HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO

Knowledge and Disagreement in Pittsburgh

A Metaepistemological Inquiry into Brandom and McDowell's Epistemological Disagreements

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Tiivistelmä: Tutkin tutkielmassani Robert Brandomin ja John McDowellin tieto-oppeja metaepistemologisesta näkökulmasta ”syvän erimielisyyden” (*deep disagreement*) käsitettä hyödyntäen. Selvitän, voiko Brandomin ja McDowellin erimielisyyttä pitää niin sanottuna ”syvänä erimielisyytenä”, toisin sanoen järjestelmällisenä kiistana, jonka osapuolten on poikkeuksellisen vaikeaa löytää yhteisymmärrystä. Lisäksi harkitsen mitä hyötyjä syvän erimielisyyden tutkimisesta voi olla itse tietoteoreettiselle keskustelulle.

Tutkielman alkupuolella esittelen Brandomin ja McDowellin edustaman Pittsburghin koulukunnan tietoteoreettisen perustan eli annetun myytin (*Myth of the Given*) ja sen esittämät haasteet tietoteorialle. Brandomilla ja McDowellilla on omat tapansa oikeuttaa uskomukset ilman annetun käsitettä, mikä on johtanut eripuraan koulukunnan sisällä. Tutkielman loppupuolella selvitän millä perustein Brandomin ja McDowellin erimielisyyttä voisi pitää niin sanottuna syvänä erimielisyytenä. Nostan analyysissäni esiin erityisesti Brandomin ja McDowellin erimielisyydet kokemuksen käsitteen merkityksestä sekä heidän näkemyksensä siitä, mikä on filosofian tehtävä ylipäänsä. Johtopäätökseni on, että Brandomin ja McDowellin erimielisyyttä voi hyvinkin pitää syvänä, mutta että sen pohjaaminen tiettyyn episteemiseen lähtökohtaan saattaa olla harhaanjohtavaa ja keskustelun kehityksen kannalta haitallista.

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Introduction

In this Masters Thesis I aim to compare and contrast the epistemology of Robert Brandom and John McDowell with the final aim of doing a metaepistemological analysis of what I take to constitute a so-called ‘deep disagreement’ between the two viewpoints.

Brandom and McDowell are often considered to form, together with their teacher Wilfrid Sellars, a philosophical circle known as the ‘Pittsburgh School of Philosophy’. Similarities between the three thinkers abound, but here I take the central point of convergence to be a common doubt concerning traditional epistemic foundationalism, which is rejected by the School as the ‘Myth of the Given’.

I begin this thesis by providing an outline of the School’s most foundational text, Sellars’ essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, with a special focus on the notion of the Myth of the Given, a basic motivator of much of the epistemology later developed by Brandom and McDowell. After introducing the Myth, I present an outline of Sellars’ own cursory solution, which I then take as a foundation for understanding Brandom and McDowell’s subsequent approaches.

In chapter two I show how Brandom takes Sellars’ view’s basic principles and develops a pragmatic view of knowledge that emphasises interpersonal relations in a social ‘game’ of giving and asking for reasons. Following the chapter on Brandom, I present McDowell’s much more quietist approach, which puts experience in the centre of justification as an ‘openness to the world’. According to McDowell, both experience and the world should be considered conceptual in themselves when looking to ground our beliefs about the world in an external, objective reality.

Brandom and McDowell share a starting point, but they pursue vastly different paths to knowledge after forsaking the Given. In the final chapter of this thesis, I introduce the concept of ‘deep disagreements’ – systematic disputes that have shown exceptionally hard to resolve – and consider whether the long-standing dispute between the Pittsburgh School’s two most famous living philosophers could be deemed a deep disagreement about knowledge, and if so, how it should be conceived of. The concept of ‘deep disagreement’ describes a persistent conflict of opinion about what are often worldview-defining matters. When deeply disagreeing, each party is said to defend their position rationally while failing to

convince the other of their view. Brandom and McDowell seem to disagree deeply about how we can be said to be answerable to the world in our beliefs about it in light of Sellars' critique of the Given, so the question of whether this is a proper deep disagreement with all its downsides, such as systematic irresolvability, merits investigation.

My analysis will focus on Brandom and McDowell's different views on experience as well as their opposing views about the best way to do philosophy – Brandom being a Popperian system-building constructivist and McDowell taking a more quietist and deconstructivist approach. This kind of analysis follows what have been called 'fundamental models of deep disagreements,' an umbrella term for many popular ways of analysing deep disagreements by attempting to identify some fundamental difference in epistemic resources, which can be pinpointed as the cause of the disagreement and then used as a key to solving it.

I finally conclude that although fundamental causes can be identified, we should consider the disagreement more holistically than fundamental models suggest. More specifically, I consider the possibility that a focus on the role of experience at the expense of Brandom and McDowell's metaphilosophical views gives a deceivingly simplistic idea of the disagreement, which then leads to premature and somewhat uncharitable attempts at reconciliation. I hope analysing Brandom and McDowell's disagreement from a metaepistemological perspective will shed light on the debate – as well as external attempts at conciliation – in hopes of leveraging some more fruitful conclusions from Brandom and McDowell's interactions.

1 Wilfrid Sellars and the Myth of the Given[1]

1.1. Introduction

In this first section I outline Wilfrid Sellars' original ideas concerning the epistemological foundation often called 'the Given', and his so called 'psychological nominalism', a theory of mind designed to circumvent the problems that arise from his critical examination of the Given. Subsequent chapters will build on the ideas outlined here as I consider the responses of Robert Brandom and John McDowell.

The core text for my purposes will be Sellars' article 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' (Henceforth EPM, first published 1956), in which he criticises certain ideas about the mind and knowledge, mostly inherited from René Descartes and pivotal to the empiricism of his time. Sellars' main target are theories that look for foundational justification from direct awareness of subjects' private inner episodes. Sellars denies we can *know* mental states by introspection alone, proposing instead that inner mental states should be thought of as either raw sensations without content or as what could be called cognitive states proper: thoughts and ideas with a conceptual or propositional form which allows them to justify and be justified by other such cognitive states.

Sellars argues against the Cartesian tradition that neither the expression of one's own inner states nor the evaluation of the inner states of others is based on introspection. To be *known*, these must be first ordered and conceptualised by linguistic means. This requires familiarity with public matters, which are learned at once with language. Sellars does not deny immediate inner states altogether but claims these to be without content and justificatory power before they have been fitted into a logical framework that is characterised by its linguistic structure.

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[1] This first chapter relies heavily on work done for my bachelor's thesis 'Wilfrid Sellars and the Puzzle of Immediate Experience'.

Sellars' essay EPM can be seen to consist of two parts, a critique of 'bad' empiricism and foundationalism, and a constructive project that does not really abandon empiricism or foundationalism for an alternative as much as it rethinks their fundamental tenets. I have divided my account of Sellars' main arguments into two parts accordingly. In section 1, 'Empiricism', I look at the reasoning that led Sellars to raise the issue of the Given being a mere myth. In section 2, 'Philosophy of Mind', I examine Sellars' solution to the problem, a theory of mental states known as psychological nominalism.

By the end of this section several key concepts for the so-called Pittsburgh School of Philosophy will have brought to light. The 'Pittsburgh School' denominates a grouping that centrally includes Sellars and his followers – and the other two subjects of this study – Robert Brandom and John McDowell, who have all taught philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh for decades. The School is also characterised by a shared interests and beliefs, of course, which shall be discussed in what follows. I shall begin by introducing the reader to Sellars' so-called 'Myth of the Given', and in the following sections on Brandom and McDowell, I consider the response that Sellars' original ideas have elicited in his followers.

The key ideas I focus on are those of the aforementioned Myth of the Given, the 'logical space of reasons', which relates to the Pittsburgh School's conception of language as a prerequisite for thought or sapience (as opposed to mere sensations or sentience, which are also mental phenomena) and the importance of normativity for thought and knowledge. These ideas will largely be introduced here in chapter I and then be elaborated on in subsequent chapters.

1.2. Empiricism

This subsection is concerned with the critical aspects of EPM, the Myth of the Given, and the tradition it adheres to.

Sellars considers his philosophy of mind a response to this stubborn aspect of Cartesianism that has too long gone unchallenged and still served as a foundationalist basis for the empiricism of his day. For Descartes, the mind is of course perfectly known to itself, better than the body and all other material substance. The mind's self-knowledge is absolutely certain, whence originates Descartes' famous indubitable starting point for all subsequent

inquiry, "*cogito ergo sum*". By extension, the entirety of a person's mental substance is beyond doubt to the self. Though one might never be absolutely certain that their experience is without error, that there, for instance, really is a blue book on the table, one cannot doubt the *experience of seeing* a blue book on the table.

Descartes considers all such mental material including beliefs, wishes, sensations, etc., 'thought', which in Descartes' substance dualism is its own form of substance called '*res cogitans*' (thinking thing). The mind knows itself best but seems to be in some sort of contact with the corporeal world, or, '*res extensa*' (extended thing). Things external to the mind can leave imprints on the mind like footprints on the sands of an isolated island. The connection between mind and matter is direct, but the 'island' of the mind can only know things about the outer world by inference, by looking at the island's internal changes, such as the footprints on its shores, never the feet leaving them. All knowledge that we gain of matter, as well as other minds, is ultimately based on knowledge of our own mental states (DeVries & Triplett, 2000: xvi-xix). This is what is known as classical or radical foundationalism, an epistemic justificatory strategy not limited to only classical rationalism, as we shall see.

1.2.1. Sellars' Objection

Sellars could be said to reject this cartesian picture on two interrelated grounds. He first wishes to deny the unary category of 'thought' as *res cogitans* and propose in its stead a dualism of 'thoughts' on the one hand and 'sensations' on the other. The former is an epistemic or cognitive mental state (something intentional and structured like a language, something to be *known* or reflected upon with logical rigour), the latter a phenomenal mental state, or a form of qualia (a sensation, "what it is like…", modelled on the properties of perceptible things). What is essential for sensations is their intrinsic nature, the feel of them; whereas for thoughts, what matters is the organisation of their elements and the functions

they serve — the stuff thoughts are made of is redundant (DeVries & Triplett, 2000: 123; Sellars 1956, §25-7).[2]

The second quarrel that Sellars has with the Cartesian picture concerns knowledge. For Descartes, all thought is directly and infallibly accessible to the subject as knowledge. Sellars does not wish to reject the notion of private experience (DeVries & Triplett, 2000: 117), but based on the distinction made in the previous paragraph, Sellars (1956: §45-7) argues that people only have privileged access to sensations. These are not *known* either; they are simply *felt*. It follows that cognitive mental phenomena are not immediate in this way. Cognitive mental phenomena allow *knowledge* of private sensations through engagement with the public understanding of relevant concepts and categories, something that is not immediate to perception. Especially Brandom has engaged with this line of thought and I shall discuss it in more detail in the section on Brandom.

1.2.2. The Myth of the Given

From Descartes' thinking we have inherited what Sellars calls the 'Myth of the Given'. The Myth is the epistemological fallacy that purportedly grounded the principal forms of empiricism of Sellars' time as it grounded Descartes' rationalism. The given serves as a node that is supposed to link together our immediate experience of the external world with the infallible, introspected knowledge that we have of our own propositional mental contents (DeVries & Triplett, 2000: xxi).

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[2] By "cognitive" I refer here and henceforth to mental episodes akin to propositions or 'thoughts' as defined above, distinct from mere experience or 'sensations'. It should also be noted that words like 'sensory or sense impressions', 'experience', and 'raw feels' are used henceforth as variations of the same concept of 'sensations' as they are distinct from 'thoughts'. 'Thoughts' are also referred to as 'knowledge' and 'cognitive mental states' without semantic implications. 'Sentience' and 'sapience' are used as opposites, whereas 'Mental states' and 'mental episodes', refer to the mental without emphasising the difference between thoughts and sensations.

Those that follow the doctrine of the Myth – let us call them 'Givenists'[3] – hold the foundationalist belief that a piece of empirical knowledge X requires another piece of *justifying* knowledge Y from which it is inferred. The justifying knowledge must be traceable to a final piece of grounding knowledge Z that is also part of the inferential chain that passes on justification. To occupy this grounding role, the piece of knowledge Z must also be *epistemically independent*; that is, it must possess its epistemic status independently of inference from other knowledge (Rorty & Brandom, 1997: 124-6; Sellars, 1956: §7).

The Given can easily be pointed out in this outline. It is the grounding piece of knowledge Z at the end of the justificatory chain, a kind of basic belief that derives justificatory power from the indubitability of experience without itself having to be justified. In the case of empirical knowledge, the process advances as follows. Physical Objects ($^{1}\rightarrow$) lead to sensing sense contents, which ($^{2}\rightarrow$) cause noninferential beliefs (*arguably* Z in the above scheme), from which ($^{3}\rightarrow$) inferential beliefs are inferred (Y, X). (scheme adapted from Rorty & Brandom, 1997: 126).

For our purposes, arrows 1 and 3 are acceptable. 1 is a causal relation, and 3 is an epistemic relation that allows Y to justify X inferentially. What about arrow 2? The Myth of the Given treats ($^{2}\rightarrow$) as a sort of transitory relation between Z and Y, where Y is clearly 'knowledge' in the technical sense of being cognitive, but Z loiters somewhere between 'knowledge' and 'sensation', or as Sellars (1956: §2) puts it, between being a 'fact' and a 'sensed particular'.[4]

The open epistemic status of Z is closely interrelated with the irresoluteness of relation 2, which, according to Sellars, should be either causal (like relation 1) or epistemic (like relation 3). Sellars seems to force us to choose between the two instead of allowing us to carelessly

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[3] 'Givenist' is employed in reference to the manifold of adherents to the various forms of the Myth of the Given from Cartesians to the varied supporters of several sense-datum theories, which are here considered somewhat interchangeably. Despite his focus in '*Empiricism* and the Philosophy of Mind', Sellars' critique is not limited to empiricism; it also applies to rationalism and Platonism as well as several forms of empiricism and even some forms of phenomenology (see deVries and Triplett, 2000: xxi, xxxi-ii).

[4] Z is above said to be the noninferential proposition, but since we are dealing with the Myth, the actual status of Z is unclear as it serves the role of a nonpropositional belief but needs to be propositional in order to engage with the inferential relation ($^{3}\rightarrow$) that follows.

bypass the step with a confused notion of an imprecise and erroneous hybrid. The core of Sellars' critique is that Givenists have ignored the disjunction, and more importantly, that were they to pay more attention to their reasoning, Givenists would have to face the fact that *neither* choice alone will make sensations a satisfactory foundation for justification, since a causal relation does not entail a justificatory relation and, as we shall soon see in more detail, a sensation on its own cannot participate in an epistemic relation. If it remains nonconceptual and empty of propositional content, it loses all justificatory power – a pure sensation that does not require justification cannot provide justification. It would be epistemically independent, but as such, it cannot enter epistemic relations with other propositions. In other words, if a mental state is to give justification, it must also be in need of some sort of justification itself (Rorty & Brandom, 1997: 127-8; Sellars, 1956: §2-4).

If Z is to justify Y, it must enter what Sellars calls the 'game of giving and asking reasons', for which it must have a conceptual or even propositional structure. That is, to have justificatory power, Z must be more than a raw sensation. However, allowing Z to include more than the raw sensation would in turn beg for additional justification. In this case Z could not be the end of the justificatory chain because it would pass on more than raw experience from sense content to belief and there are no reasons or justification given for smuggling this additional content. This would at least require an account of how raw sensation becomes something with a logical structure and justificatory power. Sellars aims to do just that. He believes that mere sentience does exist: children and animals at least for the most part live as only sentient beings without proper sapience. Humans, unlike animals, are eventually introduced to a logical space where their linguistically parsed concepts and thoughts can engage in logical relations of, for instance, justification. Psychological nominalism is Sellars' theory of mind, which develops these ideas. Psychological nominalism is the subject of the following subsection.

A caveat might be in place. Sensations do of course exist independently of language and the conceptual or propositional. Language is not ontologically required to feel things. On the contrary, sensation *comes about* or *exists* prior to thought's conceptual classification as sensing provides that which is classified. But to *know* that which is sensed, one needs to first have acquired the ability to represent sensation to oneself in a new way that is not immediate but conceptually parsed or propositional. Knowledge and belief is ontologically dependent on language (Maher, 2012: 41), but the ability to learn a public language presupposes an ability

to have sensations. It is the ability to be aware of these sensations and to know them which presupposes the public language that this awareness is modelled on.

The aspect of sensation remains at the bottom, making the learning of a language possible. Sensations also inform knowledge, but sensations are not *known* by merely being had. Caution about possible errors does not directly come with impressions, automatically turning them into knowledge. Beliefs about the world are of course based on impressions, but knowing that one might be mistaken must be learned through a cognitive process. Sellars emphasises that knowing that something might not be as perceived requires one to know about the erroneous perception, the truthful alternative and the circumstances that might be causing the mistake. These different beliefs must then be connected in a logical space, something only further cognitive work can do (Sellars: §17).

1.3. Philosophy of Mind

It is a matter of interpretation how to categorise Sellars' own solution to the problems of the Given and the demands rejecting it gives rise to. Sellars' critique of foundationalism does not simply lead him to endorse some opposite view like pure coherentism. Instead, Sellars seems to be looking for more of a revised form of foundationalism, for he believes some form of stable link between the actual world and our mental awareness of it is crucial for the form of naturalism (or externalist foundationalism) he endorses.

In a famous passage, Sellars shows suspicion of both foundationalism, "an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?)", and coherentism "a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?)" Sellars claims to reject both in favour of a gradual acquisition of concepts analogous to the progression of science, which is after all only the most sophisticated extension of day-to-day empirical knowledge, "a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once" (Sellars, 1956: §38).

Sellars had a name for his theory of mind: psychological nominalism. Depending on what perspective is taken (epistemological, ontological, naturalist), different emphases can be found. This, as well as pure disagreements on interpretation, is reflected in Sellars' followers' views and philosophies. I will not go into interpretations here, as I hope later chapters will

suffice to give an idea of what Brandom and McDowell each emphasise in their reading of Sellars. The following is meant as a general introduction to psychological nominalism, which will be developed later.

1.3.1. Psychological Nominalism

Roughly stated, psychological nominalism is a more elaborate, linguistically centred form of standard nominalism, which is essentially a view in opposition with realism. The latter argues that universals exist independently of human minds, nominalism arguing the contrary: universals only come about as constructs devised by mental activity (Reider, 2017: 1).

Universals are relevant here because they play into the debate concerning the source of human understanding. Everything we rationally think about can be seen to be classified and sorted in some way by the mind: we sort by kinds, by colour, shape, etc. These classifications can be seen to be an essential component of the way we experience the world. What Sellars unsympathetically opposes is the view that language acquisition is a process of learning to verbally discriminate between particulars, universals, and facts which all already exist 'out there' and are only in need of names (Reider, 2017: 1-4).

When picturing children learning their first language, we tend to locate them into the structured logical space we are already familiar with, assuming young children have a pre-analytic awareness of the same space as we picture it (Sellars, 1956: §65). Sellars wants to say that this leads to misconceptions (the Myth of the Given). According to him, the ability to make observations that possess the logic of propositional and conceptual content is learned. This happens through language, as we have already learned, but more specifically, the normativity of language and a lengthy process of acquiring of linguistic and conceptual habits. When learning a language, the linguistic community imposes norms on the language learner as well as a complex network within which to arrange one's interrelated habituated responses. The norms of a linguistic community are also what establishes the habits a language learner must internalise (Reider, 2017: 8-10). Brandom has delved into this aspect in depth, ultimately arguing against Richard Rorty, that we can speak of truth and objectivity exactly because there is a communal normativity that no attempt to convince another

individual can account for (Levine, 2010: 568). This will be discussed in more detail in the section on Brandom.

What is learned through language is a form of 'know how' of how to use concepts. Propositional or conceptual knowledge, in contrast – knowledge in an epistemological sense – is a form of 'know that'. 'Knowing that' in language relates to things like knowing the reasons why something is, say, a tie. 'Knowing how' is practical knowledge that refers to the ability to generate the appropriate thoughts in the presence of ties (keeping with the example) and the ability to form and interpret statements like "this is a tie".

Sellars holds that language and logic of the 'know that' kind ultimately rest on a foundation of 'know how' because justifying 'know that' with more 'know that' only leads to an infinite regress. This is a point Sellars borrows from Gilbert Ryle and applies to language (Reider, 2017: 6), arriving at a Wittgensteinian idea about the 'unfoundedness' of language. Wittgenstein argues that knowledge ultimately rests on particular modes of life that simply "are there" and have no further justification (see deVries, 2005: 24). Thus, language is regulated through norms, though not because there is an awareness of them. Such an awareness comes later, itself also reliant on the same norms of which it is an awareness.

Language is ultimately based on something like thought (DeVries, 2005: 53), but we get to understand thought only through language, as it systematises this unstructured 'mentalese' and makes a shared, normative project out of cognising. And only as cognising takes on a social, communicative role does it transcend the unstructured 'mentalese' that is a raw form of proper thought, a mere potential for real sapience.

Since for Sellars language derives its meaning from use and context, it can give rise to new ways of categorising and working with observations and facts of the world. Language can thus be anchored in reality yet create new things (universals) on its own. Language gives rise to a logical space into which the learners of language are initiated. By this 'logical space' Sellars means, according to DeVries & Triplett (2000: 60), a space delineated by "the categorical structure that we use to carve up the world conceptually." Within this logical space one understands, for instance, why something is an object, an event, or a property, the difference between abstract and physical entities, as well as their relations.

The structure and propositionality of thought exist in this logical space, not in the mode of expression. Thoughts also participate in logical relations, entailments, and incompatibilities, which are all understood through the logic of language. It is an interesting question which I

will not tackle here whether language should be seen as a mere tool necessary for us to consider this logic, or whether there really is a deeper logic in itself which language mirrors. To be on the safe side, we can ignore the ontological question posed by the second option and say that the first option is inevitable regardless of the second. We must at least understand the logical space of reasons in terms of a linguistic framework. This is necessary if we are to speak of logic at all.

1.4. Conclusion

In sum, Sellars' idea of the relations between sensation, language, concepts and knowledge seems to be the following. As infants, we begin as mostly sentient beings. We perceive the world in a way comparable to non-rational animals. Sentience, however, allows us to gradually learn language, which can turn perception and sensations into cognitive states with intentional content. As a result, instead of experiencing a certain type of qualia embedded within the rest of our perception, we can specifically see 'green', for instance. In other words, sensing green sense content *x* does not include the noninferential piece of knowledge that *x* is green, as the givenist tradition would hold. It is rather superimposed on the qualia by language and reasoning (DeVries & Triplett, 2000: 148).

Psychological nominalism therefore makes the epistemic claim we have seen above (counter to (British) empiricism, rationalism as well as universal realism): people do not directly see universals or create them non-inferentially from sensation: this is the 'Myth of the Given'. Universals are something people holistically learn to use and rationalise with as they are inculcated into a language whose norms and rules actualise and influence the logical space described above. Entering this logical space permits a functional mastery of universals, which again, are crucial for rational thought or sapience. The belief that it is this logical space in which rational thought takes place is called 'psychological nominalism'.

Sellars remains, however, very sympathetic to most aspects of empiricism, but he believes that the Myth of the Given reveals a need to supplement empiricism in a way similar to Immanuel Kant's treatment of it in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. As Kant did in his synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, Sellars posits a necessity for something not included in raw perception. Kant's famous thesis, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without

concepts are blind" is echoed in Sellars's constructive picture, which revamps Kant's idea with a mostly late-Wittgensteinian linguistic twist deeply rooted in a naturalistic world view (Goldman, 1992: 160). Kant sought to disclose the necessary conditions for experience by examining the human mind before engaging with metaphysics or epistemology. Sellars extends this project to giving an account of how humans perceive, judge, and communicate through language (Reider, 2017: 12).

Once the epistemological system that emerges is more closely examined, implicit consequences made explicit, and the details filled in, we might end up with a system more akin to Hegel's critique and supplementation of Kant's original idea. Brandom and McDowell (most famously) see this as a live possibility.

2 Robert Brandom

2.1. Introduction

Let us now move on to the next generation, starting with Robert Brandom. Brandom's philosophy broadly follows Sellars in his quest to justify our most fundamental beliefs without falling for the Myth of the Given. Harkening back to Sellars' psychological nominalism, especially its social aspects, Brandom develops a much more advanced system – or what he himself calls a "big, bold conjecture" (Brandom, 1997: 189) – named 'inferentialism'. Inferentialism is largely occupied with semantics, but its most important function is to explain how our beliefs can be justified without appealing to the Given. And as we shall see, semantics are a rather important part of epistemology within the Pittsburgh School. Brandom's non-representationalist approach to semantics begins with an analysis of individual utterances, but it ultimately seeks to clarify the very foundations of human knowledge.

2.2. Parting From Sellars

Let us begin by outlining what relevant aspects Brandom adopts from Sellars's philosophy, how he makes it his own, and what part he rejects and why.

The insight that the Given is a myth, which is the central idea of this thesis and the holy grail of the Pittsburgh School, remains (by and large, at least for our purposes) intact in Brandom's philosophy. Sellars' insight is a starting point that can be rephrased and clarified without damaging the central idea: sense-data and its similars cannot alone be appealed to when trying to stop an epistemological regress of justification. A belief cannot be both *efficient* in terms of explanatory power and wholly *independent* of other beliefs and their rational framework: we cannot use a 'raw' piece of perception that is supposedly self-justified (independent) to justify other beliefs (efficiency).

Abandoning the idea of a Given, Brandom, like Sellars, then considers it to be his task to seek an alternative way to ground our empirical knowledge. Sellars' response to the Myth of the Given, psychological nominalism, is taken up by Brandom and elevated to a highly developed theory of meaning known as 'inferentialism'. Where Sellars left his psychological nominalism somewhat vague, Brandom's approach to bridging the rift between knowledge and the denial of Givenness takes a highly elaborate form with a life of its own.

The aim of Brandom's inferentialism is to provide a non-representationalist explanation of the intentionality of thought by analysing the meaning of linguistic items in terms of their socially norm-governed use. As a key player in so-called 'inferential role semantics', Brandom advocates the view that the linguistic meaning of expressions is determined by their inferential role in use. That is, the meaning of an expression is identified with its relationships to other expressions and the relationships' adherence to a certain kind of inferential rules (Maher, 2012: 67).

Brandom cannot be said to be a mere psychological nominalist, but much of his theory relies on the groundwork set down by Sellars. This is why I shall mostly lean on what has already been said about psychological nominalism in the previous chapter on Sellars. I will of course also only consider Brandom's extremely detailed theory of inferentialism in outline, and mainly from the perspective of the Given and the discrepancies it constitutes with relation to McDowell's views.

2.3. Introducing Inferentialism

So far, we have seen that the Pittsburgh School shares a view of the Given as a misguided attempt to ground knowledge. Like Sellars, Brandom does not give up on knowledge despite renouncing the Given, which leaves him with the question of how to avoid the regress of justification that the Given was originally meant to end. How, then, can any of our beliefs be justified if the justification process from one belief to another cannot be grounded in direct sense-experience? In essence, Brandom rejects a supposition underlying the regress problem. He shares Sellars' view of knowledge as 'non-static'. Instead of trying to find a foundation that justifies all our beliefs at once, we should see empiricism as a "self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy though not all at once" (EPM, §38; Maher, 2012: 5).

Brandom takes this basic idea and develops it into his own theory about the structure of justification: the "default and challenge" structure of justification working behind inferentialism.

The name of inferentialism stems from the word 'inference', which is what Brandom places at the centre of his theory of meaning. Inferentialism is a so-called functional role theory of meaning**.** It essentially claims that sentences gain their meaning from their inferential relations to other sentences in intricate economy of 'giving and asking for reasons'. Essentially, a sentence gets its meaning from its relations to all the other sentences it can be inferred from as well as all the sentences that can be inferred from it (Brandom 1994, 79, 119). This entails a rejection of those views that see meaning as a relation between words and something else, say, a referent. In addition to its basic structure, inferentialism also takes from Sellars the idea of turning towards linguistic practice in our attempt to understand meaning (Maher, 2012: 67).

This view of course has strong Wittgensteinian connotations as well as pragmatist roots. What is most important for inferentialism is the actual *use* of propositions and the meaning that is created *intersubjectively* as propositions find themselves intertwined in interpersonal usage aimed at conveying something to others.

Inferences are made between sentences, which act as the basic unit of meaning in the system because sentences derive meaning from holding logical connections with other sentences rather than relations to referents on a word-by-word basis. Individual words gain signifying power by taking part in a network of other meaningful words as they work together in propositional forms: "in order to master *any* concepts, one must master *many* concepts". (Brandom, 2000: 48-9). Sub-sentences cannot serve as premises and conclusions of inferences, of course, so Brandom grants them an "indirect" inferential role. Roughly speaking, the meaning of a sub-sentence is identified with the contribution it makes to the good inferences involving sentences in which it appears (Maher, 2012: 74).

So according to Brandom, our entire world of meaning is communally produced by an intricate system of giving and asking for reasons and factual evaluations made by various 'departments' of a community that upholds meaning. If one were to simplify, it could be said that Brandom's view implies no meaning whatsoever would be possible without a community to police, evaluate, guide, and keep score of each other's utterances. This social view of course presupposes that there is a system in place, which can be upheld and adhered to by

language-users. There must be fixed patterns and rules that can be followed, reinforced, and taught to new language-users. And those not following the rules must be penalised.

Meanings cannot be personal in this view because it relies on a sort of scorekeeping system operated by other language users giving and asking for reasons. In fact, it is a deeply social approach to semantics and epistemology. Despite this, however, language also has a very important effect on individual thought, as it parses our thinking and allows us to believe that we see red and know that we see red in addition to just perceiving the colour (Wanderer, 2008: 20). Brandom's inferentialism is in fact primarily a theory of knowledge. It just has the neat side-effect of also providing us with an explanation of linguistic meaning as it seeks to explain how the "epistemic-status-changing potential" of avowals in the game of giving and asking for reasons give them meaning or "conceptual content" (Maher, 2012: 67-70).

In his monograph on inferentialism, *Making It Explicit*, Brandom introduces a scheme of scorekeeping where interlocutors keep track of what others have committed to. This makes knowledge a social affair in a very peculiar way. The germ of this idea can already be found in Sellars' writing in the form of the "game of giving and asking for reasons", which vaguely describes the scheme developed further by Brandom and which is outlined in the following section below.

2.3.1. A Cursory Rulebook for Inferentialism

A cursory rulebook for inferentialism might begin by explaining that the metaphorical game of giving and asking for reasons consists of different moves like asserting, defending, challenging, and justifying. A move in the game is an act of asserting or "avowing a commitment", of which each player keeps score of. Thus, all players keep track of both the commitments they have made themselves and those that have been made by others (Maher, 2012: 67-8).

An assertion is an undertaking of justificatory responsibility. In asserting, say, *p*, one commits to defend what one has asserted. According to Brandom, it is a kind of promotion from sentience to sapience to be able to defend one's claims and to have reasons to make assertions in the first place (Wanderer, 2008: 20). By the same token, undertaking a

commitment by asserting it implies the ability to know what follows from the undertaken commitment as well as what other commitments it follows from.

Scorekeeping players will see acknowledged commitments as having various consequences, which may or may not be acknowledged by the holder of the original commitment. Each player is, by default, entitled to any commitments they avow as long as they do not contradict their previous commitments, but their entitlement can be undermined by a challenge from another player that thinks or knows it goes against the rules of correct inference.

All assertions may be used to challenge other assertions, but they can also rely on assertions made by others. Players may disavow their challenged commitments (and if it is a consequence of another commitment still held, both/all the commitments in that consequential chain should be examined and perhaps disavowed) or they can respond to the challenge by avowing another commitment that is taken to have a permissive or justificatory relation to the challenged commitment to defend it. Or, alternatively, a player may defer a challenge by pointing out the player from whom they take to have inherited their entitlement to the challenged commitment or to some other player with the ability to defend it. If defending an assertion proves impossible, it must be withdrawn.

A ‘good inference’ is, roughly speaking, one that is status-preserving. For instance, avowing *p2* in response to a challenge to an original commitment *p1* is valid only if it preserves one’s status as entitled to the original challenged commitment *p1* (Maher, 2012: 67-70).

So far, the ‘game’ might seem just a tedious recounting of something that comes naturally to us. It is a systematic description of language use seen as a pursuit to attain knowledge by holding oneself accountable as well as everyone else (since each individual relies on others’ knowledge as much as they do on their own).

For Brandom, the responsibility to defend one’s claims is enough to consider the claims justified until proven otherwise. He also seems to not think it to be a distortion of justification. In fact, Brandom sees his system as a prerequisite for meaningfulness rather than a lenient way to avoid the Myth of the Given and the Regress. In Brandom’s view, if having to justify was a prerequisite to say anything, one could never get off the ground: one could never justify a claim because even the meaning of the words expressing a justification would then need to be justified, perhaps proving, in the end, that nothing meaningful had been said in the first place. (Maher, 2012: 95)

The freedom to avow anything with prima facie justification, however, comes with the responsibility to respond to challenges. Any single avowal can change the course of the game as, through its inferential connections, it affects what beliefs one can be committed to and what one can be entitled to. Scorekeeping is not easy, which is why Brandom only offers an idealised model of the actual practice. Scorekeeping is further complicated by the fact that the aforementioned effects all depend on *whose* scorekeeping is considered. There is no otherworldly master scorekeeper to keep track of the consistency and rationality of everything, so as complicated as scorekeeping is, it relies on the players themselves keeping track of the validity of their commitments (Maher, 2012: 70). This might be why language itself is an untidy affair and perhaps why Brandom prefers a pragmatic approach to it. Individual players, their scorekeeping, and the very language they use might be riddled with inconsistencies and even errors, but from Brandom's perspective, it is possible for us humans to recognise such errors and inconsistencies in our attempt to achieve at least local and limited consistency in our beliefs.

There might not be a master scorekeeper and everything might not always be perfectly accounted for in natural language use, but this does not mean that knowledge is impossible. On the contrary, inferentialism aims to explain how successful inferences can justify our claims to knowledge. Brandom's system recognises that the practical side of attaining knowledge might sometimes lead us astray, but it holds fast the belief that its possibility is always present.

2.3.2. Concerns Concerning Objectivity

In this section I wish to explore two further details of inferentialism, which I consider relevant to the final chapter aiming to contrast Brandom's views with those of his Pittsburgh colleague John McDowell's. A good way to introduce these details is by way of questions or critiques:

(1) If there is no master scorekeeper, how can there be agreement between scorekeepers about which are the "correct" inferences to and from any given commitment?

(2) Does inferentialism have any regard for non-verbal actions and perceptions?

Let us begin with concern number one. Brandom recognises this issue of relativism and he has an answer to it: commitments have inferential norms. The inferential role and meaning of a sentence are thus not determined by the inferential moves actually made by it, but rather by the moves that it would be appropriate to make with it. Speakers can be said to use the same sentence not because they actually always use the sentence in the same way, but because they are subject to the same inferential norms in their use of that sentence.

These norms are of course up for debate just like all the commitments governed by them. Norms, however, are based on a universal logic, which one would be hard pressed to contest. In discussing norms, we engage in "explicitating" these norms in the form of claims. In fact, Brandom also thinks of logical vocabulary as a special kind of vocabulary that makes inferential proprieties explicit as claims. Thus, for Brandom, logical vocabulary can be distinguished by its use in facilitating rational evaluation, and it includes verbs like 'believe' and 'should'. Good inferences are ultimately governed by *norms* of inference, which are made explicit as rules as they are identified by logic (Brandom, 1994 xix, 20).

There is no master scorekeeper that trumps intersubjectivity, but there are objective norms the 'players' of the game of giving and asking for reasons try to and should adhere to. These are norms pertaining to the correct use of inferences, logical rules, for the most part, as well as rules that might be deemed 'common sense'.

Concern number two could very well be voiced by John McDowell, as we shall soon see. Brandom does not concern himself with the same issue of experience as McDowell, but he does include perception and action into his system, as they too have inferential functions. One might, for instance, see Bob the cat on a mat and then claim "Bob is on the mat." Here *seeing* acts as a kind of premise to the exclamation, which I suppose could also be verbalised: "I saw Bob on the mat," therefore, "Bob is on the mat."

Like a parrot that correctly responds to the sight of a red object by squawking "Red!", humans also respond to objects in the world with words and other more complicated vocal utterances. Unlike parrots, however, we humans can recognise that undertaking the committing of an object being red also entails committing to it being coloured, not blue or green, etc. (Brandom, 1995: 896-7; 2002: 349-353). What is interesting for Brandom, is how

placing utterances like “Red!” into the ‘space of giving and asking for reasons’ makes us sapient and thus able to claim knowledge.

More active nonverbal actions similarly contribute to constituting the meaning of sentences. An action such as taking Bob to the veterinarian, for instance, instead of the hospital, is a result of knowing he is a cat and an animal, that veterinarians are different from doctors specialised in human ailments, etc. Much like perceiving, acting in a certain manner may serve as a kind of nonverbal premise for certain inferences (Brandom, 1994: 119). One does not necessarily have to *talk* to exhibit inferential understanding and knowledge, and Brandom agrees. Speech simply seems to be the most exemplary case of inferential behaviour in humans, and it often makes implicit commitments and inferences *explicit*.

2.4. Two Two-Ply Accounts of Knowledge

Let us finally consider why Brandom specifically chooses inferentialism as a route towards knowledge. So far, we have seen that the Pittsburgh School shares the view of the Given as a misguided attempt to ground knowledge. This means that the most obvious form of fundamentalism meant to stop the regress of justification is not available to Brandom as it wasn’t for Sellars. As a result, Brandom prefers to assume that claims are justified by default until successfully challenged. This might seem extreme, as anyone is essentially justified in claiming anything (as long as it doesn’t contradict anything one is already committed to), but it also makes a lot of sense from a pragmatist perspective because it describes at least part of the reality of linguistic practice. When one makes a claim, they most often indeed consider it to be implicitly justified. Why else would the claim be made? There are of course cases in which I might be lying or joking, etc., but in these cases, there is already a challenge to my claim simply waiting to be made public. Lies and jokes might just be the exceptions that prove the rule: they are intentional abuses of a system that presupposes good faith. Albeit rational, we humans are finite and imperfect beings, so we need to work with what we have if we ever want to reach anything like knowledge proper. Instead of trying to find a stable base to be able to claim anything, we should accept the already established practice of language use and from there try to parse out why and how some true claims express knowledge.

One of Brandom's project's principal aims is to make clear the difference between knowing, which is a rational affair, and having what Brandom (1994: 33) calls "reliable differential responsive dispositions", which is a merely causal affair. This relates to what was said in section 2.3.2. about experience and harkens further back to the difference between 'sapience' and 'sentience' discussed in relation to Sellars. One way to exemplify the difference is by asking how do we go from perceiving, say, a cat on the mat to claiming, "there is a cat on the mat"? And is the former perception as such even possible without the linguistic parsing that puts the 'cat' 'on' the 'mat'.

There is a crucial difference in the following: our environment exercises a causal influence on us, but we do not want to say that these *causal* relations *justify* our beliefs about them. This is why inferentialism is so important to Brandom when it comes to epistemology. We have "reliable differential responsive dispositions", but we cannot call a disposition to say "cat!" every time there is a cat *knowledge* about something (cats or the state of the world) per se because knowledge is a rational affair involving concepts and a readiness to defend one's claim (Brandom, 2000: 157-8). Differentiating between the two and providing an explanation for the distinction thus becomes important. Sellars deals with a similar situation, and Brandom identifies his solution as Sellars' 'two-ply account of observation', which gives observational knowledge two requirements or 'plies': it must result from (1) a subject's reliable ability to respond to facts and (2) the subject must be aware of their own reliability as an observer (see Brandom, 2002).

Brandom considers the second ply of Sellars' account a little too strict, as according to him, someone can be justified without knowing that they are justified, which he interprets Sellars not agreeing with. Brandom has his reasons to believe this – in the game of giving and asking for reasons, someone can be considered entitled without knowing it themselves – though we might as well consider the oft invoked example of the chicken sexers, who very accurately sex birds without being able to give a conscious account of how it is done (Maher, 2012: 91). After disavowing the second ply of Sellars' account, however, Brandom is left with the need to replace it with something else because ply number one, "resulting from a subject's reliable ability to respond to facts" will not suffice for *knowledge* (as was previously stated with relation to 'reliable differential responsive dispositions'). In fact, the first ply alone does not even suffice for belief, according to Brandom (1994: 213-5). Brandom's answer to the overly permissive definition is to invoke and develop Sellars' idea of the space of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom requires knowledge from observation to be the result of taking facts to

be true, believing and having a sense of under what circumstances that which is believed would be true. This is so that something like (in the most extreme case) a thermometer responding (albeit very accurately) to external facts (in this case, temperature) will not count as the item *knowing* the temperature. Concepts also establish the connections between statements and thus give us the readiness to defend our beliefs/knowledge, or to see why a belief might be erroneous (Brandom, 2000: 158).

What the thermometer does is not an act of knowing because it does not have concepts or reasons for its responses. it simply acts mechanistically. Much like the parrot mentioned earlier, the thermometer does not have an understanding of what 'hot' or 'cold' means, it does not know if it's a warm day for winter or that one should perhaps take a jacket when going out. It cannot go beyond the immediate causal response of indicating with its numbers how hot or cold it is exactly.

So Brandom replaces Sellars' second ply with his own: (2′) "the observer must know what would rationally support their belief and what it would be supported by." This it Brandom's more elegant way of distinguishing mere sentience from sapience, and it links directly with the game of giving and asking for reasons (Wanderer, 2008: 23-4).

2.5. Conclusion

In sum, Brandom wants to save the possibility of justifying our beliefs despite giving up the idea of a 'Given'. Like Sellars, he wants to look at our discursive practices and how they express our ability to place beliefs in a metaphorical 'space of giving and asking for reasons'. This ability is, according to Brandom, what separates us from other beings capable of responding reliably to external stimuli – it is what makes us sapient and thus able to *believe* and *know*. Knowledge is thus a complex socially acquired status. Reliable differential responsive dispositions to facts are not enough for claiming knowledge; we need to also consider the fact that knowing something involves some kind of understanding. As we engage in giving and asking for reasons, we are engaged with the inferential roles of our utterances, that is, their meaning, which we express an understanding of by correct usage.

3 John McDowell

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will survey John McDowell's epistemology, especially as it concerns the Myth of the Given. Like Brandom, McDowell inherits the Myth from his teacher, Wilfrid Sellars, and having forgone the Given, faces the same issue Sellars once faced: how can we justify empirical knowledge, when it seems to be the case that the world we claim to have justified true beliefs about constitutes a realm entirely separate from the realm of non-physical, normative thought? In other words, is knowledge possible, if we cannot rely on justification for our most basic beliefs about the world to be given to us by experience?

3.2. The Therapeutic Approach

McDowell's analysis of the Given, as well as the solution he eventually presents us with, should be prefaced with a few words about his approach to philosophy, which could be described as 'therapeutic', following the later Ludwig Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach. Such a therapeutic approach to philosophy favours diagnosing and then dissolving issues over constructively engaging with them on their own terms. This is because careful examination will show that, by and large, philosophical problems arise from mistaken assumptions on the part of philosophers themselves. Instead of theorising, the therapist will try to lay everything before us, and once everything is open to view, there will be no more reason to explain (Thornton, 2004: 17-20; Wittgenstein, 1953: §126). McDowell's philosophy is thus more of a *deconstructive* endeavour (de Gaynesford, 2004: 11), which is in stark contrast with Brandom's 'inferentialism', which is very much a *constructive* project and, as we shall see, is heavily criticised by McDowell for it.

The following should therefore be seen as a sort of diagnosis (if the therapist is briefly allowed the authority of a psychiatrist) of why the Given is so problematic in the first place. It

is meant to probe the anxieties underlying its conception as well as the misconceptions associated with philosophers' failure to replace the mythical solution of the Given.

3.3. What We Talk About When We Talk About the World

In McDowell's (1994: 86) view, the central concern addressed by the Given could be characterised as an attempt to reconcile 'reason' and 'nature'. We might begin by asking the question "How do we bridge the gap between mind and world?" or, as we might as well call them, 'the space of reasons' (mind) and 'the realm of law' (world). The problem has long roots going back to Plato, but could be characterised here in its most current form as follows: how can we bring together 'reason' and 'nature' – a "normative conceptual structure of having reasons and responding to them" on one side and "brute meaningless nature as successfully described by modern science" on the other (Thornton, 2004: 4)? The literature is riddled with metaphors and explanations of the gap and what it separates exactly, but the phenomenon we are describing could, for the sake of simplicity, be called Cartesian dualism (Thornton, 2004: 5-6). The idea of two entirely separate realms of thoughts on the one hand and tangible things on the other is of course not desirable, not least for epistemologists trying to justify beliefs concerning the world. This is why there is a need to bridge the gap between the mental and the physical: we cannot have beliefs and that which they are about to be wholly separate when looking for justifications between them; we want the world we claim to be talking about to actually have some bearing on that which we are talking about.

3.3.1. The Given and Coherentism

One answer that has already been explored in previous chapters of this thesis is that of postulating a 'Given' to bridge the gap between that which is being experienced externally speaking (in the world) and that which it induces internally (in the mind). McDowell accepts Sellars' view of the Given as mythical, however. As McDowell quotes Donald Davidson saying, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson, 2001: 141; cited in McDowell, 1994: 14). Facts, propositions and sentences all have in

common their conceptuality and close relation to rules; they cannot be justified by anything non-conceptual. Claiming otherwise would lead us to fall for the Myth of the Given. We need an alternative.

If we cannot appeal to the Given, how can we justify any of our most basic knowledge? According to McDowell, rejecting the Given leaves us with one obvious alternative: coherentism. According to Coherentists, experiences of the world are causally relevant to a subject's beliefs and judgments, but they have no bearing on their status as justified or warranted (McDowell, 1994: 14). This view circumvents the issues associated with the Given, but even though Coherentists hold that the world may *cause* beliefs, they need to look for *justification* elsewhere. Brandom's inferentialism could be considered an elaborate example of coherentist justification, because in it beliefs do not derive their justification from experience but from their interrelations. As was established in the previous chapter, for Brandom, the concept of experience is unnecessary because beliefs and propositions are pragmatically justified in the game of giving and asking for reasons.

McDowell, however, believes that coherentism, too, faces a veritable challenge comparable to that of the foundationalist Myth of the Given. McDowell argues that the Coherentist content in justifying propositions with other propositions and sentences with other sentences is in danger of being left suspended in their own head, or, as McDowell puts it, frictionlessly "spinning in a void" (McDowell, 1994, p. 11). The friction McDowell is left wanting is that provided by the world surrounding our minds, so to speak. How can we make sure our thoughts about the world truly correspond with the reality we claim to talk and think about if there is no justificatory link between our thoughts and sensations about the world? Many things causally affect each other in the world, but very little of that causal back-and-forth can help us in our search for knowledge.

McDowell sees why coherentism might be tempting to those who accept the Given to be a myth, but he considers it an inadequate response because it goes too far in cutting the thinker from all justificatory contact with the world. It essentially makes empirical cognition impossible and leaves us with only a Cartesian caricature of pure reason spinning around its own axis. Coherentists may pretend as though they are talking about the world, but how could this be the case if they do not seek justification from it? Thus, the real challenge for McDowell is that of avoiding coherentism, which is the only apparent option remaining for those who choose to reject the foundationalism of the Myth.

3.3.2. The Question of Intentionality

Despite disavowing them, McDowell believes both coherentism and the Given offer extremely lucrative benefits to those seeking to ground their beliefs about reality. The problem is that due to their shortcomings, philosophers are often left vacillating between the two in an “interminable oscillation” (McDowell, 1994: 9).

This oscillation has an even greater significance than it may seem, however, as the Given and coherentism aren't only attempts to demonstrate *that* we have knowledge and *how* we know what we know. The issue goes deeper than just knowledge. Central to McDowell’s epistemology is the belief that the Given and coherentism should be seen as reactions to a deeper concern about content; namely, how is empirical content possible in the first place? The question about knowledge could thus be promoted into a more fundamental concern about intentionality – that is, the very possibility of empirical content (McDowell, 2009b: 243).

Intentionality – that is, a mental state’s being about or representing objects or states of affairs under a particular psychological mode – has the potential of being an even greater catastrophe for knowledge than scepticism. This is because even false beliefs require the possibility of facing the world and making judgements about it. Choosing to think about the Given and coherentism as attempts to ground epistemic content makes it known that we are not only in danger of being left without knowledge, since a lack of intentionality would leave us without anything to know in the first place. If we are to get any epistemological answers at all, we need our beliefs to be answerable to the world, McDowell argues. Both truth and falsity require beliefs that are directed at the world and being directed at the world in turn requires beliefs to be answerable to it. Even errors and false beliefs need to have some connection with the world outside them to have contents judgeable as false. Claiming that there is a horse standing in the living room firstly needs to get its idea of a horse from somewhere and then be contrasted with the possibility that there is no horse in the living room to be considered as false.

The Given and coherentism are of course dealing with the regress problem of justifying knowledge, which arises from the need to give reasons for one’s beliefs. Both seek an end

point to the chain of justification, and to ground their beliefs as justified. The starting point of both Givenists and Coherentists is the regress problem of knowledge, though behind it lies the crucial assumption that we do have intentional episodes in the first place. If we simply think of coherentism and the Given as responses to the regress problem, then they can only be conceived as different approaches to demonstrating that some of the assumed intentional episodes indeed do constitute knowledge. Instead of assuming them, however, McDowell recommends that we focus on explaining how we come to experience truly intentional states or episodes in the first place (Maher, 2012: 96-7).

Where the Given errs, according to McDowell (1994: 3-23), is in its assumption that experience must be non-conceptual. The reasoning behind this assumption is the following: if thought is to answer to something, this something must be extra-mental or non-conceptual. The attempt is to ground conceptual thoughts in something non-conceptual, which conceptual thought can nonetheless answer to. The Givenists want the external world to bear on our beliefs, but they are unable to explain how conceptual thoughts might answer to something entirely non-conceptual.

Coherentism, on the other hand, grants that conceptual thoughts cannot be justified by non-conceptual experiences. This is why they believe the world imposes a mere causal (that is, non-justificatory) constraint on thoughts. The issue McDowell sees with this is that a causal constraint is not the same as being answerable to something – it offers "exculpations where we wanted justifications" (McDowell, 1994: 8).

McDowell's solution is a kind of synthesis between these well motivated but lacking views, although he aims to undermine their assumptions rather than develop either of the two positions further. According to McDowell, the key to solving the regress problem of justifying knowledge lies in a correct conception of experience, which neither position holds. The error that the Given and coherentism share is the belief that experience is not conceptual. The given is right in seeking justification from experience, and coherentism is right that only something conceptual can be used as a premise in thought. The natural conclusion, then, given their shortcomings, is that experience itself is conceptual. Much like the normative space of reasons (or of the mind), the natural realm of the world is also conceptual, and it should be seen as a proper subset of the former metaphorical space. Thus, experience is not to be thought of as an intermediary, but as a kind of 'openness to the world' (McDowell, 1994: 25-6).

3.4. Openness to the World

When analysed therapeutically, McDowell thinks the dilemma can be circumvented. A single session of therapy shows, according to McDowell, that the choice between coherentism and the Myth is only an illusory dilemma that stems from false assumptions regarding *experience*. McDowell essentially rejects the idea of experience as an intermediary between mind and world and claims instead that it is "a region of direct contact" with the world. This is not a way to simply bridge a gap, however, as McDowell ultimately believes there is no gap to be bridged. His solution is to instead merge the two 'realms' or 'spaces' and to claim there is no real distinction to be made between the 'space of reasons' and the 'realm of law' (or, mind and world), because what we are used to thinking of as 'nature', or as McDowell amusingly puts it, "swarms of colourless particles or whatever" (McDowell, 2009a: 41), is *encompassed* by the 'space of reasons' (McDowell, 1994: 24-6). That is to say, reason is a part of nature, which is also conceptual and normative in itself, not because rational beings somehow translate or import elements of it to their thoughts and the space of reasons. McDowell thus extends Brandom's idea that *knowers* belong in the logical space of reasons to *believers*, as everything taken in through experience as a basis for forming beliefs already forms part of the space of reasons – we rational beings do not put it there. We do, however, need to make a mental effort to turn these aspects of the space of reasons into knowledge.

This is a controversial view of rationality and conceptuality, but McDowell seems to think it to be the most logical way to explain how the world might have bearing on our beliefs without falling for the Myth of the Given. Ultimately, McDowell is rallying against a broadly Cartesian dualist separation between the mental and the physical. His aim is to show how mind and world "interpenetrate". Rather than thinking of mind as an enclosed inner space, McDowell chooses to see it as fundamentally open to the world. This openness is furthermore constitutive to the mind. Our inner world would not be what it is, were it not for its openness to the world around it, McDowell believes. By the same token McDowell holds that we should be able to show that empirical beliefs are accountable to the world and not cut off from it somehow (Thornton, 2004: 7). Mind-world dualism, however, makes this rational accountability impossible, as the dilemma between the Myth of the Given and Coherentism

illustrates. In sum, McDowell's alternative approach aims to reconceive sense experience as already (minimally) conceptualised. Sense experience is thus considered an openness to the world,' a taking-in of how things are as they are. For McDowell, our perception of reality is in itself conceptual in nature, so experiences themselves always inevitably have at least some conceptual content (McDowell, 1994: 22). Furthermore, since experience is conceptual while also taking in how the world is, it follows that the world itself must be constitutively apt for conceptualisation (Thornton, 2004: 11-2). As a result, using our senses to take in the world lets us directly "see" how things are in the world. Our experiences are outward-bound and of the world, but they are not independent of it despite having justificatory power in relation to knowledge. There is no gap to be breached.

3.4.1 The Identity Theory of Thoughts and Facts

McDowell (1996: 26) believes, that true thoughts are constitutively connected to the very elements that make up the world, or following Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, facts. This means that facts play a double role as contents of thoughts when engaged in judging and as facts in the world independently of judgment. This is because for McDowell, the Space of Reasons is unbounded and extends beyond just our minds. As McDowell puts it in *Mind and World* (1994: 27):

"[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is the case. So since the world *is* everything that is the case […] there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world."

We should not think that when reasoning we somehow translate facts to be used in thinking. Instead, we should think of reasoning as a form of engaging with the natural facts of reality that are already part of the Space of Reasons. McDowell is essentially attributing normativity to the world itself as it exists outside our conceptions of it.

The most obvious contention one might have with this view is that equating thought and world seems to slide into idealism. This is not McDowell's aim, however, so he wishes to emphasise the distinction between 'acts of thinking' on the one hand and 'thinkables' on the other. Facts are not equated with thoughts per se as 'acts of thinking', but with 'thinkable' contents. The correctness of a thought is dependent on what is 'thinkable' in the world and *in*dependent of acts of thinking (McDowell, 1994: 28-9).

3.4.2. The Conceptuality of Experience

According to McDowell (1998: 230), "which configurations a mind can get itself into is partly determined by which objects exist in the world." This is to say that according to McDowell, thoughts depend on an external world – they get their content from the world, not only as we experience it, but from the world as it is. The difference between this view and a traditional Given is that for McDowell, perception passively involves some aspects of rational, conceptual thought. This is possible because the Space of Reasons extends beyond the rational mind. As a result, we can say to be engaging facts as contents in our judgements without mysteriously breaching an unbreachable gap as is done with the Given or by not having the world bear on our judgements at all.

The resulting scheme is the following: we receive a sort of 'layout' of facts limited by our conceptual resources, and these facts are the contents of our sense experience. This does not directly cause empirical judgements, however, even though the facts presented to us give us conclusive reasons to make such judgements (McDowell, 1996: 26, 33; 2002: 278). That is to say, judgements are made independently of the facts presented to us by experience even though facts are conceptual in themselves. The principal aim of this account is to show how experience bears on our beliefs without falling for the Myth that it can be at the same time both rationally significant to our judgements *and* independent of normative rationality.

3.4.3. Meaning and the Sideways-view From Nowhere

Let us finally look at McDowell's conception of meaning, as it closely relates to his emphasis on contents and grounds the very conversation about experience as openness to the world. This is also an important point to elaborate in light of this thesis' larger aims, because it interestingly contrasts with Brandom's approach to meaning and philosophical systems more broadly.

The most important aspect of McDowell's theory of meaning is his reliance on the very word 'meaning'. His view is to be contrasted with what he calls 'full-blooded' theories of meaning. Full-blooded theories begin from the supposition that there is a need to analyse or at least rearticulate the notion of meaning in other terms. A theory such as Alfred Tarski's, which simply states that the sentence "Snow is white" simply means that snow is white, would not count as full-blooded because it relies on the word "means". A full-blooded theory would have the following form: "talk about 'means' in reality describes X". In contrast, theories of the form "Y means Z" are merely half-blooded or anemic. Brandom's theory of meaning, for the record, is as full-blooded as they come.

What McDowell suggests, and this is a direct reflection of his views on experience — we are in direct contact with the world and its facts — is that we simply think of understanding as something primal or fundamental to meaning. The word "means" and the way we understand do not need to be analysed, explained in other terms or reconceptualised with a set of different but fundamentally similar words and concepts. They can simply be taken at face value as almost all of the non-philosophically inclined population does (without much issue, mind you!). This does not mean that meaning can't or shouldn't be thought of philosophically, but McDowell seems to think such profound thinking about semantics and the ability to understand should be done (and is already being done) by linguists rather than philosophers looking to find a way to get beyond the ordinary understanding of meaning (Maher, 2012: 76-7). McDowell of course does not need a robust, full-blooded theory of meaning in large part because he believes mind and world are both conceptual and similarly structured. As a result, meaning is, to a large extent, 'just there'. We have no need to explain what or how a particular concept means because its meaning is largely determined by that which the world presents us with.

It should further be noted that according to McDowell (1994: 34-5), it is impossible to adopt a "sideways-on view" to chart the relation of thought/language and an extra-conceptual – or

“noumenal” as Kant would put it – world from outside thought/language as well as the world. Meaning is something that is grasped from within; we cannot simply step outside language to understand its semantic functioning, McDowell insists, espousing himself to a particular (Wittgensteinian) idea of language, which Jaakko Hintikka (Hintikka & Hintikka, 1997: 162-3) calls “language as the universal medium”. According to the view, one cannot step outside one's language to describe it or to graph its semantic connections with the world as one would already be bound by these connections in any attempt that could be made. As a result, we can’t perhaps even make anything of the idea that the world does not have the intelligible structure it is represented as having, McDowell seems to think (Thornton, 2004: 13).

3.5. Conclusion

We have so far seen that McDowell has his own view of experience which has three main functions:

1) finding a way to breach the apparent gap between mind and world in order to find justification for our empirical beliefs,

2) avoiding the Myth of the Given, and

3) avoiding coherentism.

McDowell’s approach to the regress problem is very different from Sellars’ and Brandom’s. McDowell turns his analysis towards the assumptions underlying the regress rather than on the possible issues contained within these assumptions. Whereas Brandom sees the question of meaning to be fundamental to avoiding the regress and the myth, and develops based on this an intricate system to explain meaning, McDowell thinks it should be taken at face value. Instead of explaining it, we should consider meaning as a relation between mind and world primary, and from there see what are the conditions of its possibility.

The conclusion McDowell arrives at is that thoughts about the world can be justified because experience puts us in direct contact with the world. Were this not the case, meaning would be

impossible, McDowell thinks. Experience is conceptual as well as the world itself, because where else could the contents of our thoughts come from?

The major objections McDowell's approach faces can be divided into two opposing camps, which neatly mirror the initial dilemma considered in the beginning of this chapter. On the one hand, we have the threat of idealism, which comes close to McDowell's critique of coherentism; and on the other hand, we have the Myth of The Given, which McDowell could be seen to fall back on in his view that we can justify beliefs about the world by simply referring back to our experiences of it (de Gaynesford, 2004: 130). McDowell himself has of course tackled both critiques and believes to have adequately dismissed them (McDowell, 1994: 40; de Gaynesford, 2004: 130-1; also see Morris, 2009).

In Brandom's view, McDowell's appeal to experience is an appeal to an unnecessary "internal thing" that doubles both the causal role of sense impressions and the normative role of facts. We do not need to appeal to intermediaries between perceptible facts and reports of them, Brandom insists, as the idea that our claims are about and answerable to an external objective world is a product of the social character of our discursive practice. This is meant to explain why 'experience' is not one of Brandom's words (Hendley, 2010: sec. 1).

The most severe issue with McDowell's philosophy, however, might just lie in its foundations. The quietist, therapeutic approach McDowell endorses requires considerable amounts of compromising on the part of dissenting voices as it abstains from elaborating and constructing a tangible position open to criticism. To agree with a quietist essentially requires one to accept the starting assumption that quietism is the better way to do philosophy. To some extent, McDowell simply points out the unfounded assumptions that his opponents make, and then essentially offers his own assumptions as substitutes, claiming they are more adequate due to their ability to dissolve certain problems and issues. And McDowell might just be right in some regards, but his therapeutic approach to philosophy makes his argumentation hard to engage with, if one is not ready to accept its fundamentals.

But does a more coherent end-result (given that one would consider McDowell's results more coherent) suffice as an argument for accepting the new assumptions McDowell is offering? We can see this in several back-and-forths with Brandom – who sometimes even says he agrees with McDowell but holds on to his own beliefs regardless (see for instance, Brandom, 1995 or McDowell, 2002) – that McDowell might come off to his readers as too tepid a theorist. In contrast, Brandom sees his "big, bold conjecture" of inferentialism to be superior

to smaller, more quietist ones such as McDowell's, because it can be more easily subjected to testing and even falsification. Its expansiveness allows us to see more clearly where and how it fails and where and how it succeeds (Brandom, 1997: 189).

4 On the Depth of the Disagreement

4.1. Introduction

The three previous chapters have, for the most part, acted as an exposition for this final inquiry into the nature and apparent unbreachability of Brandom and McDowell's epistemological disagreement. In this final chapter, I introduce the concept of a 'deep disagreement' and finally ask whether Brandom and McDowell might be engaged in one concerning knowledge and our epistemic accountability to the world. The answer is not straightforward, but it comes much closer to an affirmative answer than a negative one – leaving, however, open the possibility, if not of reconciliation, at least that of fruitful exchanges between the differing positions. The point of this final chapter is therefore not to make a definitive judgement about the depth of the disagreement, but rather to provide some hopefully useful insights to the debate itself and conversations around it from a metaepistemological perspective.

The idea of 'deep disagreement' seems to have entered the philosophical discourse as a means to speak of particularly heated debates where the participants remain steadfast in their beliefs and a resolution has been found exceptionally hard to reach. Much like in the case of Plato's famous '*aporias',* discussions involving deep disagreement seem to come to a standstill, but unlike the epistemically humble *aporia*, deep disagreement leads to a halt where both parties still believe to be in the right. What makes disagreements deep is their persistence and heatedness. The equally characteristic fact that no resolution seems possible usually stems from differences in world views and the systematicity that implies. Rational arguments are made but they do not seem to sway either party.

In an uncharacteristically metaphysical inquiry into deep disagreement, Chris Ranalli (2021: 983) notes that "[r]ecent work on deep disagreement has tended to focus on various epistemic issues, such as whether deep disagreements are rationally resolvable (and if so, how), or whether deep disagreement supports epistemic relativism." The little consideration given to

the nature or metaphysics of deep disagreement often tends to also be closely tied to the question of whether they are rationally resolvable.

Another researcher who has been doing recent work around deep disagreements is Victoria Lavorerio. In the following, I heavily rely on Lavorerio's 2021 article "The Fundamental Model of Deep Disagreements", in which she considers a prominent pattern of foundation-seeking within the literature concerning deep disagreement. Lavorerio's article takes centre stage because, on the one hand, it offers a thorough and illuminating outline of the discussions surrounding deep disagreements and, on the other hand, because her ultimate dismissal of 'fundamental models' mirrors my own findings regarding the disagreement between Brandom and McDowell. In her article, Lavorerio presents two exemplary and prominent analyses of deep disagreements that each identify their own fundamental cause that is deemed immune to epistemic reasoning. These causes are fundamental epistemic resources that allegedly precede justification and are supposedly separate from other epistemic categories. According to Lavorerio (2021: 416), most analyses of deep disagreements rely on some form of them – she mentions forms of life, principles, hinges, perspectives, methods, and norms, among others. Lavorerio's reservations about these 'fundamental models' concerns both these simplistic sources and their failure to provide a satisfying resolution. Lavorerio's misgivings will be discussed in more detail below in section 4.4. Like most deep disagreements, Brandom and McDowell's does seem to be analysable in 'fundamentalist' terms by pointing to the importance of sense experience for knowledge on the one hand, and a more general outlook on philosophical methodology on the other. I shall consider this a viable starting point, but will ultimately consider what complexities lie beneath this surface-level analysis to sketch out what it might be that makes the disagreement so persistent and difficult to resolve.

Before considering Brandom and McDowell's disagreement, let us first look at the concept of 'deep disagreement' in more detail. Lavorerio (2021: 416) characterises deep disagreements in the following way:

"Deep disagreements are persistent conflicts of opinions about matters that can be said to be worldview defining. In deep disagreements, the parties defend their positions rationally, but the argument of each fails to move the other."

In essence, deep disagreements are systematic disputes that have shown exceptionally hard to resolve. Deep disagreements have recently given rise to discussion especially in the field of metaepistemology, where the idea has been used to make peace with disputes in which no developments seem to take place beyond a certain point despite both parties claiming to understanding the opposing stance.

Deep disagreements plague philosophical debates as much as they plague public forums and more informal interpersonal relations. In philosophy, however, the idea of a deep disagreement might seem to some more problematic, as the very foundation of philosophical inquiry has long rested on the assumption that by means of analysis of our premises and subsequent logical reasoning we can arrive at a common truth (especially when the interlocutors are working within the same tradition and have a common starting point to boot).

Let us now finally turn to Brandom and McDowell and the particularities of their disagreement.

4.2. Brandom and McDowell's Disagreement

Robert Brandom and John McDowell have very much in common and their starting point would initially seem like fertile ground for a more unilateral relationship. Both work within the so-called analytic tradition of philosophy with an uncharacteristic interest in history and even some philosophers held in less esteem by traditional analytic philosophy, particularly the German idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (See, e.g., Redding, 2011). All three – Hegel, Brandom, and McDowell – also share strong Kantian roots, which the more contemporary pair have inherited from their teacher Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars, Brandom and McDowell are furthermore often seen to form their own school of philosophy, the Pittsburgh School, due to their close interactions within the University of Pittsburgh as well as their work's shared philosophical themes, motives, and influences (Maher, 2012: 1-2). If Brandom and McDowell indeed are engaged in a deep disagreement, theirs is a peculiar one because it does not stem from the vastly different origins of their beliefs such as more typical examples – the most common cause for deep disagreements discussed in the literature seems to be the schism between theists and atheists or agnostics. In most exemplary cases of deep

disagreements such as those concerning abortion or the validity of creationism, the participants' most basic beliefs as well as the very standards of reliable or acceptable evidence as well as methods of enquiry differ due to incommensurable spiritual convictions (see Lavorerio, 2021: 418).

Despite their shared starting point, however, Brandom and McDowell have ended up with vastly different solutions to the problem of how to achieve knowledge without the Given. As we already saw in chapter I, the challenge is to explain how empirical data can be translated into knowledge without claiming it to be at once epistemically 'independent' and 'efficient' as the Myth of the Given does; that is, both capable of justifying and exempted from the need to be justified. Here are Brandom and McDowell's attempts to solve the problem boiled down to one sentence each:

Brandom: Knowledge is possible without appealing to the Given because knowledge is a socio-linguistic status that arises from the correct use of linguistic moves in a 'game of giving and asking for reasons'.

McDowell: Knowledge is possible without appealing to the Given by realising that experience is in itself conceptual and thus provides us with empirical observations already located in the 'space of reasons'.

The disagreement thus concerns knowledge and how it should be thought of. Or more precisely, how can we be said to be answerable to the world in our beliefs about it in light of Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given?

The two main differences that stand out in Brandom and McDowell's approaches to the question formulated above are the role of experience (examined below in section 4.2.1) and the broader question of good philosophical methodology (sec. 4.2.2. below). What follows mostly echoes what has already been said in chapters II and III, so it doesn't go into detail. The aim of the following two sections is to look more closely at these apparent causes or 'foundations' of the disagreement in order to assess their plausibility as fundamental causes in further sections below.

4.2.1. Two Potential Causes for the Disagreement: 1. Experience

As has been noted before, McDowell has raised concerns about Brandom's project's lack of a firm grounding in experience. Brandom, on the other hand, does not consider experience one of his words because for Brandom, the social character of our discursive practices is what makes claims answerable to the world for their correctness. There is no need "to appeal to any intermediaries between perceptible facts and reports of them" (Hendley, 2010: sec. 1). From this perspective, what seems to be at the core of Brandom and McDowell's disagreements is the larger issue over semantic content, which is generally thought to be a crucial aspect of knowledge (*what* is it that is known?). Brandom believes inferentialist discourse in its broadest sense suffices for semantical content while McDowell claims semantical content is fundamentally world-involving. In this regard, Brandom seems to adhere to Sellars' original article (EPM) more closely, as he holds fast the distinction between what I have called 'thoughts' and 'sensations' in chapter I whilst at the same time labouring to explain, like Sellars, how we get from merely having sensations to having knowledge about their contents. McDowell, on the other hand, takes his solution back from this stage of the argument and claims contra Sellars and Brandom that sensations are more akin to thoughts than his colleagues realise. McDowell's starting point is that of fixing what he sees as a worrying (but ultimately illusory) gap between mind and world in this and almost every other line of thinking within Western philosophy by extending the 'space of reasons' to experience and even thinkable things in the world itself.

Many (see for instance Arendt, 2021; Čukljević, 2021; Hendley, 2010; and to some extent MacBeth, 2002) attempts to reconcile or compare Brandom and McDowell have focused on some aspect of experience when assessing the two thinkers' epistemological positions. Experience seems to be a fruitful point of interest because it cuts straight through Brandom and McDowell's differing conceptions of conceptual capacity, the idea of "being answerable to the world" and the relation of knowledge to justification and empiricism (the latter of which was indispensable for Sellars' project).

4.2.2. Two Potential Causes for the Disagreement: 2. Methodology

The second major disagreement between Brandom and McDowell is one of methodology. I have previously referred to their positions as a falsificationist or Popperian (Brandom) and quietist or therapeutic (McDowell), as well as constructivist and deconstructivist (respectively).

One aspect in which Brandom and McDowell's differing views on philosophy are evident is their disagreement on the explanation of meaning. As has already been noted, Brandom's inferentialism is what McDowell disparagingly calls a "full-blooded" theory of meaning (see sec. 3.4.3.). That is, it aims to explain linguistic meaning without appeal to the idea of 'meaning' itself or other related ideas. In Brandom's words, McDowell's worry with regard to Brandom's system is that "the practices of keeping score on commitments and entitlements and their relations […] do not suffice to get any intelligible notion of inference, assertion or (therefore) conceptual content in play" (Brandom, 2008a: 218). In short, the charge is that the so-called game of giving and asking for reasons is a mere game devoid of meaning, a "self-contained game," as McDowell (1994: 5) puts it.

These two differences (experience and philosophical methodology) will be used as main indexes in the following sections, as I proceed to evaluate the depth of Brandom and McDowell's disagreement.

4.3. Some Criteria for Deep Disagreements

Now that we have seen what it is that Brandom and McDowell disagree about when it comes to their accounts of the nature of knowledge without the Given, we can finally ask whether their disagreement is a deep one or not. There is no one way to determine this. Instead of a rigid definition we have several examples and lists of characteristics based on those examples. One such list is that provided by Lavorerio (2021: 418 (numbering added)):

1) [Deep disagreements] are persistent, long-standing;

2) they present no clear path toward resolution;

3) they are systematic: they show a ripple effect;

4) they often get heated, involve controversial topics, and can lead to polarization;

5) they involve differences in worldviews.

We could go through the checklist with Brandom and McDowell in mind and tick almost every box. The only point that seems somewhat inaccurate is the latter half of number four: "[they] involve controversial topics, and can lead to polarization". Despite their long-lasting debates Brandom and McDowell do not seem to be drifting apart towards wholly isolated bubbles but have instead continued to engage with each other throughout their long careers, their differences notwithstanding. This may of course just be due to interpersonal connections and their shared history at the university of Pittsburgh, but nevertheless, the fact that it continues on friendly terms makes the present attempt at analysing the dispute through the lens of metaepistemology all the more interesting. Does it score a point against this being a deep disagreement, however? Perhaps not. Extensive engagement as well as some concessions made from side to side seems to indicate disagreement is not as deep in Brandom and McDowell's case, but it also begs the question of why the interchanges have remained engaging for so long. Perhaps the participants have been avoiding the aspects of their views they know to be unreconcilable. As has been noted, Brandom and McDowell have many points of agreement. Working on what common ground they have might be fruitful, but tip-toeing at the margins does not seem to chip away at the more fundamental disagreements. There is also the problem of talking past each other (mentioned in section 3.5.) and pointing out things the other is already known to disagree on, perhaps for the sake of rhetorically or elsewise convincing the audience of one's own position.

Brandom to some degree often sounds more agreeable to McDowell's approach than vice versa, which is probably due to his more 'constructivist' view of philosophy. Brandom will more readily accept the building blocks McDowell's critiques offer for developing his views, whereas McDowell finds it harder to reciprocate, because in his Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy, the truth should result from the exorcising of philosophical misconceptions, not from adding more philosophy to perfect one's system. This will be discussed in more detail further on.

In what follows I would like to focus on characteristics (2), (3), and (5), as these seem the most substantial points philosophically speaking. (1) and (4) might be important features by which to recognise deep disagreements, but they seem to me less interesting in terms of the content of the disagreement at hand, so I will leave them at what has been said above. Let us now examine the three remaining points (2, 3, and 5) individually in more detail.

(2) According to Lavorerio, deep disagreements "present no clear path toward resolution." If we look at Brandom and McDowell's disagreement, we can see that both parties have made some changes to their positions, but a "resolution" per se does not yet seem to be on the horizon (see, e.g., Čukljević, 2021 or Hendley, 2010). What makes this point hard to evaluate, however, is how often Brandom and McDowell tacitly agree to disagree on the fundamentals while labouring some detail or aspect that enough common ground has been found for discussion to take place. They might, for instance, agree about the shortcomings of representationalism, but their positive alternatives (inferentialism and McDowell's quaint amalgam of inference and representation) are less easy to engage in a productive conversation. At least no resolution accepted by both parties seems to be on the table.

(3) "Deep disagreements are also systematic in that they show a ripple effect." This means that deep disagreements bring forth clusters of interrelated disputes due to how far-reaching the consequences of each position are. The result is an expansion of the issue at hand, which might be hard to grasp in its entirety. Differing interpretations of Sellars (see, e.g., Tripodi, 2013) or Hegel (see Redding, 2011) could serve as examples of this point in the case of Brandom and McDowell, as well as disagreements on intentional action, which have not been discussed in this thesis (see Maher, 2012: Ch. 6).

(5) The question of "differing worldviews" is somewhat easier to understand when applied to religious cases, as is done in most examples of deep disagreements. Brandom and McDowell probably view the world quite similarly in practical terms, though their philosophical views do push them apart in some crucial regards.

If we expand the notion of world view to a view of the task of philosophy, it could be said that Brandom and McDowell deal with a rather similar views inherited from their teacher Sellars. On the other hand, however, both have their favourites beyond Sellars, and this is where the largest points of contention arise. McDowell's view of philosophy stems largely from the later Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach, and his understanding of experience seems to harken back to something very different from Brandom's pragmatic approach to

experience. Brandom's view of philosophical methodology, on the other hand, seems to be rooted in the philosophy of science more generally and Karl Popper's falsificationism in specific. Popper's idea of science as something falsifiable can be read from between the lines (see Maher, 2012: 79) of Brandom's idea of preferring to adopt "the stronger, more easily falsifiable hypothesis so as to see how far it can be pressed" (Brandom, 1997: 189) over a more broad-strokes approach that, following a strictly Popperian approach, might be accused of being pseudo-scientific due to its relative vagueness and openness.

4.4. The Verdict

The disagreement at hand does not self-evidently fulfil every single characteristic presented, but it does seem to fit most of them. There is no way to definitively say whether the disagreement within the Pittsburgh School is deep – indeed, Adams (2005, 76) argues more generally that

"the logic of deep disagreements makes it impossible to specify a priori conditions such that, for any disagreement, satisfaction of just those conditions would be necessary and sufficient epistemically to conclude that the disagreement is deep. The only way for the parties to know whether such a state of affairs obtains is by continuing to work through an attempt at rational discourse, and this because the question of whether a given disagreement is deep can only be settled by exhausting the possible resources of normal discourse."

Given such a view, Brandom and McDowell might not have a deep disagreement, as it seems ludicrous to claim that they have exhausted all "the possible resources of normal discourse" while still addressing responses to each other's work. The participants most likely do not think so either, though Brandom and McDowell's most lively back-and-forth about the nature of knowledge seems to already belong in the past (largely (and understandably) before the turn of the millennium, in the wake of the publication of McDowell's *Mind and World* and Brandom's *Making it Explicit* in 1994). Considering both the waning of the discourse and its continuation to this day (Brandom's latest book, *A Spirit of Trust*, for instance, addresses

McDowell on several occasions), we might perhaps say the disagreement merits some depth on both Lavorerio's and Adams' accounts.

More specifically, a fundament-seeking explanation for Brandom and McDowell's allegedly deep disagreement seems to present itself in the form of constructivism versus deconstructivism, or alternatively, as a disagreement on the role of experience for justifying our beliefs about the world. Such an analysis would fall under what Lavorerio calls a 'fundamental model of deep disagreements'. She remains sceptical of such a simplistic analysis, however, as according to her (Lavorerio, 2021: 428), fundamental models seem to "struggle to answer the two main issues concerning deep disagreements: why they originate and how they are resolved (if they are)." Lavorerio has very specific issues with the two views she discusses in her 2021 article, but I take it from her conclusion that she considers fundamental models to be faulty at best. This is because there might not be one fundamental root, one specific difference in epistemic resources causing deep disagreements – or at least it is not as easy to identify as fundamental models assume. This makes them more complicated than fundamental models suggest. Lavorerio also suspects the causes of deep disagreements can't be as neatly separated from other epistemic resources as fundamental models seem to require. She further argues that, contrary to the claims of those developing fundamental models, those fundamental causes that they have allegedly identified seldom help in devising a satisfying solution (Lavorerio, 2021: 428-9). Prichard, for instance, sees (in Lavorerio's words (2021: 427)) that "[w]e cannot alter hinge commitments[5] by appealing to reasons, but we can change them through a transformation in beliefs" (which can be changed by appealing to reasons) by essentially forcing one to re-evaluate their most basic beliefs in the face of incongruity. But Lavorerio (2021: 427-8) argues this is not as easy as Pritchard makes it seem. We can use the example of Brandom and McDowell here because it is very analogous to Lavorerio's, which considers a certain scientist's thorough familiarity with the Bible (the evidence) and the book's inability to sway his trust in the scientific method over faith in scripture when it comes to evolutionary biology. Brandom and McDowell have similarly read most of each other's work and engaged with it extensively; they have also read Sellars, and

[5] Pritchard uses Wittgenstein's idea of 'hinge propositions' (introduced in Wittgenstein's (1969) *On Certainty*), which are meant to articulate certain foundational beliefs about which doubt cannot be entertained.

they have most probably read the same seminal works in the history of philosophy as evidenced by their extensive work on the history of philosophy and the simple fact that they are known as analytic philosophers abnormally interested in ideas of the past (see, e.g., Brandom, 2002; McDowell, 2009). One would then be hard-pressed to show that either has not engaged with the other's evidence or dismissed it out of hand or that there remains some piece of evidence for either Brandom or McDowell to find, which would make them more sympathetic to the other's viewpoint. Pritchard seems to think that even when rational argumentation fails, there always remains hope for some kind of evidence to emerge, which might sway one side's hinge beliefs without the need for argumentation (a scientist might, for instance, have a deeply touching revelatory insight about the Bible). Lavorerio (2021: 428), however, points out that there is something more complicated underlying each participant's very sense of (good) evidence that should be taken into account. According to her (Lavorerio 2021: 427), "Pritchard is rightly concerned with how confronting evidence can change our beliefs, hence reshaping our hinge commitments. But he does not consider how our hinge commitments shape what we accept as evidence and what we do not." Brandom or McDowell might well still come across a piece of evidence that overturns their view of epistemic practice, but we should also take into account that that very view of epistemic practice which they already hold might be working against this possibility by affecting each side's interpretation and openness to such evidence.

All this is not to say conversation is useless. As was previously mentioned, some agreements have been reached in the exchanges between Brandom and McDowell, though analysing such points of agreement as simple persuasions by evidence would do injustice to the depth of deep disagreement. An analysis of Brandom and McDowell's exchanges should probably focus on more than persuasive pieces of evidence, as the more interesting question regards how already established beliefs influence the very reception of evidence. Lavorerio seems to echo Andrew Lugg (1986) to some extent in that she highlights the possibility of a "dynamic" conception of rationality over a "static" one. In criticising a specific description of deep disagreements, Lugg (1986: 48) argues that "[r]eason may not be sufficient to decide a particular issue here and now" by adding that "it may still contribute significantly to its resolution later on"[6]. This initially sounds a lot like Pritchard's view – "confronting evidence

[6] Finocchiaro (2011: 4) quotes Lugg (1986: 48) further elaborating his point: "Individuals who disagree deeply may still be able to narrow the distance between themselves by dint of argument, debate, inquiry,

can change our beliefs, hence reshaping our hinge commitments" – but we might simply want to dispose of the fixation on 'hinges' as a cure-all solution to get a more realistic path toward mutual understanding.

To quickly summarise the content of this long section we might think of two similes: the first compares deep disagreements to a stalemate, the end of a road or a wall. There is no going forward, there is nothing more to say. The other simile, which I think characterises Brandom and McDowell's disagreement better replaces the end of a road with an endless road, the standing still with a stationary bicycle or a treadmill. The conversation continues, the motions are gone through, and there might even be some moments of revelation on both sides, but what might be considered the core of the disagreement does not change. Lavorerio, however, thinks we should be wary of thinking about deep disagreements as grounded in some strictly located and separate epistemic resource, the identification of which alone can help us resolve the disagreement. Perhaps this is why no resolution has been reached. As Lavorerio (2021: 429) notes, "The parties' beliefs about the issue they disagree over shape what they take to be relevant evidence in the dispute as well as their assessment of the merits of epistemic principles." Perhaps the two possible causes identified in sections 4.2.1. and 4.2.2. work together, obscuring each other. Experience presents itself as the more evident core of the disagreement while the debaters' more general approaches to philosophy function as true arbiters. The latter cannot be considered on its own, however, as it only manifests itself in talk about experience and other more concrete topics. I continue to analyse this possibility in what follows.

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and research […] Individuals can also bring about a shift in one another's allegiances by demonstrating hidden strengths of their own views and by eliciting hidden weaknesses of alternative views. Furthermore, they may find themselves having to shift ground as a result of their discovering things wrong with the views that they accept and things right with the ones that they reject".

4.4.1. The Possibility of Reconciliation

Deeming a disagreement deep does not mean there is no way to find a solution or to advance the discussion. As several papers (Arendt, 2021; Čukljević, 2021; Hendley, 2010; and to some extent Macbeth, 2002) bent on finding a middle-ground or a synthesis between Brandom and McDowell's approaches show, there might be alternative ways of thinking about these issues as well as semantic discrepancies that do not allow the debate to move forward.[7]

Woods (1992) has introduced the idea of "degrees of depth" to the discussion of deep disagreements, which might elucidate the picture of the disagreement at hand as well as offer some hope as to its resolution. Woods' five degrees, which Finocchiaro (2011: 13) notes parallel the classification of hurricanes into five categories, range from the simplicity of there being no consensus to the gravity of participants not acknowledging "that the opposite opinions are 'real possibilities'", making them "close-minded" (Woods 1992: 103-4).

On such a scale, Brandom and McDowell are engaged in a quite breezy argument rather than a cataclysmic one. In analysing Woods' categories, Finocchiaro (2011: 14-6; using Friemann's (2005) concepts) takes into account the participants' 'open-mindedness', which according to him (Finocciaro 2011: 16) "means that one also acknowledges that there are contrary arguments", and 'fair-mindedness', which "means that one acknowledges not only that there are contrary arguments, but also that some of them have some worth (although less than the good arguments favoring one's own position or against the opposite one)". There sems to be a remarkably small degree of close-mindedness between Brandom and McDowell, and both also seem quite fair-minded in their exchanges, though it must be noted that open- and fair-mindedness might be hard to distinguish from formal cordiality.

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[7] One such semantic discrepancy might just concern the word "experience". As Hendley (2010: sec. 3) notes, "there is a sense of 'experience' that is one of Brandom's words: 'experience, in Hegel's and Dewey's sense (processual, developmental *Erfahrung* rather than episodic, self-intimating *Erlebnis*) of a feedback loop of perception, responsive performance, and perception of the results of the performance' [(Brandom 2008b: 87)]", something that could just be characterised as "practical engagement with the world" (Hendley, 2010: sec. 3).

On a more negative note, open-mindedness and fair-mindedness might have also stalled the conversation to some extent, as both Brandom and McDowell have enough trust in the other to leave him be, so to speak, and keep doing what they see best. Hendley's (2010) and Čukljević's (2021) analyses of Brandom and McDowell's disagreement on the importance of experience seem to sweep in at just such an occasion, as they reiterate the exchanges between the two, which are mostly fruitless until the external arbiters weigh in. Whether Hendley or Čukljević really 'solve' the disagreement is up for further debate, however. Brandom and McDowell have not publicly taken note of these solutions.

An interesting aspect of the attempts at a resolution mentioned so far seem to take a critique from McDowell (namely that of the importance of experience) and apply it to Brandom's system, essentially ignoring McDowell's therapeutic approach to philosophy. One reason for this might be that it is harder for McDowell to accept suggestions made from a constructivist perspective due to his own deconstructivist and quietist ideals. McDowell might also find it hard to try to perfect his theories, as they are more akin to criticisms or 'deconstructions' meant to dissolve problems rather than to resolve them. Brandom, on the contrary, can more easily take on board McDowell's suggestions and incorporate them to his system. Indeed, this seems to be the general gist of Brandom and McDowell's exchanges (at least as it concerns experience): Brandom will, metaphorically speaking, reply with a "yes and" while McDowell is more likely to begin with "yes but". As a result, it seems like the disagreement can only be resolved unilaterally. Brandom might accept some criticisms aimed at him by McDowell and make his falsifiable conjecture more stable, complete, coherent, etc. And this seems to be the approach many attempts at resolution take, intentionally or not. It is easier to engage with Brandom's system because it is a system and because its falsificationist background allows it to be engaged with in this way.

4.5. Conclusion

To some extent, it is not even clear what the disagreement between Brandom and McDowell concerns. I have defined it here as one about epistemology, but it might as well be reconceptualised as a deep disagreement about the nature of experience or the best way to do

philosophy.[8] The latter two I have instead considered as candidates for fundamental causes, which idea I have engaged with critically following Lavorerio's (2021) analysis of fundamental models of deep disagreements. The disagreement between Brandom and McDowell seems to largely concern experience and their approaches to philosophy, but it also ripples outwards from this core. Looking at the two positions more closely shows that there is little agreement about what the principal issues are beyond the Myth of the Given. One example not discussed in much detail above is the interpretation of Sellars' work (see, e.g., Tripodi, 2013), in addition to genuine differences in their other influences (McDowell's Wittgensteinian therapeutic quietism comes to mind). Not all these differences can be traced back to views of experience or even to views about philosophical methodology, as these views themselves seem to be largely informed by the philosophers' readings of them rather than vice versa.

The final verdict of this thesis is that yes, Brandom and McDowell are most probably engaged in a 'deep disagreement', as a resolution seems to elude them. Some concessions have been made, but the crux of the disagreement – which view is more worthwhile or closer to truth – remains unsettled. Whether there even is a solution, a winner or a middle ground, remains to be seen. One possibility is that this will remain an endless dialectic, but much of the literature has so far seemed to opt for a kind of dialectic-terminating synthesis, where McDowell's concerns about experience are somehow incorporated into Brandom's inferentialism. This means Brandom is often tacitly declared the winner of the debate, while McDowell's concern about experience is denigrated to a footnote to inferentialism. These suggested resolutions seem to focus on experience and largely ignore the other half of the disagreement concerning the nature or task of philosophy. This detail might merit some further analysis in Lavorerio's spirit: do Hendley, Čukljević and others implicitly make the assumption that views concerning experience are the fundamental cause of Brandom and McDowell's disagreement in hopes of providing a solution? Brandom seems to have accepted a version of these analyses to some extent, as for instance Hendley (2010: 131) notes.

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[8] The pragmatic reason to choose 'disagreement on how to think of knowledge without the Given' as the subject of study is that this is the broader topic of most exchanges. Though Experience is talked about a lot, it is usually considered in light of 'being answerable to the world without appealing to the Given'. Brandom and McDowell's views on philosophical methodology, on the other hand, I tend to think of as more of a set of tools used to achieve the goal of explaining knowledge.

Brandom (1996: 242) has even stated to have no issue with McDowell's account of experience as a possible way of addressing the issue. He acknowledges that it may be “where we ought to be at the end of the day”. Such partial and unilateral conciliation might give the disagreement a semblance of agreement, but as noted above, I believe it should be considered limited at best due to its unilaterality. Deeming the disagreement settled at this point would leave McDowell with the short end of the stick, as his more holistic vision of philosophy as therapy is largely ignored.

A debate as theoretical as this seems unlikely to ever be resolved by the discovery of a fact or even a momentous new argument. Instead, the faults and merits of each position will have to be assessed relative to some ideal or standard. This is probably the most important aspect making Brandom and McDowell’s disagreement deep: the disagreement reaches beyond the issue at hand, as it were, and concerns also the very standard or ideal against which arguments and evidence are assessed.

Furthermore, the disagreement at hand is not the most traditional case of vastly different approaches stemming from worldviews that seldom interact with one another. Brandom and McDowell are engaged in, as Brandom (1996: 259) puts it, an “intramural” disagreement, which can sometimes be the most insidious kind. When such a disagreement emerges, it usually concerns the interpretation of a (set of) shared core belief(s) – a notable antithesis for ‘fundamental models’. Some examples might be feuds between religious sects or the disdain between social democrats and communists. These are very different from disagreements involving two diametrically opposed worldviews and could merit more attention in the literature on deep disagreement.

Another note about Brandom and McDowell’s disagreement concerns what Friemann (2005) calls ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘fair-mindedness’. These are supposed to be positive traits that will help the partakers of a disagreement find common ground, but being too fair-minded might, after some time, leave the disagreement running in place without much change. Unless optimists in this regard are right in their belief that “[i]ndividuals who disagree deeply may still be able to narrow the distance between themselves by dint of argument, debate, inquiry, and research …” (Lugg, 1986: 48). Open- and fair-mindedness are very useful for de-escalating extreme, possibly violent disagreements, but they might also prematurely lead a disagreement to an agree-to-disagree-stage of stagnation.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have engaged with a prominent disagreement within the Pittsburgh school of Philosophy, more specifically, Robert Brandom and John McDowell's disagreement on how to account for knowledge without the Given. In his seminal article "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", Wilfrid Sellars cast doubts on the possibility of an epistemological 'Given' that might justify our beliefs without the need of being justified itself. Brandom and McDowell have engaged with Sellars' challenge in very different ways, one favouring an expansive constructivist project that puts our socio-linguistic practices at its centre, and the latter preferring a quietist approach that worries about the fate of experience for accounts that are keen to dismiss the Given.

Based on my analysis of Brandom and McDowell's epistemological disagreement (how is knowledge possible without the Given?), I have argued that we might, metaepistemologically speaking, consider the dispute a so-called 'deep disagreement,' that is, a systematic dispute that has shown exceptionally hard to resolve. In assessing the Pittsburgh School's intramural disagreement, I have identified two possible causes for the disagreement while also engaging with Victoria Lavorerio's critique of the 'fundamental model of deep disagreements,' which calls for a more holistic and dynamic view of deep disagreement. In Lavorerio's spirit I then brought forth some possible challenges and missteps taken by external arbiters of Brandom and McDowell's disagreement, which seem to mostly favour the former's approach. I hope this metaepistemological analysis of Brandom and McDowell's deep disagreement will provide new tools and perspectives for evaluating and perhaps reconciling the Pittsburgh School's intramural yet deep disagreement concerning knowledge.

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