genuinely is. In this way he believes the possibility of reaching genuine, non-relativistic truths can be maintained alongside the view that we can only ever arrive at them from within the bounds of our own natural capacities and cultural practices. Due to limitations of space, I will restrict my comments to a few of the essays in this collection that are most closely related to this central theme.

Essays 3 through 5 provide a thorough application of this central idea to the interpretation of Aristotle's ethics. The first of the three, 'Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics' argues against a prominent interpretation of Aristotle which sees him

as building up the concept of happiness from materials available to an agent independently of whether he or she has received the proper education or developed the character proper to virtuous action. McDowell thinks that the recent interest in this externalist reading of Aristotle stems from a misguided desire to recruit him to a certain realist program in ethics that itself falls into the former of the two bad alternatives. In particular, it takes for granted that for an ethical theory to count as realist, it must be based upon a foundation that is available from outside the ethical practice in question. In place of this, McDowell argues for an alternative reading of Aristotle which is no less realist, but which holds that a sense of happiness can be built up only from a grasp of what it means to be fulfilled that is attainable only from within ethical deliberation carried about by a person properly educated in an ethical tradition. The central point that McDowell wishes to make is that Aristotle, given his historical context, is best read as espousing a kind of realism that is simply not troubled by those skeptical doubts which compel thinkers in the modern philosophical tradition to seek an external metaethical foundation for their thought. The same theme is generalized in the next essay, 'Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle's Ethics', where McDowell contends that the moral agent, on Aristotle's view, is indeed able to grasp the unity and goodness of individual courses of action within a single universal conception of doing well, a conception which is nevertheless essentially unavailable from outside a specific ethical practice.

The final essay on Aristotelian ethics, 'Incontinence and Practical Wisdom in Aristotle', argues, against David Wiggins, that rather than reading Aristotle's partial agreement with Socrates on the issue of incontinence as evidence for his failure to fully see past a dubious rationalistic view of human motivation, it should be read as expressing an important insight regarding an essential link that exists between ethical knowledge and motivation. Aristotle's insight, according to McDowell, lies in the recognition that the possession and employment of such knowledge is only really possible for an agent that has inured itself to motivation from other sources. In other words, the ethically wise cannot but do what is good, because it is a condition of developing such wisdom—indeed to seeing the virtuousness of an action as a reason for undertaking it—that they have formed their character in a way that makes them immune to other motivations. The objection that finds an excessively rationalistic view of motivation in Aristotle thus stems from a failure to realize that his notions of practical wisdom and proper motivation are not external to one another.

'Are Meaning, Understanding, etc., Definite States?' is the first of two essays concerned with the interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following argument. In this essay, McDowell argues against those who take Wittgenstein's use of this argument to attack the notion that the understanding is some definite thing or state to be aimed at the rejection of a common but false picture. The problem, in McDowell's view, is that this reading misses the more important point that Wittgenstein is not in fact criticizing the common view of the understanding, but rather a certain manner of thinking about the understanding that tends to turn it into some mysterious meaning-generating engine that lies behind and supports language. If one reads the argument in the former way, one might feel the need to replace the false picture of understanding with a correct one. But,

on McDowell's reading, the point is to become philosophically satisfied with the very notion of understanding that we commonly apply, so that we can eventually resist the temptation to interpret it in such a way that it requires explanation.

'How Not to Read *Philosophical Investigations*: Brandom's Wittgenstein', develops a very similar idea through an attempted refutation of Robert Brandom's reading of the rule-following argument. On Brandom's reading, Wittgenstein's goal is to attack the idea that following an explicitly stated rule requires the comprehension of a further rule to guide its application in practice, one that must also be able to be stated explicitly for it to function. From the infinite regress that is generated by this line of thought, Brandom's Wittgenstein draws the conclusion that explicitly stated rules are only applicable upon the assumption of rules that are merely implicit in practice and which constitute a series of entitlements and moves within it. As McDowell notes, the aim of this interpretation is not only to bring Wittgenstein in line with Brandom's own project, but to place Brandom himself in the position of completing what Wittgenstein began. McDowell, however, marshals considerable textual evidence against this suggestion, showing that Wittgenstein's real target is the idea, expressed in Brandom's terms, that rules—be they explicit or implicit, it matters not—do not immediately carry within themselves the norms of applicability. The regress in this case is not generated by the idea that the implicit rule must in fact be able to be made explicit, but by the idea that a rule is not immediately the kind of thing that has immediate practical significance on its own. For McDowell's Wittgenstein, then, the only job left for philosophy is to exorcise the kind of thinking that problematizes rules, not to make explicit some supposed understanding of their meaning that is only implicit in practice. Thus Wittgenstein's quietism is not a failure to fulfill the project Brandom proposes, namely making such implicit norms explicit, but is rather the principled recognition that such a project is pointless.

In 'Knowledge and the Internal Revisited' McDowell again takes issue with Brandom, writing that he has noticed 'an ongoing effort on his (i.e., Brandom's) part to appropriate my work as a kind of promissory note for his' (279), an appropriation that McDowell feels rests on a systematic distortion of his intended meaning. In defense, McDowell wishes to 'resist being cast as the hind legs of a pantomime horse called "Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism"' (279, n2), which internalizes such conditions into a 'socially perspectival hybrid conception of knowledge' (284). By contrast, McDowell claims to accept a kind of 'dogmatism' (208) that takes the contact between the knower and the known to be in a sense immediate and unproblematic. This dogmatism readily concedes that we cannot perceive and know things correctly without such a socially embedded form of reason; but, contrary to Brandom's idealism, it maintains that it is incorrect to conclude from this that satisfying such internal conditions is all that knowing things correctly really means. As McDowell explains, 'Brandom undertakes, in effect, to do what I am saying is unnecessary: to exploit the image of the space of reasons, cashed out in his social-perspectival terms, so as to secure the very idea of being on to things' (287). McDowell's master thought is in fact that we do not need to secure such an idea, but only to protect it against the undermining tendencies that lead either to internalism or to externalism, both of which in turn lead to a disengagement of the mind from the world.

The issues discussed in *Mind and World* (1995) are explicitly ‘revisited’ in the two helpful essays, ‘Experiencing the World’ and ‘Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind’. As the name suggests, the first introduces the notion of experience employed in that work, while the second applies the argument of *Mind and World* to some basic questions in the philosophy of mind. Anyone looking for an introduction to McDowell’s philosophy or for clarification of some of its basic themes will want to consult these essays.

The same resistance to idealism or to the placement of intersubjective agreement at the basis of our conception of objectivity, which we saw in McDowell’s response to Brandom, also lies at the heart his response to Richard Rorty in ‘Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity’, to Michael Friedman in ‘Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism’ and—although to a lesser extent—to Donald Davidson in ‘Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective’. Each of these essays greatly clarifies McDowell’s philosophical program by highlighting its deeply realist or dogmatic dimension, a dimension that is easily overlooked when one focuses too narrowly on the idealistic sounding thesis of the ‘unboundedness of the conceptual’ McDowell develops in popular writings such as *Mind and World*.

McDowell has been justly criticized for his lapses into vagueness and metaphor, and these are as much in evidence in this volume as elsewhere. As well, McDowell’s conviction that nearly the only positive argument his position requires is the criticism of its competition can be dissatisfying. However, whatever particular faults these essays might have, they do provide the rare and instructive spectacle of a philosopher who is able to genuinely enrich our understanding of the history of philosophy while at the same time engaging in current philosophical problems and debates.

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