
John McDowell’s broad-ranging collection of essays will prove valuable — and challenging — to those interested in moral psychology and virtue ethics (particularly as both are pursued by Aristotle), the later Wittgenstein, and mental philosophy. Seventeen papers, spanning twenty years, are presented in four sections. The earliest paper was published in 1978, the most recent in 1998. This is the companion to a second collection compiled by the author, Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality, same publisher, same year.

The author readily acknowledges a certain amount of repetition as well as inconsistency in this body of work, but assures the reader that he has “resolutely resisted any temptation to make alterations of substance . . . .” In addition to this book’s considerable merits, certainly this is to be reckoned a virtue.

The first section, headed “Greek Ethics”, features three papers: “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics” (1980), “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology” (1998), and “Virtue and Reason” (1979). These address questions of interpretation concerning Socratic, Platonic, and especially Aristotelian ethics. McDowell’s stated aim in this section is “to counteract a way in which, as I see it, modern prejudices about rationality tend to distort our understanding of Greek ethics”. This view is all the more intriguing considering McDowell’s substantial reliance, in Essay 3, on thoroughly modern Wittgenstein on rule-following.

The second section, “Reason, Value, and Reality”, the largest of the four, contains seven essays: “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” (1978), “Might There Be External Reasons?” (1995), “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World” (1983), “Values and Secondary Qualities” (1985), “Projection and Truth in Ethics” (1987), “Two Sorts of Naturalism” (1996), and “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following” (1981). Broadly speaking, the focus in this section is on moral psychology — the role of reason in action that flows from ethical character — and on how a natural connection between reason and objectivity impinges on metaphysical issues in ethics. McDowell describes these essays as expressive of a (negatively oriented) “anti-anti-realism”, a stance that is to be understood as distinct from that of a (positively presented) moral realism. It is his contention that anti-realist positions such as emotivism and its descendants like Simon Blackburn’s projectivism “are responses to a misconception of the significance of the obvious fact that ethical, and more generally evaluative, thinking is not science”. Again Wittgensteinian considerations about rule-following make an appearance in this section, particularly in the final essay.
But the domains of moral and aesthetic theory are not the only ones within which views that go by the name of “anti-realism” are to be combated, as McDowell makes abundantly clear in the next group of essays. While in the first two sections McDowell in places exploits Wittgensteinian ideas about reason in action (rule-following, most prominently), the four essays in the third group, “Issues in Wittgenstein”, present direct readings of the philosophical iconoclast from Vienna: “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule” (1984), “Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” (1993), “One Strand in the Private Language Argument” (1989), and “Intentionality and Interiority in Wittgenstein” (1991). Of particular interest to McDowell are the implications of Wittgenstein’s work for our ideas about the world-directness of thought and talk and for our concept of an inner life. Here again we encounter a natural connection to McDowell’s concern with moral psychology. Indeed, the first of these essays, as McDowell notes, aims to entitle him to the use he makes of Wittgenstein’s observations about rule-following in Essays 3 and 10. Unsurprisingly, central ideas presented in his 1984 paper are brought to bear again in the two papers of 1991 and 1993. It is to this group — Essays 11, 12, and 14, especially — that I will direct some critical remarks in a moment.

The essays in section three provide a nice segue into the fourth and final section, “Mind and Self”. This brief section is comprised of just three papers: “Functionalism and Anomalous Monism” (1985), “The Content of Perceptual Experience” (1994), and “Reductionism and the First Person” (1997). A distinctly less cohesive group, in these papers McDowell addresses concerns pertaining to “the character of the mental in general, and of perceptual experience in particular; and the implications, for reflection about personal identity and thereby the nature of persons, of our first-person angle on our own lives and the continuity they display.”

To return, then, to section three. The main focus of these four essays is on the idea of “interiority” — in particular, the complexity of the notions of intentionality, meaning, and understanding, and their interrelations. All are bound up with, and bound together by, issues of rules and rule-following. The earliest of this group, Essay 11, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule”, is a response to two papers of Simon Blackburn’s: “Rule-Following and Moral Realism” and an early unpublished version of “The Individual Strikes Back”. McDowell also takes Saul Kripke to task for his now-famous reading of Wittgenstein as propounding in Philosophical Investigations a “sceptical solution to a sceptical paradox”. To my mind, some of the best work on Wittgenstein to that time is found here.

Concerning rule-following and the understanding of meaning, two key questions are debated. First, in what sense, if any, is our understanding of a rule, or more generally, of a concept, wholly in mind in advance of a particular new application of it? What is it for a rule to determine linguistic behavior in novel situations? Second, what role, if any, is played by the community of speakers to which one belongs in determining the correctness of one’s application of the rule (or concept)? For Wittgenstein scholars, a third issue has shot to the fore: In what sense, and to what extent, is the later Wittgenstein an anti-realist?

Kripke first. Clearly, whatever else we are to say about meaning and understanding, both relate normatively to linguistic behavior. This “contractual conception” is our common sense of being subsequently bound to abide by the meanings we have attached to expressions, something we regularly demonstrate by our commitment to maintaining certain established patterns of linguistic usage. We feel no doubt about how to go on with a numerical series, applying the rule “add 2”, for...
example, to the last number in a finite sequence to produce a number we have not previously arrived at by this means. We are bound and determined, we say, to go on in just this way. One usage is correct, another incorrect. But for Kripke this conception gives rise to a skeptical paradox, one that his Wittgenstein (a.k.a. “Kripkenstein”) embraces in the first paragraph of *PI* § 201:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was; if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

For Kripke there simply is no internal fact — no item in the individual’s mind, no disposition — that settles the issue. Naturally, this goes to the heart of our ideas about intention, also. But by now the charge is familiar: Kripke’s thesis is flawed by the citation’s blind selectivity. McDowell is surely right to fix on the remainder of the passage, and to expand upon one of Wittgenstein’s most crucial insights: understanding can neither be identified with nor reduced in every case to interpretation. Kripke’s reading fails to make room for the remainder of *PI* §201, which explicitly views the skeptical problem as resulting from confusion:

> It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases.

As McDowell shows, the skeptical problem is not Wittgenstein’s. And so neither can be any skeptical solution. Further passages in the *Investigations* can also be brought to bear on this matter. Consider what Wittgenstein says at *PI* §211: “I shall act [on an order to continue a numerical series] *without reasons*. Or at *PI* § 217: “This is simply what I do.” Or again, at *PI* §219: “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly.” The critique of Kripke is withering. In all fairness it should be acknowledged, however, that Wittgenstein’s key point — that there is a way of following a rule that is *not* an interpretation — is already flushed out by Anthony Kenny more than a decade before McDowell leverages it against Kripke (see Kenny’s *Wittgenstein*, Harvard University Press, 1973, especially pp. 175-176, where, by the way, he also anticipates Kripke’s skeptical problem).

The attack on Wright is far less clear-cut. I daresay readers will find McDowell’s reconstruction of pieces of the later Wittgenstein’s thought, although at many places both deep and subtle, somewhat less convincing.

Wright, in his *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (p. 21), voices what he takes to be a central tenet of Wittgenstein’s: “There is in our understanding of a concept no rigid, advance determination of what is to count as its correct application.” The conclusion he draws from this has as its “most striking casualty”, according to McDowell, “a familiar intuitive notion of objectivity”. Insofar as this notion features prominently in our ordinary, *non-philosophical* way of understanding meaning, it is something that McDowell seeks to defend. In the end, I am not at all sure that he succeeds.

The idea at risk is that of things being thus and so independently of our investigating the matter —
an idea that would seem to require, in McDowell’s words, “a conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway, independently of our making or ratifying any judgment that that is how they are”. A form of Michael Dummett’s anti-realism, leading from meaning to metaphysics, threatens here in the guise of a radical kind of idealism. So, then, what constitutes a grasp or meaning? Just how are we to understand understanding? For the later Wittgenstein, the preferred candidates — mental processes and so-called mental events — are clearly to be dismissed.

The effect of Wright’s reading of Wittgenstein — a destructive reconstrual, according to McDowell — goes far beyond Wittgenstein’s opposition to mathematical Platonism. But (outside the domain of mathematics) can an anti-realist label be pinned on Wittgenstein himself?

McDowell says no. Even locating the source of anti-realism in Wittgenstein’s (later) writings is to him “a travesty”. But his citing of Wittgenstein’s famous disavowal of philosophical theorizing at *PI* §128 does little to settle the matter:

> If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree with them.

It is arguable whether Wittgenstein himself everywhere abides by this dictum. His linkage of meaning and use (in passages such as *PI* §§ 41, 43, 139, 197) and his claims about the nature or proper methods of philosophy at the very least are expressive of broad views of considerable substance. More pertinent is the move to explain and justify particular applications of rules (and concepts) by appeal to a linguistic community. At *PI* §238 Wittgenstein remarks,

> The rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them as a matter of course. As much as it is a matter of course for me to call this color “blue”.

But isn’t this a matter of course? At *PI* §381 Wittgenstein says,

> How do I know that this color is red? —It would be an answer to say: I have learnt English.

I take it that this can only mean, “Learnt from others”. As Dummett has in many places demonstrated, meaning has a social character — intrinsically. What makes it a matter of course for me to apply a concept in a new circumstance, or to continue a numerical series in a particular way, is my training in a linguistic custom or practice. On page 242 McDowell writes:

> How can a performance both be nothing but a “blind” reaction to a situation, not an attempt to act on an interpretation, and be a case of going by a rule? The answer is: by belonging to a custom (*PI* 198), practice (*PI* 202), or institution (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* VI-31).

And crucially, according to Wittgenstein these “institutions” rest on a bedrock of shared behaviors or natural responses. This bedrock lies below any question of justification. Part and parcel of our human “natural history”, it is what makes our linguistic practices possible.

Now certainly, from outside a linguistic community any demand for justification of a particular application — and, equally, of any particular rule — is out of place. Really, it makes no sense. An observer who does not know how to play chess cannot sensibly challenge the legitimacy of a
player’s move. From inside, too, however, Wittgenstein seems to think this answer enough: “I have learnt English.” Wright lands himself in difficulty when, in an attempt to dismiss the idea of an individualistic (idiolectal) account of meaning and understanding — the idea of the correctness or incorrectness of an application as being determinable by oneself alone — he makes the following claim:

None of us unilaterally can make sense of the idea of correct employment of language save by reference to the authority of securable communal assent on the matter; and for the community itself there is no authority, so no standard to meet (my emphasis).

This conclusion unnecessarily confuses matters. To be sure, for the community taken as a whole there is no outside authority. But from this it does not follow that for the individuals that make up the community there exist no standards whatsoever. From an external standpoint the rules of chess are felt to possess an arbitrary character; nevertheless, playing the game does not license an unfettered liberality. It is not the case that “anything goes”. Questions of justification can indeed be raised — it is just that here they can be only internal, they address particular moves, made by individuals. True, they have their limit. As Wittgenstein says, they hit bedrock, justifications come to an end. But so what? To the question, “What justifies that move (queen takes rook, but is sacrificed to bishop)?” the answer, “I have learnt to play chess”, strikes one as wholly inadequate.

McDowell criticizes Wright for trying to have it both ways: the normative character of meaning, he claims, becomes an obstacle to Wright’s anti-realism. For, once the norms are obliterated, it does indeed seem impossible to put alongside this picture another in which the openness of an individual to correction by his fellows means that he is subject to norms. But, surely, despite the final clause of the passage above, Wright’s view cannot be that just anything goes. There would, in that case, be no rules to follow. In which circumstance, then, there would be no identifiable game at all. Linguistically, such anarchy would amount to utter nonsense. Meaning would be obliterated, as McDowell correctly observes.

A more charitable reading of Wright, however, would allow for the requisite community-wide norms, internal shared norms respected by individual speakers, while yet retaining the possibility that some of these, at least, are to be understood in a way that is compatible with the idea of truth as being investigation-dependent. I.e., with one or another form of verificationism. More on this in a moment.

Still, this core question remains: How can the whole (future) application of a term, concept, or rule be meant, grasped, or intended in advance? What is it for someone to intend that another “go on” in a specific way — that is, to continue a series, extend a pattern, apply a formula to a novel situation? At PI 187 Wittgenstein’s interlocutor says,

“But I already knew, at the time I gave the order, that he ought to write 1002 after 1000.”

Wittgenstein’s rejoinder is:

—Certainly; and you can also say you meant it then; only you should not let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words “know” and “mean”. . . . When you said “I already knew at the time . . . .” that meant something like: “If I had then been asked what number should be
written after 1000, I should have replied ‘1002’.” And that I don’t doubt.

But surely the mere absence of doubt does not carry any implication that doubt makes no sense, is logically ruled out. Here, it is far from clear to me that a demand for justification is turned like a spade on bedrock. Granting Wittgenstein’s bold assimilation of the one claim to the other, a competent speaker ought to be able to provide more in the way of justifying such a counterfactual conditional than “I have learnt English” or “I have learnt how to count (by twos)”, merely. In different contexts, a variety of conditions or circumstances are commonly appealed to with respect to the employment of this form. I cannot, of course, even attempt to broadly sketch a semantics for counterfactuals here: the literature is both too vast and too disunited. But it is certainly worth pointing out that counterfactual conditionals are arguably among the best candidates for anti-realist treatment. Dummett charges realists with having no adequate answer to the question, “What (investigation-independent) fact or state-of-affairs makes them true? Attempted answers to this line of questioning have proven notoriously problematic. Anti-realists might understandably view the interlocutor’s claim in PI 187 as itself crying out for verification.

So. Can one grasp in a flash the whole use of an expression? Grasp it, that is, in advance of actually using it in all its possible ways? Are all its uses before the mind already? McDowell cites favorably Wittgenstein’s response to his interlocutor in the interchange recorded at PI 195:

“But I don’t mean that what I do now (in grasping a sense) determines the future use causally and as a matter of experience, but that in a queer way, the use itself is in some sense present.”

—But of course it is, ‘in some sense’! Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression “in a queer way”. The rest is all right . . . .

Unfortunately, whatever this vague ‘sense’ is is left unanalyzed by McDowell. At least I can’t find an account of it in any of this group of essays. McDowell, however, seems to think that this is quite enough to preserve the kind of objectivity initially cited as being under threat. But Wittgenstein’s point here does not seem to me to be so straightforward or transparent. The rest is all right? Why?

What bothers me in his presentation of this passage is McDowell’s selective omission. It strikes me as being on a par with the very complaint he (rightly) lodges against Kripke, where the latter fails to include the portion of PI 202 in which Wittgenstein explicitly says that the skeptical paradox arises from a mistake. In this case, in PI 195 Wittgenstein identifies the feeling of queerness (of saying that the whole use of an expression is already present to one who grasps its meaning) with another, and wholly different, kind of mistake from that to which McDowell has been addressing himself. The entire sentence that McDowell cuts short with ellipses reads,

The rest is all right; and the sentence only seems queer when one imagines a different language-game for it from the one in which we actually use it.

What is missing in this debate is any discussion of one of the most central ideas, an idea that provides the context, and thus, the framework, within which the debate takes place. And that is the idea of language-games. To which also comes attached the notion of family resemblance. Why are these important here? For one thing, according to Wittgenstein the expressions “rule” and “following a rule” are themselves family resemblance terms (e.g., PI 54). That is, no one feature,
property, or general, unified set of conditions applies to each and every rule, or following of a rule. What counts as following a rule varies across different language-games, across the innumerable different activities that feature the use of spoken and written expressions among the participants. For instance, following an algebraic formula is, on this picture, quite possibly very different from following an explicit rule in chess, or an implicit, unspoken one involved in helping another to build a sand castle. In each case we feel ourselves to be guided by a rule, or set of rules; but exactly what these are may turn out on closer inspection to be quite different.

“The use itself is in some sense present.” Which language-game is the actual home of this expression? In what context, in what circumstances, does this sentence make sense? The answer is not immediately apparent. Wittgenstein is silent on the matter. But one thing seems likely enough: wherever this home turns out to be, it is not to be found in the neighborhood of any philosophical elucidation such as McDowell’s. Or, if that is its natural home, for Wittgenstein it must be immediately suspect.

One of McDowell’s chief reasons for rejecting Wright’s anti-Realism (as well as his anti-realist reading of Wittgenstein on meaning, understanding, and intending) is his view that anti-realists (such as Dummett, also) violate the “bedrock” — their demand for a justification for assertions is illegitimate because it tries to get to a level below the bedrock. But this just seems wrong. With the benefit of the ensuing years since its publication, one can confidently state that this line of argument has failed to convince many. In any case, even supposing it were true, the charge might be levied against Wittgenstein himself. Numerous passages scattered throughout his later work reveal that he did not entirely abandon his verificationist sympathies of the 1930s. The matter is not black and white, certainly. For starters, it cannot simply be treated as an all-or-nothing proposition. Realist (or anti-anti-realist) vs. realist. A false dilemma lurks here.

To be more convincing, at the very least McDowell needs to attempt a reconciliation of his reading, and those passages in Wittgenstein on which he places great weight, with other passages in the later Wittgenstein that appear to concede a role to verifiability for some forms of expression. Consider, for example, *PI* 353:

Asking whether and how a proposition can be verified is only a particular way of asking, “How d’you mean?” The answer is a contribution to [elucidating] the grammar of the proposition.

This is given more tooth, I believe, when one takes into account that a more accurate translation of the German into English of the fragment “a particular way of asking” reads, “a special form of the question” (thanks to Edwin McCann for alerting me to this). Which means, really, something along the lines of “one perfectly good way of asking”. The upshot is that for some expressions, in some circumstances, some means of verification contribute to meaning — or at least to the grasp of meaning.

Continuing a number series is one thing, and may appropriately be given a constructivist, rather than a Platonist, gloss. But how does this compare with Wittgenstein’s early example, in *PI* 1, of an individual presenting to the grocer a slip of paper on which are printed the words, “Five red apples”? The clear suggestion is that the word “five” is not to be understood, in this case, at least, as a name of any object. Naturally, objectivity need not in every case require the independent
existence of an object (object-as-referent) to yield the possibility of truth; my point here, rather, is that what are commonly taken to be mathematical expressions are used in ordinary, non-mathematical contexts, as well. Not just in descriptions, measurements, speculations, and predictions, but also in recounting dreams, asking questions, issuing orders, telling lies, guessing riddles, play acting, telling jokes, and so on, and so forth. Indeed, such expressions are unreflectively employed by ordinary speakers across the whole unsurveyable gamut of language-games that Wittgenstein provides as examples at PI 23 and elsewhere in Philosophical Investigations. And here we encounter a problematic tension in Wittgenstein’s later ideas concerning meaning and use. One that threatens to render moot the entire line of questioning above (about grasping or intending the whole use of an expression).

At PI 139 Wittgenstein writes,

When someone says the word “cube” to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole use of the word come before my mind, when I understand it in this way? Well, but on the other hand isn’t the meaning of the word also determined by this use? And can these ways of determining meaning conflict? Can what we grasp in a flash accord with a use, fit or fail to fit it? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before our mind in an instant, fit a use?

Briefly, what I take Wittgenstein to be pointing to at the end of this passage, in the final two sentences, is the ungrammaticality of the question (about fitting and use). He goes on to explore the natural suggestion that a picture might come before the mind, and might suggest a certain use to us; but he proceeds to show that no picture, indeed nothing that’s “before the mind”, can determine a use, or force a particular use on us.

But it is the first two sentences in the above passage that begin to show the cracks caused by the doctrine of meaning-as-use butting up against the idea of language-games. On the one hand, the assimilation of meaning to use amounts to the view that the meaning of an individual expression is comprised of all its various uses or applications. On the other hand, we are confronted with the idea that ‘use’ can only be understood to signify ‘use in a language-game’. When someone says the word “cube” to me, I know what it means. This can be because I am completely familiar with all of its uses (actual and possible); or, it can because I am familiar with the way this person is using it in this particular language-game.

These two ways of understanding meaning are quite different. They are also at odds with each other. If, as Wittgenstein observes in many places, an expression used “outside the language-game which is its home” amounts to either a change in meaning or produces nonsense, then different uses in different language-games correspond to different meanings. Thus the innocent-sounding question, “What does the word ‘cube’ mean?” really has no answer. The question shows up a mistake. The word has a meaning only within the confines of a describable language-game. And these are neither finite nor fixed. The rules of one game are wholly independent of those of another. This means that the employment of a term in a particular game (the rules which determine its use in that game) can tell us nothing about how the same term (orthographically identified) is to function in some heretofore unimagined or yet-to-be-invented game. It establishes no pattern. Across different language-games, there simply is no such thing as “going on in the same way”. One can ask what a word means as it is used in this or in that game. One cannot meaningfully ask simply,
“What does w mean?”

I myself cannot subscribe to the doctrine of language-games. A word like ‘ladder’, I submit, does not change meaning between its uses in describing a ladder, measuring a ladder, requesting a ladder, telling a lie or telling a joke about a ladder. With Bede Rundle (Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy of Language, Blackwell, 1993) I believe that only a slightly more sophisticated version of the (naïve) Augustinian picture of such terms that Wittgenstein criticizes in the early part of the Investigations will suffice to account for our common grasp of them. I understand the term ‘ladder’ — in all its uses — because I have a grasp of what it refers to. Jacob’s ladder, the hard to climb ladder of success, these and other figurative or non-literal uses are explicable on the basis of the standard conditions. Here, too, it should be pointed out, Frege’s notions of sense and reference are workable. But this need not entail realism.

One of the weaker aspects of McDowell’s argument in the four papers in this section, and especially in Essay 11, is his embrace of Davidson’s truth-conditional semantics. Undeniably, one the most significant things jettisoned by Wittgenstein in the transition from the Tractatus to the Investigations is a truth-conditional theory of meaning — at least, as a model for all types of expressions or uses of language. One wants to demand of McDowell just how such a systematic theory of meaning can be in keeping with the Wittgensteinian dictum (of PI 128) cited earlier, to the effect that it is not the proper business of philosophers to advance theses (because it would not be possible to debate them). McDowell, especially in the companion collection of essays, in clear violation of Wittgenstein’s disavowal of theorizing goes to some length to strengthen and support the Davidsonian systematic model. (Recently, however, McDowell has adopted a more critical stance to this model in his book Mind and World, Harvard University Press, 2003.)

In part 12 of Essay 11 McDowell resolutely stands by the centrality of Tarski-style T-sentences, with their explicit truth-conditions. McDowell writes (p. 255):

That [truth-conditional] conception has no need to camouflage the fact that truth-conditions are necessarily given by us, in a language we understand. When we say “‘Diamonds are hard’ is true if and only if diamonds are hard”, we are just as much involved on the right-hand side as the reflections on rule-following tell us we are. There is a standing temptation to miss this obvious truth, and to suppose that the right-hand side somehow presents us with a possible fact, pictured as a unconceptualized configuration of things in themselves. But we can find the connection between meaning and truth illuminating without succumbing to that temptation.

This may be; but it is impossible for me to understand how this “involvement” with truth-conditions (whatever it amounts to) coheres with the “familiar intuitive notion of objectivity” which McDowell started out in this essay to defend. As I see it, our familiar intuitive notion makes no concession to a human involvement in the constitution or determination of (objective) facts, and as such bears little resemblance to the more sophisticated, philosophical conception that McDowell presents in the above passage.

Second, it has been widely acknowledged, since well before the original publication of this essay, that the invocation of T-sentences does not by itself presuppose a realist notion of truth. Indeed, what is centrally at stake between Dummett and Davidson in realist-anti-realist controversy is precisely the correct construal of truth: truth simpliciter vs. in-principle- knowable truth. Which of
these actually allows T-sentences to do the work for which purpose they are introduced? As we have seen, the later Wittgenstein explicitly leaves room for some variant of the latter notion to play a role in the meaning of certain expressions.

McDowell also claims that because they hold that “initiation into a common language consists in acquisitions of linguistic propensities without use of the notion of meaning”, anti-realists cannot make sense of shared minds in a community. But his argument here (pp. 249-254) arguably applies to Davidson, as well. Certainly it ignores one prominent aspect of the Quine-inspired approach to assigning meanings (to the speech-acts of members of an unfamiliar linguistic community). The point is made by the observation that, as beginning learners of our own native tongue, we are in the same position as a radical translator exposed for the first time to a foreign tribe. If the anti-realist is confined to producing a coherent, sense-making account of communal linguistic behavior without invoking a notion of content from the start, and if, as McDowell claims, this results in some sort of explanatory deficiency, it is hard to see how realists like Davidson fare any better. Right or wrong, Davidson’s “principle of charity”, the presumption that the speakers around us “hold true” certain utterances, is behavioristic at its core; it provides no special comfort to realists. Davidson builds to a (tentative) assignment of content in stages, but does not have access to meanings from the start.

Moreover, the notion of truth that gets fully developed in this approach is a relativized one. It is not truth per se, but “truth-in-L”. So, again, one wants to ask: Exactly what familiar, intuitive notion of objectivity does McDowell in the end preserve? The notion found in Davidson is clearly a philosopher’s sophistication — i.e., a theoretical one. — Certainly not an ordinary, unreflective, pre-philosophical one.

Ultimately, the question as to whether or not Wittgenstein is an anti-realist with respect to ordinary (non-mathematical) discourse is a red herring. As Dummett has nicely articulated, a number of different philosophical positions conform to the general label. Every bit as important is the distinction between global and local versions. One can be an anti-realist about the past or about other minds, about counterfactuals or about mathematics, say, without thereby forsaking a realist view concerning other matters or forms of expression. With respect to the later Wittgenstein, then, only a careful examination of what he says about each distinct candidate expression can possibly advance our estimation of his place within recent and current debates on realism and anti-realism — on the likes of “verifiability” and “decidability” and their ilk.

To my knowledge the most thorough, and most successful, attempt to do just this has been made by Bede Rundle (op. cit.). Decidability, the stronger requirement of Dummett, might not find suitable soil in which to take root in ordinary (non-mathematical) discourse. But in certain cases, the weaker demands of verifiability arguably can and do. The two must not be conflated. There is much to praise in McDowell’s exposition on Wittgenstein’s reflections on rule-following. But one thing I find conspicuously lacking is any attempt to incorporate Wittgenstein’s later ideas on the connections of verifiability to intending, understanding, and meaning. The extent to which this might affect McDowell’s account of the role of reason in ethics is perhaps a question worth revisiting. But this is a matter for another place and time.

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