

### **The Myth of the Given: The Last Act**

*A philosophy professor came to see MrKeuner and told him about his wisdom. After a while Mr K. said to him: "You sit uncomfortably, you talk uncomfortably, you think uncomfortably."The philosophy professor became angry and said: "I didn't want to hear anything about myself but about the substance of what I was talking about." "It has no substance,"said MrKeuner, "I see you walking clumsily and, as far as I can see, you're not getting anywhere. You talk obscurely, and you create no light with your talking. Seeing your stance, I'm not interested in what you're getting at."*

B. Brecht, *The Stories of MrKeuner*

And yet, we may think; MrKeuner could very well have talked about the substance of the philosopher's words, only he did not really care to do so, given the philosopher's attitude. There is a possibility we are resisting here. And the possibility is that MrKeuner really meant what he said. "It (what the philosopher says) has no substance. How does MrKeuner know? He has *seen* the philosopher's stance: the clumsy walk, the uncomfortable sitting, the obscure talk, the uncomfortable thinking. We resist because we fantasize that when we have access to what someone says we may have access to something as it is in itself; that is, without the mediation of anything that may be involved in the saying. The philosopher in Berthold Brecht's stories resists MrKeuner's criticism in this fantastical frame of mind.

The philosopher in John McDowell's *Mind and World* presents the anatomy of this fantastical frame of mind with regard to thinking that is of the external world. Like the philosopher in Brecht's stories, we may fantasize that when our thoughts are about the external world, we may have access to something as it is in itself; that is, without the mediation of anything that may be involved in the thinking of it. And, like MrKeuner, John McDowell will not have this.

But, should you be interested in what McDowell has to say? I'm here today to tell you why, seeing his stance, you should be. And this, seeing his stance will, if MrKeuner is right, tell us something about the substance of what he has to say.

Here is what I can say: When, at the age of 25 I was dispatched to the former capital of the steel industry of the U.S., Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, to join the Pittsburgh school of Philosophy, I was already aware of the book, the author and their aura. Suspicious as I was of auras, I resisted reading *Mind and World*. Who was this man, after all? Why be interested? I sat in on his classes

without understanding and I started writing papers for him in an effort to figure out what he might want from me, that is, who he was. First I copied others. Then I copied him. Finally I copied myself. Nothing worked. Over and over again I tried and over and over again I failed; he remained perfectly unimpressed. I had no idea who he was and what he wanted from me. Until at some point I realized that he was interested in what *I* was thinking. And thus slowly over the years he taught me how to think.

He was a peculiar man. You would walk into his office and he would sit in his armchair, always already in place, never in motion, never in the middle of another business, always already in *medias res* with you, with the printed copy of your paper on his lap. All it took was for you to sit in the chair right across from him, and philosophy happened. All that mattered now was and always had been it seemed like, *your work*. *Your* thinking. There is something I'm not understanding very well, he'd say, and point to your paper; on page 36 you say "X", but right in the beginning of the paper you say something that doesn't boat well with "X". -Oh well, yes, I know, but I *really* meant to say this. But he would not give up. He would say the same thing. Tirelessly. Over and over again, until you could see that there was nothing you *really* meant, as your thinking was oscillating between two thoughts. Over and over again, until you could see that there was something else that needed to be said, something to make the uncertainty and the oscillation unnecessary. At times I'd get pissed off. I would interrupt him, raise the tone of my voice, and argue back in an effort to fight off defeat. Then I'd go home and think and write and read and talk to others, and 3, 4, 7, months later I'd have a moment where I'd go "Oh, *this* is what he meant". And it was never a defeat. It was always only understanding; light showing the truth, that was until then only partially and dimly seen. Light created by his talking.

And sometimes I even resented him. I'd have written down a laborious and intricate argument for something I'd have thought, and he would look at me straight in the eyes and tell me, "Oh, but what you argue for seems to me dead wrong." - But I have this argument, I'd respond, not having learnt to care for the truth in quite the right way. And he would just look at me and say "But the opposite seems to me dead right." What do you know about the truth, I would think to myself. And what I means was What do I know about the truth; I can only do arguments. But no tricks and no argumentative gimmicks, however intricate and elaborate, would work with him. In that chair across from that man, I learned that thinking *rests* at the true and that reason creates light in which the true is to be seen and not rhetorical tools.

And I also learned that not only it was within my right, but also my obligation to create this light for truth and not for my theses. The first time I knew I had written what I thought, and after more than an hour of talking about it, I asked him: "So, what did you think of it?". He said "Didn't I just tell you?", I said "No, I mean did you like it? - Did you find it interesting?". I knew that he was interested, he had spent over an hour talking about it, but I had wanted more. I had wanted external vindication of something that was my job to vindicate. He said "You wrote it, if anyone you're the one who should know whether it is interesting or not." There was never any room for non commitment, never any room for self-exculpation, never any room for excuses in his office. And thus, this man slowly over the years taught me to look for the truth by respecting myself, my capacities and my limitations and by claiming responsibility for them.

Sit comfortably, talk comfortably and think comfortably was what this man did and always demanded of his students. And this, at once in practice and in theory. You could not say I said this but I really meant that. You could not care for your pet argument more than about the truth of it. And you could not ask him to share your responsibility for what you had said. And thus he taught that if reason is restless there is work to be done; *sit comfortably*. That if your reason does not rest at the true its toil is worthless; *think comfortably*. And, that if *you* are not answerable for your words, then you and I can never hope to find the truth together; *talk comfortably*.

And this is what we see Mind and World doing too.

*To Sit comfortably.*

Mind and World starts with a specific restlessness. We are in *medias res*. We are trying to think the thought that our thought is of the external world. But our reason keeps switching places with itself. Right as it tries to think the one thought, this becomes another. If our thought is to count as truly being of the world that is external, then it should be constrained by it in a way that gives us reasons and not just excuses for thinking what we think. But if what we think of must constrain our thought, then it seems as if it must lie outside our thought. But if it must lie outside our thought, then it cannot be what we think of. And, thus, right as we try to think that our thought is of the external world we end up thinking that the external world must lie outside of what we can think.

This restlessness may make us think that the external world constraints our thinking only as what causes what we think and never as what gives us a reason for what we think; that all the grounds

that there are for what we think are other thoughts of ours. But this picture makes the very idea of a rational constraint unrecognizable.

It seems as if there is no place for reason to rest.

*To Think comfortably.*

Mind and World then looks for a resting place for reason, not merely by showing the places reason keeps switching with itself to be wrong, but by thinking what each place has such that it demands departure from it and what each place has such that it demands return to it.

What in the first position demands departure from it is the thought that what constraints our thought of the external world by grounding it should be conceived of as what must lie outside of what we can think. But what invites return to it is the thought that the external world can only constraint our thought in the relevant sense by grounding it and not by causing it.

To think towards the resting place of reason then, Mind and World instructs us, we need to find a way to free our thought from what invites departure from it and save in it what invites return to it. And this is what McDowell sets out to do in the rest of Mind and World.

*To talk comfortably.*

McDowell in the rest of Mind and World explains how *he* thinks we should understand our thought that is of the external world. He thinks that the external world can at once constraint our thought and ground it if we understand our capacity to experience it in a certain way. If we understand, that is, the capacity to experience it as at once our capacity to be passive with regard to the fact that we receive the world and our capacity to be active with regard to the fact that we receive the world in concepts, that is as thinkable material.

But if this possibility is to be convincing we should also know why it remained hidden. And this, McDowell claims, is not because it has been hard for people to think of passivity per se together with activity per se, but because passivity is conceived of as the realm of nature and activity as the realm of reason and freedom, and it has been difficult for people to think of the realm of nature and the realm of reason together. And this, McDowell thinks, is because it has been difficult for people to think of reason in the realm of nature; the difficulty has been that we tend to think of the realm of nature as the realm of law and the realm of reason as the realm of freedom, and it has been difficult to conceive of the realm of freedom in the realm of law. And, here again, McDowell thinks, there is a certain restlessness that may befall reason. We may either think that the realm of freedom and a fortiori reason lies outside the realm of the natural or we may think

that the realm of reason is to be reduced to the realm of law. But both positions are untenable, McDowell thinks; both invite a departure from and a return to. What invites departure from is the thought that the realm of reason is in the realm of law and what invites return to is the thought that the realm of freedom and a fortiori reason is in the realm of nature.

The two realms (freedom and law) must be conceived of as *suis generis* and that freedom is natural.

But there is a way to rest from this oscillation. McDowell thinks that we should widen our understanding of the realm of nature beyond the realm of law to include the realm of freedom. If we pay heed to Aristotle's ethical works, we will find there the conception of a capacity to be in tune with moral facts, such that one must be habituated into a way of life, if one is to be capable of exercising it, that is, of recognizing the moral facts one is in tune with as facts. Now if we leave morality out of the picture, we suggest that, similarly, to exercise our capacity to reason is to live in certain way. But this, living is a natural thing beyond doubt, and hence this, our capacity to exercise our reason and a fortiori our freedom is also a natural capacity beyond doubt; what he calls second nature, when contrasted to nature as the realm of law, which McDowell calls the first nature.

But this McDowell thinks, and this brings me to the closing line, we cannot conceive of this second nature, as what the kind of living that the human beings may enjoy independently from the first nature. This, would be to revert to what McDowell calls rampant Platonism. No, he says, we should both conceive of the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> nature as separate and we should also conceive of the 2<sup>nd</sup> nature as constrained by the 1<sup>st</sup>. As he himself says: "Second nature could not float free of potentialities that belong to a normal human organism. This gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science." - p. 84-

AND LIMIT QUOTE

But, and here's how I would like to close this presentation, reason doesn't sit comfortably here.

Which means that there is work that needs to be done. If our second nature is the life we live because we have the capacity to be free, to reason, and our first nature is the life we live because our bodies fall under biological laws, then to even be able to recognize a sense in which our 1<sup>st</sup> nature might constraint our 2<sup>nd</sup> nature, we should be able to recognize what constraints our life as thinking beings as belonging to *our* life. In other words, we should be able to understand something that is thinkable as falling under laws as something that can also be thought of as what *I* do. But now this may make us think that the realm of law and freedom are no longer *suis*

generis. Or it may make us think that 1<sup>st</sup> nature constraints our 2<sup>nd</sup> nature in the sense that it is constitutes a sort of living that is different than the sort of living that actualizations of our second nature constitute, and that it as a matter of fact makes some of these latter actualizations impossible. But if the two realms of intelligibility are no longer *suis generis*, then the idea of a constraint on second nature fails. If, on the other hand, the 1<sup>st</sup> nature constraints 2<sup>nd</sup> nature by simply making some of its actualization impossible, then we will not be able to identify the life of our 1<sup>st</sup> nature as *our* life; we will not even be able to identify our bodies as *our* bodies. And the constraint will once more not be the one we are looking for.

Thus, to sit comfortably in our thinking of what he thinks, we should hold McDowell answerable to what he says, and we should ask him: How is it that the operations or functions of our 1<sup>st</sup> nature may be recognized as belonging to the business of *our* living without discarding the distinctness between the two realms?; because if they are not, we cannot keep a reasonable conception of the idea of 1<sup>st</sup> nature constraining our 2<sup>nd</sup> nature.

Dear Friends, I hope I have said something to show that this is a book you should be interested in.

Dear John, I wish you spoke modern Greek to see what you would have written if you had written your book in Greek.

Dear Thanos, thank you for this great Greek book.

Dear Aristeides, I had to read the book in Greek to see that you were right about it.

Thank you all.

To the Lighthouse

*And back*

I always read McDowell with the excitement of dread. That I will find in his writings either what I think or the opposite.

If the former, then I have no way of knowing that what I think is mine. And if the latter, then I have a way of knowing that what I think is false. In both cases, I lose.

And in both cases I'm wrong. But, in both cases I'm wrong in a way that is intelligible under a certain anxiety. The anxiety resembles the one that McDowell describes in his book: that there be something external to our thought that makes our thought true, or even better that there be something external to our thought that guarantees that our thought is of what is external. But how about the first part of my anxiety? The anxiety that my thought will not be mine? This again is similar to a fantasy that McDowell describes in the book, a fantasy that originates in the neglect of our true social being, and expresses itself as the worry that the only thing that can provide this guarantee is something that can only be pointed at, and thus something that is essentially private.

In this great and fascinating book, McDowell laboriously explains that we do not have to accept either thesis to explain to ourselves how it is possible for our thought to be of the external world. What they both involves us in is theses that intolerable: The thesis is the possibility of bare presences. Sorts of being which lie outside thought but which are supposed to be the proper objects of thought. McDowell in this book explain why this thesis is intolerable, it makes thought and in particular empirical content unrecognisable as such. We have to reject this possibility. But this, McDowell shows does not leave us helpless, for there is an alternative. We can make sense of the possibility of our thought being of the external world if we understand our thought as being the outcome of the joined activity of two capacities, one passive and one active. The reason we think this impossible is that we have relegated the entirety of nature to the realm of law; we have not kept room for the second nature; the appearance of human life and activity under the sign of freedom and reason.