

On McDowell's Criticism of Quinean Holism

Enoch Yim

In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Willard V. O. Quine puts forward epistemic holism, the view that the unit of empirical significance is *not* individual statements, but the statements as a whole.¹ According to this view, the principle by which one evaluates his beliefs is pragmatic; in facing recalcitrant experiences, the subject is at liberty in choosing which statements to revise, discard, or hold insofar as the resultant cognitive framework maintains coherency. In *Mind and World*, John McDowell criticizes this view by contending that it is incapable of accommodating normativity in rational activities.² Hillary Putnam³ and Jaegwon Kim⁴ have expressed a similar concern. In this essay, I will examine McDowell's criticism of Quinean holism in terms of the Sellarsian framework of the tension between the *scientific* and the *manifest* image.⁵ Based on this examination, I contend that what is at the core of the tension between the two images (thus, what McDowell's criticism comes down to) is that causal necessity is expected to constrain conceptual sovereignty, the freedom to choose one's cognitive norms or schemes.

In Section One, I will reconstruct and examine McDowell's criticism of Quine's holism, specifically the notion of normativity that is playing an important role in the criticism. In Section Two, I will consider one problem with the motivation behind McDowell's criticism (or rejection

¹ Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," originally published in *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), reprinted in W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 1953, 1961), online: <http://www.ditext.com/quine/quine.html>.

² John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994, 1996), 129-35.

³ Hillary Putnam, "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," *Synthese* 52, pp. 3-23 (1982).

⁴ Jaegwon Kim, "What Is 'Naturalized Epistemology?'" *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 2, pp. 381-405 (1988).

⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Colodny, reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality* (1963), online: <http://www.ditext.com/sellars/psim.html>.

of epistemic naturalism in general). In Section Three, I will explain how the tension between Quine and McDowell can be recaptured in terms of the scientific and the manifest image—or, more precisely, in terms of how the notion of necessity figures differently in the space of causes and the space of reasons, based on which I will make my contention.

Section One

Quinean holism is roughly the following. The totality of statements (beliefs, judgments, claims, etc.) from logic and science to everyday opinions forms a network of knowledge, and this network as a whole faces the tribunal of experience (sensorial impingements of the world). The subject could respond to recalcitrant experiences by choosing which statements to retain or drop although some statements are more peripheric (or germane to experience) while other statements are more central within the network (i.e., less germane to experience). The criterion for evaluation is economical (or, as Quine would like to put it, “pragmatic”) in that the objective is to make changes that maintain coherency without disturbing the network too much. Due to this criterion, the changes are usually made at the peripheric level which includes statements about ordinary objects and everyday opinions. Yet, if the only way to maintain coherency is by making drastic changes, nothing prevents one from revising more central statements such as logical or mathematical axioms, laws of nature, fundamental theories, etc.⁶

McDowell criticizes this view by arguing that it fails to account for how thoughts could be *about* the world, which requires a normative rather than merely causal relation between mind (concepts) and world (facts). On this point, McDowell writes:

If we try to suppose that exercise of “conceptual sovereignty” are only causally affected by the course of experience, and not rationally answerable to it, there is nothing left of the

⁶ Quine, V, VI.

idea that what “conceptual sovereignty” produces is something that is *about* the empirical world, a stance correctly or incorrectly adopted according to how things are in the empirical world.⁷

Both Putnam and Kim have a similar concern. Kim points out that, in recommending us to take “the stimulation of ... sensory receptors” as the evidence of one’s beliefs, i.e., in replacing justification-centered epistemology with a causal-nomological science of cognition, Quine is urging us to do away with the notion of normativity central to rationality.⁸ Putnam expresses a frustration with Quine’s stance on normativity by remarking that, while Quine does not wish to eliminate normativity, the only notion of normativity available for him is a deflationary one, that what it is for certain methods to yield verdicts is simply that one would accept them. This is because Quine rejects any metaphysical realism that presupposes the correspondence notion of truth.⁹ The question is then what kind of role the notion of normativity plays in rational activities (or, as McDowell terms it, “exercise of conceptual sovereignty”) and why the notion of causality cannot replace it. In other words, what are normativity and causality, and what do we lose when we construe the relation between mind and world as causal rather than normative?

What is at the center of the issue is the idea that, in order for our thoughts (or statements) to be about facts, they must be constrained or anchored in some way.¹⁰ That is, it cannot be the case that *anything goes* if there is any sense to the idea that our thoughts convey information about the world. As the realm in which we exercise rationality as to construct thoughts is called ‘the space of reasons,’ the issue comes down to whether or in what way we can make sense of the requirement that the space of reasons is constrained. One natural way of making sense of this

⁷ McDowell, 134.

⁸ Kim, 386-9

⁹ Putnam, 18-20.

¹⁰ McDowell, 4-6.

requirement is that this space is constrained from *outside*—by things that are made of different materials (or have contents other) than concepts.¹¹ Perhaps, what motivates this naturalistic view is the worry is that, if what are to constrain our thoughts are of the same materials, they would be thoughts as well whereas we expected to find something that constrains thoughts in general.

Given that the world (or its sensorial impingement on the space of reasons) is non-conceptual, the challenge is to explain how its impacts on us constrain our thoughts (so that our thoughts convey certain information about its states of affairs). Here, the relationship between the space of reasons and that which lies outside it is construed as causal. Granted, what kind of relationship is causality? McDowell calls this causal impingement (via receptivity) ‘brute impact from the exterior,’ arguing that it cannot play the normative role because “we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgment is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification[.]”¹² McDowell uses the notion of justification, warrant, and constraint coextensively. Thus, we may cash out his rejection of the naturalistic view in terms of the possibility of skepticism. If my belief, e.g., that the necktie is blue, is grounded only in its causal transaction with the world, things could in fact be different from how things appear to me. It could rather be that I am triggered to think of a green necktie while the necktie itself is blue. If so, nothing warrants that what my senses report to me correspond with reality. Likewise, McDowell seems to argue, any view that construes the relationship between the space of reasons and the world as causal is vulnerable to skepticism.

In Quinean holism, sensible experiences (sensorial impingements, stimulations of sensory receptors, etc.) do not determine which thoughts or statements are to be revised or discarded.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

They simply instigate us to readjust our scheme. What determine which statements to revise are the relations between the statements. That one can disturb the network of statements, that there are more or less economical ways of organizing thoughts, implies that retaining or dropping one statement commits one to retaining or dropping a certain group of statements, but not others. It is textually evident that Quine thinks the relations constituting this network is conceptual.¹³ Since the impacts of experience on the scheme and that of statements on one another within the scheme are different in kind, the relationship between experience and the scheme (or space of reasons) and that among statements have different structures. And, insofar as the structure of the space of reasons is conceptual, the impacts of experiences—the structure of the sensorial impingements of the world on the space of reasons—must be non-conceptual, or causal. On McDowell's view as explained above, causality cannot normatively constrain our thoughts; only conceptual relations can play that role. Yet, normativity is what enables thoughts to convey information about the world. For this reason, McDowell thinks that Quine's view cannot account for the possibility of cognition as a rational activity, or the exercise of conceptual sovereignty.

Section Two

In the last section, it has been noted that McDowell treats the notion of justification, warrant, and constraint coextensively. So, that *P* normatively constrains *Q* comes down to that *P* justifies or warrants *Q*. It is this kind of relationship or structure McDowell thinks causality lacks. But what just is this relation? What is involved in saying that *P* justifies or warrants, i.e., implies, *Q*? The starting point in answering this question would be to notice that, in *P* implying *Q*, the former statement is followed by the latter statement. For example, in saying that the

¹³ Quine, VI.

necktie is blue implies that the necktie is not green, one is expecting the claim that something is blue to be followable by the claim that the very same thing is not green. However, this is not enough because something more than mere following is involved here. We would like to say not only that Q follows P , but also that R does not follow P if R is *incompatible* with Q . It cannot be the case that both that the necktie is green *and* that the necktie is not green follow that the necktie is blue. If one can go with either pattern, i.e., if no one pattern is to be favored over the other one, there is nothing systematic about the way statements are related to one another. However, in claiming that the necktie is blue, one is also expressing that there is a systematic way in which this statement is related to other statements, that one (inferential) pattern is to be favored over the other ones. (The use of the term ‘not’ is to highlight this commitment.)

The notions such as *incompatibility* and *negation* are doing the heavy lifting in sustaining the justificatory structure of statements. In other words, there is an irreversible jump from mere following to implication that requires the modal concept of necessity, without which the language as a conceptual practice will not get off the ground at all. Thus, it is not enough that P is followed by Q . Rather, if P , then it is *necessary* that Q —that it cannot but be the case that Q . This modal relation among statements cannot happen piecemeal because that Q must follow P is determined prior to the individual instantiation of each statement. The structure of necessity, i.e., normativity, must (have) come into being all at once. By construing the network of statements as holistic, Quine does concede to this peculiar requirement of language, or conceptuality.

The question then is whether causality does lack this modal, holistic characteristic. If it lacks such characteristic, there is nothing necessary about, e.g., the fact that dropping sodium in water is followed by an explosion; one state of affairs follows (or is conjoined with) another, but things could have been different. Such conception of causality is Humean. Leaving aside

whether this is the right conception and how to theorize causality, the strong intuition is that causality does establish some sort of necessity. We may be wrong about the relationship between dropping sodium in water and explosion because it is possible that, unbeknownst to us, every dropping of sodium water so far in the history of mankind has been accompanied with another chemical element not yet discovered, the real cause of the explosion. So, our *belief* about the causal relationship between sodium and explosion is piecemeal, and to that extent the particular way we conjoin sodium and (our perception of) explosion is not necessary. But—the intuition goes—if we are right about the structure behind the appearances, the world is such that an explosion cannot but happen once sodium is dropped in water.

Even if we grant that, in causality, *B* necessarily happens once *A* happens, this relation itself does not necessitate that *this* deterministic relation rather than another (e.g., *A* causes *C*, not *B*) should hold. Were the laws of nature different, different causal (deterministic, necessitating) relations would have held. *That we are stuck with one pattern of relations rather than another* is contingent. That is, nature in itself has no power to determine its own system, but operates with whatever system it is given. In contrast, we tend to think that each inferential pattern determines its own course. The very structure in which statements are arranged in a particular linguistic scheme necessitates its own layout. Perhaps, this conception is a remnant of Fregean-Russellian logocentrism. But what is important for our discussion is not whether this conception is right, but that we do have such a conception (and what the implication of this conception is). If, unlike the space of reasons, the space of causes cannot determine its own necessity, then normativity cannot arise from nature since that it operates on one (and not another) deterministic pattern is rather coincidental; things could have been different *all the way down*.

If normativity cannot come from nature, it has to come from *us*. It is in intaking causal stimuli we immediately apply the framework of normativity (modal concepts) to the intakes. If so, the worry is that normativity is something we project onto the world. However, this is no different than the version of coherentism McDowell refutes. If we are merely projecting normativity rather than receiving it from without, nothing stops us from going with or favoring one inferential pattern over the other ones, so to say, whimsically; there is no anchor for the ark of our thoughts (Neurath's boat). As such, our conceptual activities are, as McDowell would put it, "a *frictionless* spinning in a void."¹⁴ Or, as Brandom remarks, if it is one who exerts normative constraint (on himself), then there is no clear sense in which the subject is *bound* by the norms; at best, one is to make the rules as he goes by.¹⁵ (Of course, Brandom does endorse a form of the view in which it is *us* who determine normativity. But his view requires a Hegelian shift in the conception of conceptual determinateness, which is beyond the scope of our discussion.¹⁶)

To avoid coherentism, McDowell devised the notion of *openness*.¹⁷ According to this notion, the world comes to us already as conceptually (*as thus and so*) in our experience. This is possible because, on his view, when we make sensorial contact with the world, we are already

passively saddled with conceptual contents, drawing into operation capacities seamlessly integrated into a conceptual repertoire that [we employ] in the continuing activity of adjusting [our] world-view, so as to enable it to pass a scrutiny of its rational credentials.¹⁸

That is, in receiving the causal impacts from outside, McDowell insists, we are involuntarily using the capacities we use in conceptual activities. The idea is that our sensorial intakes are

¹⁴ McDowell, 11.

¹⁵ Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-94.

¹⁷ McDowell, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

conceptual all the way down. In this way, our experiences can stand in the same justificatory or implicative relation to the statements as these statements do among themselves. However, it is precisely here McDowell faces a dilemma. To maintain perceptual conceptualism, McDowell must either presuppose that the structure of the world is isomorphic to that of our mind or else give in to coherentism. If our experiences are conceptual all the way down while the world itself has a different structure so that the only way nature can impinge on the space of reasons (now including sensory receptors) is by exerting causal (or brute) forces, then the problem of rule-following is only pushed farther to experience from thought. Thus, McDowell is committed to supposing that the world itself has the same structure as the space of reasons. If so, whatever this structure of the world may be, it is just as normative as the space of reasons. Then, nature has the same capacity as inferential patterns have to determine its own necessity. (“*A* causes *B*” means “if *A* happens, it cannot but be that *B* happens.”) This is not to eradicate causality from nature (for, if causality is not found in nature, where else?), but to elevate causality to normativity. Differently put, in saying that the structure of the world is isomorphic to that of mind, why not just say that causality is normative all the way down? That is, given a few causal axioms (which necessitate themselves), the laws of nature could not have been otherwise. Normativity collapses to physics, and McDowell’s distinction between causality and normativity is redundant.

Section Three

Would then collapsing the space of reasons to that of causes (as Quine recommends in seeking to replace justification-centered epistemology with a causal-nomological science of cognition) solve the problem? Not quite, because the tension between the two realms is much more complicated than it seems. One way to capture the tension is in terms of the scientific and

the manifest image. In *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*, Wilfrid Sellars puts forward these two images as competing perspectives on the world, each of which purports to be a complete picture of “man-in-the-world.”¹⁹ Each image provides its own way of viewing the world, or more precisely, of understanding man’s place in the world. As a picture of the world, each image first determines what class of things are to be considered as the basic objects within its framework. In the case of the manifest image, as Sellars notes, the basic objects include “persons, animals, lower forms of life and ‘merely material’ things, like rivers and stones.”²⁰ By examining the correlations between these objects (e.g., properties, relations, etc.), the manifest image seeks to provide its own framework for understanding (man’s place in) the world.

Sellars remarks that the primary objects of the manifest image are *persons*. Immediately, two questions arise: (a) What are persons? and (b) In what sense are persons the *primary* objects? In regard to what persons are, Sellars describe persons as those that are capable of actions (or, more precisely, those whose behaviors are to be viewed as actions) whereas actions are behaviors done with *deliberations*.²¹ Sellars does not explicitly articulate what he means by ‘deliberation.’ But we can get a sense of what he has in mind by considering that Sellars contrasts persons with material objects: only the former kind are said to *do* things.²² For instance, in affecting their surroundings, rivers and stones by no means *do* things; rather, these objects *happen* to be in certain states correlated with the changes in environments around them (even if those changes were *necessary*). In contrast, persons are capable of *doing* things, i.e., *bringing about* the changes on their own. Here, one way to cash out the idea that persons (and not material

¹⁹ Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

objects) *do* things, or behave with deliberation, is by interpreting the notion of personhood as moral agency. Even if it is granted that every pattern from the causal relations among objects in nature (and between nature and mind) to the inferential relations among statements (within the space of reasons) is normative in that it is rule-governed, there is a difference between merely conforming to the norms and adhering to the norms *as norms*. Sellars points out,

... [A] piece of patterned governed behavior is *as such* not an action (though actions can consist of sequences of pattern governed behavior), and is correct or incorrect not as *actions* are correct or incorrect, but as events which are not actions are correct or incorrect.²³

That is, certain arrays of objects or statements showing a normative or rule-governed pattern is one thing, and taking the pattern *as normative* is another. To do the latter is to take a normative stance towards the pattern. According to Brandom, in taking such a stance, one is committing the contents in that pattern to be assessable by appropriate standards.²⁴ This is to conceive oneself as capable of being responsible for his engagement with the contents in the sense that his engagement with those contents commits or obliges him to engaging with or treating certain other contents in a certain way. Thus, for instance, in taking a normative stance on the inferential relation between that the necktie is blue and that the necktie is not green, one sees himself as responsible for (or committed to) accepting the latter statement if he accepts the former. This *taking-up* of commitment is lacking between those statements although their inferential relations are normative in themselves; statements merely conform to the norms.

²³ Wilfrid Sellars, "Meaning as Functional Classification (A Perspective on the Relation of Syntax to Semantics), *Synthese*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4, pp. 417-37 (1974), 423.

²⁴ Brandom, 29-33.

The ability to take up the commitment also gives the ability to hold back from taking up that commitment. In other words, as a moral agent (i.e., as a person), one can *choose* whether to take a particular (inferential) pattern as binding him.²⁵ That is, as participants of the space of reasons (i.e., as language-users), we have the freedom *not* to follow the rule even if the rule in itself enforces necessity. Once we choose which rule or pattern to follow and decide whether to follow it, we assume the responsibility to behave as dictated by its demand. But the rule has such authority (i.e., constrains us) only to the extent that we give them authority. The modal force of necessity is conferred on the pattern by the power of moral agency we exercise. This kind of power or ability is what constitutes the manifest image as a framework of the world.

Sellars identifies understanding the world piecemeal as the characteristic of the scientific image.²⁶ However, in the last section, I granted that causality (the structure of the world) could be elevated to a holistic relation. That is, on my view, there is a sense in which causality exerts the force of normativity akin to that of conceptuality (the structure of the space of reasons). With this view in mind (as well as the account of language-using as the manifest image), we are now in the position to sharply bring out the tension between causality and normativity.

The space of reasons: If the necktie is green, it is *necessary* (or cannot but be the case) that the necktie is not green.

The space of causes: Given the sensory stimulus (or sensible experience), it is *necessary* (or cannot but be the case) that the necktie is blue.

On the surface, these two *spaces* have the same *syntactic* structure. The modal concepts in both spaces seem to have the same function. However, in the space of reasons, one has the freedom

²⁵ Ibid., 64-5.

²⁶ Sellars, 9, 15-6.

not to confer normativity to the inference by refusing to construe the relation between the two statements as *necessary*. This is because as a participant of the space of reasons, one has the power of moral agency to choose which inferential patterns to go with. However, the same degree of freedom cannot be accorded in the space of causes. One cannot choose whether the experience (that the necktie is blue) is to be followed by the thought that the necktie is blue. Nor can the agent refuse to follow that pattern. Otherwise, there is nothing necessary, authoritative, or constraining about the experience. This is because—whereas language constrains us *within* (i.e., once we choose to participate in it)—the objects are supposed to constrain our language from without, by limiting the range of our choice of languages (or inferential patterns).

The kind of necessity operating within the space of causes and of reasons should likewise be different in kind although they seem to have the same syntactic structure. If the scientific image (the framework of conforming to norms) and the manifest image (the framework of adhering to norms) collapse, we lose either our identity as moral agents capable of exercising freedom (when the space of reasons is reduced to that of causes) or the sense in which our thoughts convey information about, i.e., are anchored by, the world (when the space of causes is reduced to that of reasons). This way of capturing the tension between the scientific and the manifest image (and between McDowell and Quine) does by no means even hint (let alone provide) the direction for working out the Sellarsian *synoptic view*, in which the two competing images “merge without dash.”²⁷ However, I hope to have at least articulated through the lens of the debates between Quine and McDowell (or between naturalists and non-naturalists in general) what is at the center of the tension, which clearly comes down to this: causal necessity is expected to constrain conceptual sovereignty, the freedom to choose one’s cognitive norms or

²⁷ Sellars, 20.

schemes. As of what this *necessity* that is capable of constraining our freedom as moral agents from without is supposed to be, much is open to further philosophical investigations.

References

- Brandom, Robert B. *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Kim, Jaegwon. "What Is 'Naturalized Epistemology?'" *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 2. 1988.
- McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Harvard University Press, 1994, 1995.
- Putnam, Hillary. "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized." *Synthese* 52. 1982.
- Quine, Willard V. O. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," originally published in *Philosophical Review* 60, 1951, reprinted in W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. Harvard University Press, 1953, 1961. , 2000.
Online: <http://www.ditext.com/quine/quine/html>.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. "Meaning as Functional Classification (A Perspective on the Relation of Syntax to Semantics)." *Synthese*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4. 1974.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man." *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Coldny, reprinted in *Science, Perception and Reality*. 1963.
Online: <http://www.ditext.com/sellars/psim.html>.