

## THE ‘CAUSAL STORY’ AND THE ‘JUSTIFICATORY STORY’

(reflections on a McDowellian theme)

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Suppose for a moment, that J.R.R. Tolkien, the famous author of the cult fantasy saga *Lord of the Rings*, did not publish anything of his writings during his lifetime; suppose that after his death the manuscripts of all his writings are lying on his table. Where, then, is the *Middleearth*, the glorious land of hobbits, dwarfs, elves and human heroes, situated? We might be tempted to say that it is within our world, namely inside the pile of the papers on the writer’s table - for it exists solely through the letters written on these papers. However, to say this would be wrong (or at least strongly misleading) - surely we do not expect that should the heroes of the book walk in a straight line long enough, they would cross the boundaries of the book and appear in Mr. Tolkien’s room. Middleearth is, of course, *not* within our world - despite existing solely due to certain things which *are* within it.

Now the situation is not substantially different actually, when Middleearth does not exist solely through a single pile of papers, but rather through millions of printed copies of Tolkien’s books and through the minds of millions of their readers. Again, the land exists exclusively through the existence of entities which are parts of our world (albeit that they are now scattered throughout the whole Earth), but this does not mean that the land itself is a part of our world.

The point of this anecdotal excursion is now that this relationship between our world and Middleearth is, in a sense, similar to the relationship between our physical space of things and „the space of reasons“ (Sellars, 1956, §36); or between „the causal story“ and „the justificatory story“ (Rorty, 1991, 148). Like Middleearth, the space of reasons exists exclusively due to us, humans, and our minds (and perhaps also of some of our artifacts), and in this sense we might be tempted to situate it in our world, to see it as a certain, perhaps scattered, compartment of the world of things within which we live; but just as in the case of Middleearth, this might be dangerously misleading.

The rationale of talking about something as the space of reasons comes from Sellars’ argument, recognized as sound by his followers, that we have to distinguish carefully between thing-like entities, *particulars*, which enter into causal (in a broad sense) relationships, and proposition-like entities, *facts* (and potential facts, which we may call simply *propositions*), which enter into justificatory relationships. These are two essentially different kinds of entities, living essentially different kinds of ‘lives’ within their different realms. Particulars typically inhabit our spatiotemporal world and are denoted by names; whereas propositions inhabit the space of reasons and are expressed by sentences. And as Brandom (1984, 6) stresses, it is the grasp of *propositional* contents that in an important sense distinguishes rational or sapient beings.

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\* This work was supported by the Research Support Scheme of the OSI/HESP, grant No. 280/1997.

The necessity of separating these two kinds of entities was what underlay Sellars' rejection of the traditional empiricism with its 'sense data' - for the 'sense data' are nothing else than entities that are supposed to belong to both these categories of entities at once. The sense-data-theorist assumes that the sense datum is a point in which the causal chain going from the outside world to the subject's mind changes into a justificatory chain, he „insists *both* that sensing is a knowing *and* that it is particulars which are sensed.“ (Sellars, 1956, §3) Thus what is sensed is assumed to be knowledge, a true belief, but knowledge which is immediately 'given' to the mind, for it is directly delivered into it by the world itself (and is thus infallible). This is what Sellars famously called the *Myth of the Given*.

However, if a particular cannot be a reason for a belief, we inevitably have to conclude, as Davidson (1986, 310) did, that „nothing can serve as reason for a belief save another belief“. But if this is true - if the world has no way of penetrating the space of beliefs -, beliefs appear to be turned loose from the world, to be condemned to blindly and aimlessly revolve within the mind. John McDowell (1994, p. 7) writes: „The idea of the Given is the idea that the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere. The extra extent of the space of reasons is supposed to allow it to incorporate non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought.“ However, he continues (p.8), „it can seem that if we reject the Given, we merely reopen ourselves to the threat to which the idea of the Given is a response, the threat that our picture does not accommodate any external constraint on our activity in empirical thought and judgment.“ This is what McDowell does not like, and why he seeks a third path, a path that would lead us safely between the Scylla of the Myth of the Given, and the Charybda of Davidsonian coherentism.

What we would like to indicate here is that both the Myth of the Given and the threat of leaving our thought externally unconstrained, broken loose from the outside world, presupposes the picture on which the space of reasons is somehow inside the space of things, so that causal chains from the outside world can penetrate into the inner one (thereby changing their nature to justificatory chains). I am going to argue that although this picture might appear to be extremely natural or even unavoidable, it is one more picture which „holds us captive“ (Wittgenstein, 1953, §115) - and that what is really needed is to abandon it.

Before we turn to the discussion of the relationship of the space of reasons to the realm of things of our everyday life, and thereby of the 'justificatory story' to the 'causal story', let me point out that the distinctions between the two realms and the two stories are related to another interesting distinction, the distinction between two ways we can approach a mind (and, I think, also a language<sup>1</sup>).

We can look at a mind 'from without': to look at it as one of the objects which feature within our the causal story (and, indeed, also *within* our justificatory story). We could hardly have failed to notice that among the objects which surround us there are some quite specific ones, which we have come to classify as *mind-havers*, thereby positing minds, specific objects the having of which distinguishes mind-havers. (It is, of course, not *necessary* to treat

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peregrin (1995, esp. §11.6).

minds as genuine objects, rather than only as ‘properties’ or ‘aspects’ of mind-havers, but this is not a question we will consider now.)

But we can also try to look at a mind ‘from within’: we may notice that the justificatory story urgently points to somebody who has invented it and who ‘harbors’ it - who is in the business of justification. (This contrasts this story with the causal story, which, in a sense can be imagined to be ‘told’ - i.e. performed - by the inanimate world itself.) Thus, the justificatory story points out to a mind (or, indeed a ‘community of minds’), which is ‘behind’ it, to a ‘transcendental ego’. So telling this story we are in a sense assuming the standpoint of a mind, we approach it ‘from inside’.

Now I think that the advice of keeping apart the causal and the justificatory story should be understood as also entailing the advice not to try to be simultaneously inside and outside a mind. And if we do follow this advice, the relationship between the mind and the world is no mystery: If we look at the mind from without, then there is nothing mysterious about its relationship to the rest of the world: mind-havers, and thereby minds, enter in all kinds of causal interactions with their surroundings. And if we approach the mind from within, then asking about its relationship to the outside world makes no sense at all: then the mind, the thinking subject, is not part of the world (but rather its boundary, as Wittgenstein, 1922, §5.632, duly points out<sup>2</sup>) and hence there simply is no outside for it to have.

This vantage point may also help us distinguish the question we are considering, the question of how to cope with the „threat that our picture [of the relationship of the mind and the world] does not accommodate any external constraint on our activity in empirical thought and judgment“, from some other, related questions, with which it sometimes appears to be intermingled in McDowell’s book.

First, there is a question which arises from looking at mind from outside, the question about the nature of mind and about the specificity of its role within the causal story. We have seen that from this perspective minds cannot be anything else than kinds of objects (or properties of objects) causally interacting with other objects. However, one can legitimately wonder whether the causal story really gives us resources to account for the peculiarity of minds in the first place. Do we need a specific kind of vocabulary to account for them, say a normative vocabulary?<sup>3</sup>

Second, there is a question that arises from looking at the world from within a mind, the question of whether we do see the world through the prism of the mind adequately. We

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kripke’s (1982, p.123ff.) discussion of this Wittgenstein’s passage.

<sup>3</sup> This seems to be a question which divides Quine and Rorty (whose answer to the question seems to be *no*) from Davidson and Brandom (who seem to accept that need for some kind of a specific vocabulary). However, we could also see the question as directly challenging the very constitution of the causal story: Since the dawn of modern science, from Descartes, Leibniz and Newton, we have come to see the causal world as made exclusively of passive *materia*; but in view of the existence of minds, is this really right? Do we not need also an active ‘*pateria*’ (to use the terminology of the Czech mathematician and philosopher Petr Vopěnka) to describe the world containing minds? Do we not need to assume that there may exist entities which are not only subject to causal law, but are also able to insert new causes into the causal chains?

may wonder whether our conceptualizations which underlie our justificatory story do not corrupt the world, whether the story we thus tell presents the world 'as it really is'. This is the question about the nature of the unconceptualized world, about the outlook of bare facts stripped of our values<sup>4</sup>.

Both these questions, which we are not going to address here, are to be distinguished from our question of the relationship of the thoughts inside mind to the things outside it. How do elements of the causal world of things manage to restrain the elements of our inner space of reasons, to make our minds work somehow dependently on what is going on outside them? Note that this question arises only if we attempt to account for minds within the world by making the causal story continuous with the justificatory story in such a way that the justificatory story would account for minds and the causal story for the rest of the world. This leads to the picture of minds as spaces of their own within the physical space, as certain islands governed by the justificatory relations within the vast sea governed by the causal ones. To understand the real nature of this question, we now turn our attention back to the concept of the space of reasons.

What is the space of reasons and where is it situated? What is the nature of propositions which constitute it? On my construal, the concept of the space of reasons and the concept of proposition are two sides of the same coin. Intuitively, it is very hard to say what a proposition is, to get any kind of a firm grip on them. However, there are facts about propositions which seem to be obvious: we would, for example hardly call something a proposition unless it has a negation. Similarly, it seems to be constitutive of the concept of proposition that propositions can be conjoined, that a proposition can imply something etc. In short, propositions necessarily exist within a network, or a space, of logical relationships. And it is these logical relationships which constitute the most general shape of the space of reasons.

Now as a matter of fact, some propositions happen to be *true*, or, in other words, are *facts*. It was Wittgenstein (1922), who famously insisted that it is facts, and not things, of which our world consists. Why does Wittgenstein find it so important to deny that the building blocks of the worlds are things, despite the fact that probably any normal, philosophically uncontaminated person would say that world *does* consist of things (perhaps things which stand in certain relationships)? Well, one answer might be that as he wants to put forward his correspondence theory of language, he needs the world cut into pieces corresponding to the pieces of language, and thus he invokes facts, the „sentence-shaped items“ (Strawson<sup>5</sup>), or „ghostly doubles of the grammarian's sentence“ (Collingwood<sup>6</sup>). A little bit more sympathetic answer would be that this „linguistic“ structuring of the world is not only something Wittgenstein needs to accomplish his project, but in fact something that is

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<sup>4</sup> This is a question many philosophers have warned us is illusory: the idea that there is a story which would be told by the world itself - as contrasted by the stories told by the mind-havers -, they say, is an idea not worth being taken seriously.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Rorty (1988, p. 35).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Putnam (1994, p. 301).

in a sense how the world sometimes really looks to us, language-users. Although we perceive our worlds as the world of things, having language we sometimes reflect it, and reflecting it we see the world as the world not of things, but of facts. Thus, our „language instinct“ (as Pinker, 1994, dubbed our ability to use language) makes us see our worlds in terms of facts and propositions. „Language is“, as Davidson (1997, 22) put it recently, „the means of propositional perception“.

Thus, the causal story (featuring things in their causal interaction) and the justificatory story (featuring propositions in their inferential dependencies) are, in an important sense, two different stories with the same subject, namely our world (which is what makes this case different from the Middleearth one). We may say that the sun sends its rays thus causing the air to become warm; and we may also say that the fact that the sun shines implies (via the „observational categorical“ saying that if the sun shines, the air becomes warm) that it is warm. Seen from this perspective, the space of reasons is not embedded within the realm of things, it is merely the very same realm differently conceived.

However, propositions do not merely reside within the abstract space of reasons; some of them come to be entertained or endorsed by rational individuals, thereby becoming the individuals' *thoughts* or *beliefs*<sup>7</sup>. It is, for example, me, who believes that the sun is shining and that (therefore) it is warm outside. Are then not *my* beliefs, the propositions that *I* endorse, situated inside the physical world, namely inside my head? And is it not necessary to secure that they do properly reflect the world outside the mind?

It is this picture which makes the Myth of the Given so attractive - it seems that if we do not want believers' minds to be completely independent of the world, there must be a path from the outside space of things into the inside realm of beliefs. There must be a boundary of the space of beliefs at which the causal chain gets transformed into the evidential and justificatory chain, there must be a spot on the boundary between mind and world at which a particular becomes a proposition which thus constitutes direct, *given* knowledge. The answer to this temptation is, again, the rejection of the conflation of the causal story with the justificatory story and to situate the space of beliefs inside the physical space. Beliefs are better not imagined as being within one's head.

We have the causal story: the world, e.g. the sun sending its rays, impinges on my (or whoever's) sensory receptors, the receptors send signals to the brain, there some kind of causal interaction between the neurons takes place, and then the brain perhaps sends a signal to some motoric nerves which do something, e.g. make the hands put off the coat and hang it into the wardrobe. What is important is that this story is causal *through and through*, the causal chain *nowhere* changes into anything non-causal.

Now we could perhaps improve on this causal story by assuming what Dennett (1987) calls the *intentional stance*: instead of addressing the proceedings of one's neural machinery (which we can hardly really know), we can adopt a much more rough and a much more useful

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<sup>7</sup> Of course the very existence of propositions and of the space of reasons is parasitic upon the rational (predominantly linguistic) practices of us humans, the space being in fact nothing more than a hypostasis vividly envisaging the structure of our linguistic practices. However, once we accept this hypostasis, it is clear that propositions may exist without being anybody's beliefs.

way of speaking, and characterize the person as, e.g., *believing that it is warm*. There is still nothing non-causal about this: *believes that it is warm* is our rough way to specify the physical state of the person in question. And *believes* here should not be construed as *is in the possession of a thing called belief* let alone *has a belief floating somewhere inside his head*.

And it is important to realize that the situation does not change even when we grant Davidson and Brandom that assuming the intentional stance means a more substantial change than simply starting to discern more global patterns, namely that it is the place where some kind of normativity creeps in. Ascribing beliefs and even thoughts to somebody is still, as Davidson stresses, not situating propositions into an inner space of that person, it is using propositions as a classificatory scale in the same way in which we use the number scale for the purpose of classifying weights of things: „In thinking and talking of the weights of physical objects we do not need to suppose there are such things as weights for objects to have. Similarly in thinking and talking about the beliefs of people we needn't suppose there are such entities as beliefs. ... The entities we mention to help specify a state of mind do not have to play any *psychological* or epistemological role at all, just as numbers play no physical role.“ (Davidson, 1989, 11)

Now it is important to keep in mind that from this vantage point, we have to distinguish between the properties which a proposition has simply in itself, and those which it may have in virtue of being endorsed by a believer. The proposition that it is warm may be, for example, true (i.e. be a fact), which is, of course, independent of whether anybody believes it. On the other hand, the same proposition, happening to be my belief, might be, e.g., caused by the sun rays coming into my eye - which is obviously only the property of my belief, not of the proposition as such. Now to ask what is the reason of something is to ask about a property of the first kind, whereas to ask why did somebody come to believe something is to ask about a property of the second kind. To say that the reason it is warm is that the sun shines (and, possibly, that whenever the sun shines, it is warm) is to say something that does not depend on anybody's in fact believing that it is warm. It is something essentially different from saying why X believes that it is warm.

Now if I say „The reason why it is warm is that the sun shines“, I give a reason, I tell the justificatory story; whereas when I say „I believe that it is warm, because I believe that the sun shines“, I do not give reasons, I tell the causal story (or some its enhancement tailored to account for *agents*<sup>8</sup>) about myself. This means that the term *belief* is systematically ambiguous: it may mean a *potential* belief, a proposition from the space of reasons that may (or may not) become somebody's belief, and it may also mean an actual belief of a concrete person. There is a belief as such, i.e. a proposition, and there is a belief of somebody - similarly as there is a pint as such (the unit of measure) and there is a pint of something. If we ask whether beliefs are broken loose from the (rest of the) world, we must first clarify which sense of belief do we mean: if it is the first one, then the question does not make much sense, for there is nothing for abstract propositions to be broken loose from (similarly as pints and meters are not broken loose from anything); and if we mean the second sense, then beliefs are

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<sup>8</sup> See footnote 3.

trivially *not* broken loose from the world: they are part of the causal world and as such they causally interact with their environment in various ways (similarly as pints of beer do, e.g. by being drunk by people).

What about, then, McDowell's worry that the rejection of the Myth of the Given „threatens to make what was meant to be empirical thinking degenerate, in our picture, into a frictionless spinning in a void“ (p. 66)? Well the upshot of our considerations so far is that we should see thinking either as a causal matter, in which case it „spins“ unproblematically within its causal surroundings, or as a matter of the justificatory relationships, in which case it does not „spin“ in anything. I am convinced that this should be the right response to the „in the void“ threat.

However, there is also the „frictionless“ threat. The causal story and the justificatory story differ in that although both must come to an end, there is no end to causes, whereas there has to be an end to reasons. Everything has, as we believe, its cause, and any causal chain can be traced back indefinitely; but there are reasons which do not require further justification, which are, so to say, justified in themselves. (This is not to say that such reasons could be distinguished once and for all - which reasons do not require further justification depends on the context of the justification, but in each context there are such reasons.) And does this not mean that such reasons are „unwarranted“, that accepting them our mind draws on willful or arbitrary foundations? That thinking is „frictionless“?

Of course not: once we see that there is no outside from where such „unwarranted“, „border“ reasons could (fail to) be sustained, we should be bound to see that they are not representations of something outside there in the world, but rather parts of the world itself. Beliefs are propositions purported to be true, and if some of them are *obviously* true, their purport thus being veridical, then they are simply what true propositions are, *viz* facts. As Brandom (1994, p. 333) puts it: „Thus a demolition of semantic categories of correspondence relative to those of expression does not involve ‘loss of the world’ in the sense that our discursive practice is then conceived as unconstrained by how things actually are. ... What is lost is only the bifurcation that makes knowledge seem to require the bridging of a *gap* that opens up between sayable and thinkable contents - thought of as existing self-contained on their side of the epistemic crevasse - and the wordly facts, existing on their side“.

If I look from the window and claim that the sun is shining, and somebody standing besides me asks „why?“, my reaction is probably not going to be to give a reason, but rather to cease to see him as a serious partner within the ‘practice of giving and asking for reasons’ (maybe only for that moment - maybe what he says is only a kind of joke, or his way of doing poetry). The fact that a claim does not need further justification does not mean that it is somehow broken loose from the world and thereby basically dubious - on the contrary, it means that it is the most indubitable<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> We must not be confused by the fact that we sometimes appear to voice further justifications by switching from the justificatory to the causal story. If somebody asks why X believes that it is warm, I can answer „because he believes that the sun shines and he infers that it is warm from it“, or „because he feels it“ or whatever: in short, I can investigate and describe the *causes of his adopting the belief*. Also if I claim „It is warm“ and somebody asks „why do you think so?“, I can sometimes

This gets us to the Kantian story about *spontaneity*: it tells us that while the inanimate world is the realm of law, the mind constitutes the realm of freedom. The mind does not simply behave according to rules, but it rather acts according to *conceptions* of rules - as it is thus possible for it to *disobey* a rule (see Brandom, 1994, §4.1). Thus, the mind is *free* in a way other objects are not.

And this leads to a further problem: if mind is free, how is it that the world forces upon it, in perception? Does it mean that perception takes place somewhere still behind the bulwarks of mind, or does it mean that mind is not as free it seems to be? This is an important theme for McDowell; and his answer is, in effect, that the space of one's beliefs does not coincide with the realm of his freedom. This squares with the fact which we urged above: namely that justification must come to an end, that every justificatory claim must end with a reason for which no justifications appears to be required (in the corresponding context). If there were any freedom with respect of the acceptance of such a reason, there would be necessarily a further „why?“.

Thus I think that if McDowell speaks about the „threat of empirical thinking degenerating into a frictionless spinning in a void“ we should see this rather as two different kinds of challenges: we have to explain why our thinking is not „frictionless“, and we have to show why it is not „in the void“. To show that it is not „frictionless“ we need to show that the realm of our beliefs does not coincide with the realm of our freedom - and making this obvious is one of the achievements of McDowell's book. On the other hand, to show that it is not „in the void“ requires, I am convinced, to show that the whole picture in which our thinking is „in something“ is basically misleading - which appears to be something McDowell is not willing to settle for.

„Thus the fate of all 'philosophical problems' is this: Some of them will disappear by being shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings of our language and the others will be found to be ordinary scientific problems in disguise“, wrote Moritz Schlick in 1932 thus expressing the opinion of a great majority of analytic philosophers of his age that philosophical problems could be dispensed with by means of a careful analysis, or indeed an adjustment, of the semantics of language. This was, no doubt, an exaggeration; but the conviction surely did have a certain rational core. Some of the problems we try to solve in philosophy *can* be dissolved by means of changing the way we see certain things and the way we speak about them. I think that the relationship between mind and the world is one of them: it is the post-Cartesian picture of mind as an 'inner space' which has given rise to most of the questions we ask now. And it is, I think, the consequential abandonment of this picture which may help us deal with them.

People like Rorty, Davidson and Brandom have done very much to bring out the misleadingness of the „representational model“ of thought. McDowell seems to think that in some respects they might have been too hasty: that in the course of cleaning away pseudoproblems they swept under the table also some genuine problems, such as the problem

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construe the question as „What has caused you to have the belief?“ and give similar kinds of explanations; otherwise the only thing I can do is to voice a reason for it being warm - if there is one.



of „empiricism“. Although his book is surely a deep discussion of many issues concerning human mind, I cannot help feeling that the author, by resurrecting the problem of empiricism, restores also a picture which we should be glad to have gotten rid of.

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