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van Mazijk, Corijn

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## Phenomenologizing McDowell

Book review of Carleton B. Christensen's *Self and World – From Analytic Philosophy to Phenomenology*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008

Corijn Van Mazijk

University of Groningen-University of Leuven  
corijnvanmazijk@hotmail.com

Christensen aims high with his approximately four hundred page-long work that brings together fifteen years of contributions to debates between analytic philosophy and phenomenology. *Self and World – From Analytic Philosophy to Phenomenology* (2008) displays in depth knowledge of a wide array of twentieth century philosophers in both analytic and continental tradition. The spirit of Christensen's thinking is certainly laudable and may serve as an example for all phenomenologists seeking to raise a voice in contemporary philosophical discussions on perception, non-conceptual experience and epistemology. In the Introduction, Christensen presents himself as a true spokesman of the phenomenological tradition, seeking to draw analytic philosophy and phenomenology closer without taking recourse to a today rather commonplace subordination of the latter to the first.

Christensen lines up with Wright (1996) and others in questioning the success of McDowell's solution in *Mind and World* (1994) to the problem of oscillation discerned there. In short, McDowell is taken by Christensen as representative of a tradition perhaps not wholly unrelated to neo-Kantianism, which views experience as essentially apophantic. Christensen thinks this approach covers up the essentially aesthetic dimension of experience on which phenomenological accounts of perception expand. This line of thought brings him to reconstruct McDowell's philosophy in ways that open it to more phenomenologically oriented readings. Importantly, Christensen's attempt at reconciliation of both strands of philosophy is characterized by a contra-chronological transgression from McDowell's thinking to the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Reconstructing McDowell, it is said, will allow a "process of letting past and present so illuminate one another that future possibilities are opened up".<sup>1</sup> Finally, Husserl's account of perception is said then to pave the way for a reconsideration of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, one that can rightly acknowledge the positive influence of Husserl on the development of Heidegger's existential phenomenology. In chapter I, Christensen expands on McDowell's treatment of the problem of oscillation in *Mind and World*. Chapter II continues to play out Davidson's "frictionless spinning"<sup>2</sup> against McDowell's attempt to avoid such position. Here Christensen argues that Davidson's account cannot incorporate the right kind of unity of sensibility and understanding operative at the level of perception. In chapter III, Christensen criticizes McDowell's fear for confinement imagery. Chapter IV, V, VI and VII give extra depth to these discussions by focusing on topics such as second nature, externalism and finally phenomenology. Doubtlessly, *Self and World* profits from the author's smooth writing, which makes most discussions enjoyable to read. However, a difficulty is that this book only represents one half of a more elaborate project.

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<sup>1</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 11.

<sup>2</sup>McDOWELL 1994, 13-18.

Discussions of Husserl and Heidegger are almost wholly excluded from this book. By consequence, it is hard to judge whether Christensen manages to save the essentials of Husserlian and Heideggerean phenomenology in light of the task of making it relevant to analytic philosophy. Considered as a work of its own, many of the book's discussions are perhaps too lengthy and would have profited from some editorial cutting. This length is, unfortunately, not compromised by a particularly wide scope, although it is often met in terms of a considerable depth of the investigations. In spite of this, I will in what follows show that Christensen seems on the right track in this first division. I will try to highlight the ways in which Christensen's reading in the first three chapters contributes to an understanding of McDowell's problem of oscillation and how, in the following chapters, Christensen intends to exploit the soil laid by McDowell for a phenomenological interpretation. In the final parts, I will also criticize some aspects of his reading of Husserl. I take the first three chapters to elaborate on three general topics: 1. The nature and legitimacy of McDowell's critique of Davidson in *Mind and World*, 2. The nature and legitimacy of McDowell's own position regarding the problem of oscillating between the Myth of the Given and coherentism, 3. The way we ought to reconstruct McDowell's views in order to improve it. These preparations ultimately serve to lay a foundation for another kind of unity in sensibility and understanding than the one McDowell endorses, namely one which puts central the idea that "not all 'synthesis' (predication) is 'logical' or apophantic, that indeed there is an aesthetic kind as well".<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is to lead us from Kantian active synthesis governed by the understanding toward an originally passive synthesis in the sense advocated by the later Husserl. McDowell's philosophy takes central stage throughout the book. According to McDowell, epistemology has suffered from a certain dilemma for centuries, leading philosophers to oscillate back and forth between two opposing and equally problematic positions regarding the nature of experience. In order to account for the way thought grips onto reality, it seems necessary to invoke an intermediary between our conscious thoughts and beliefs on the one hand and external reality on the other. Classic empiricism draws on sensations to fulfill this task. Sensations supposedly stand in immediate connection with reality, being extra-conceptual, while simultaneously connecting to thought in such a way that they can inform our thoughts about the way reality is. McDowell leans on Sellars (1963) in criticizing this recourse to sensations but also goes beyond Sellars in rejecting that they would play any separate role whatsoever. Because sensations in the classic sense are taken to somehow inform our conceptual understanding while not being conceptual themselves and thus really unknowable, Sellars calls the idea of it a Myth of the Given. Put differently, the "idea of the Given is the idea that the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere".<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid such an unaccountable Given, a rejection of it seems required, which in turn leaves our thoughts hopelessly floating free with no connection to an external reality. These two unsatisfactory ends make up the oscillatory state central to McDowell's thinking. McDowell's own solution is, in short, to regard all of our perceptions as already mediated by and open to conceptual activity. This way, the world is said to fall within the grasp of our minds while simultaneously constraining our thoughts as an independent though subject-mediated reality. Importantly, McDowell sees Davidson's coherentism as a representative of the second strand, which thus fails to account for thought's relation to the world. In the first two chapters of his book, Christensen first pursues a line of argument saying that McDowell's account of perceptual experience

<sup>3</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 60.

<sup>4</sup>McDOWELL 1994, 7.

and the constraint it offers for empirical thinking is not substantially different from Davidson's. Although Christensen spends a lot of time trying to comprehend what McDowell has in mind when he criticizes Davidson - something Davidson possibly never quite understood himself<sup>5</sup> - he ultimately lines up more or less with McDowell. Although the merely causal role of sensations in Davidson's model does not align with the Given because it does not pretend to offer a rational constraint on our beliefs - and thus does not extend the space of justification more widely than the space of reasons - it is said still to fit the same traditional empiricist image. The reason for this is that it similarly accounts for perceptual experience in terms of an interplay between non-conceptual impressions and conceptual beliefs. In other words, Christensen takes the locus of perceptual experience in Davidson to be wrong, since the combination of distinct non-conceptual and conceptual elements does not allow for a genuine unity between the impressional and conceptual. McDowell's empirical synthesis, on the other hand, has a privileged status with respect to Davidson's, for it combines only conceptually loaded elements, seeing thought's bearing on reality secured by a notion of perception as open to and informed by conceptual activity. What is required is a "genuine [non-Davidsonian] unity of the conceptual and *sensually* and *qualitatively* impressional";<sup>6</sup> writes Christensen. Although this reading makes a lot of sense, I think one could also argue in another direction. Christensen knows that we do not have to read Davidson as wanting epistemic cross-fertilization between sensations and beliefs; in fact Davidson rejects that sensations can have more than a causal role. But it seems that the idea of a non-epistemic causal influence of sensations does not necessarily have to exhaust the whole domain of sensibility. Why can't there be, in Davidson's system, perceptions of the world that are belief-loaded and which can thus cooperate with conceptual beliefs? Read this way, McDowell's specific conception of intuitions in *Mind and World* is not as such incompatible with Davidson's account, although McDowell's rejection of causal influences on the perceiver does constitute a strong departure from him. However, the possibility of such a complete exclusion of the senses has in turn been criticized among others by De Vries (2011). For instance, as De Vries points out, McDowell might still need extra-conceptual sense data as a transcendental condition for coming to the adult human experiential world that he is interested in. Consequently, there are other lines of argument that could support McDowell's affinity to Davidson.

In chapter three, the underlying aim of the reconstructive reading of McDowell and the turn away from Davidson becomes more clear. Christensen holds that "conceptually speaking, intentionality comes before causality".<sup>7</sup> This means that the laws of nature should come second to the way in which things appear to the experiencer, and therefore the first cannot serve to explain the latter.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this does away instantly with Davidson's account. However, it is not entirely clear why this prioritization of phenomena over empirical causality should be warranted. Why would it not be equally fair to start with empirical reality and its natural laws, that is, the objective world rather than the world of subjective appearing? The position Christensen then ends on by the end of chapter three is, to my opinion, quite sophisticated. A sound theory of perceptual experience requires McDowell's adherence to the unity of intuition and concept but should expel the fear he has for a confinement imagery which led him to banish all non-conceptual content. All of this, however, is said only to lay

<sup>5</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 64

<sup>6</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 122.

<sup>7</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 124.

<sup>8</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 154.

the foundation for a phenomenologically inspired reconstruction of McDowell that improves it. This reconstruction, I take it, agrees on McDowell's prioritization of subjective appearances over natural law, but disagrees with its prioritization of the conceptual over the impressional. Christensen thus wants to keep the inseparability of concept and intuition in McDowell, but not in a way that incorporates the latter into the first. Only in parts of the final chapter and the conclusion does the reader get a glimpse of what the author has in mind with such a phenomenological reconstruction. Still, Christensen's discussions of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology in the light of correcting theoretical biases and epistemological debates are arguably too shallow. Christensen only treats Husserl's general methodology and 'meta-philosophy', and his assessments thereof do not reach far beyond stipulating the centrality of the first person perspective and subsequently criticizing Husserl's idea of a rigorous science. Furthermore, he does not allude anywhere to Husserl's posthumously published phenomenological research and findings, and thereby cannot truly interpret how Husserl's phenomenology might disagree with the unity McDowell sees between sensibility and understanding on the level of perception. Christensen thus ultimately leaves unargued what I take to be one of his central claims: that McDowell's account of the unity of impression and concept in perceptual experience is one that could be shared by phenomenologists.<sup>9</sup> Against Christensen, I think Husserl could well be interpreted as endorsing a pure passivity which is not informed by earlier conceptual activities.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, it seems that Husserl could be read to disagree with McDowell's perceptive unity, making room for non-conceptually informed sense-makings as well. Christensen's failure to address these issues might relate to his much too narrow and partially incorrect account of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology in the final sections. For one, he seems to deem transcendental phenomenology able to address object-relative properties only, such as being-a-house, being-green, and so forth, while stating it is unable to investigate subject-relative properties such as being-too-heavy or travelling-dangerously-towards-me.<sup>11</sup> I think this firstly shows a lack of understanding of the nature of phenomenological method itself, particularly genetic phenomenology, and secondly of Husserl's actual research and findings in e.g. *Ideas II*, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis* and *Experience and Judgment*. The problem is that Christensen seems to endorse a traditional conception of Husserl's phenomenology as a continuation of Brentanean intentionality, according to which Husserl would be intrinsically incapable of understanding the ontological structure of human *worldhood* as Heidegger crystalized it in *Being and Time* – a view which since decades has been falling into discredit.

With respect to the analytic parts of *Self and World*, one possible disappointment for any reader is the restriction of nearly all of its discussions to McDowell and Davidson. I think many topics could have been made a lot more substantial by drawing on important contemporary scholarly work on non-conceptualism, e.g. Hubert Dreyfus, Tim Crane, Sean Kelly or Robert Hanna, to name a few. For instance, the latter two<sup>12</sup> take well-aimed shots at McDowell's broad conception of concept in *Mind and World* ('demonstrative concepts' in particular), in part using Kant's 1786 essay *What Does It Mean To Orient Oneself In Thinking?*. Discussions as these would have been useful for broadening the scope of the book and relating it to important contemporary issues in philosophy of mind and epistemology.

<sup>9</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 150.

<sup>10</sup>HUSSERL 1997, 71-101.

<sup>11</sup>CHRISTENSEN 2011, 373.

<sup>12</sup>HANNA 2008, 41-64, KELLY 2001, 397-420.

All in all, *Self and Worldhood* is perhaps *qua* scope too narrow while it tends to explore too many sidetracks of which it is not always clear what purpose they serve. At times Christensen seems to have lost out of sight the primary aim of conveying his most important findings to his reader and finds himself lost in a jungle of personal thoughts he is trying to archive. In spite of this, it is evident that Christensen is a mature thinker who has fully made McDowell's and Davidson's thinking his own. Furthermore, I think he could be on the right track pursuing a phenomenological re-reading of McDowell's philosophy. In spite of some shortcomings, then, *Self and World* is a solid work suitable mostly for anyone interested in the difficult relation between McDowell and Davidson. Although the promise of a phenomenological reading is left unfulfilled, it is definitely worth keeping an eye out for what could be an interesting second part.

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