Knowledge and the Space of Reasons: The Ideas of John McDowell and Paul Hirst

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In this essay I develop an epistemological perspective that argues for the central role that knowledge plays in education. I do this first of all by elaborating John McDowell's ideas on the "space of reasons."[1] I then use this concept to reinterpret and develop the concept of the "forms of knowledge" associated with Paul Hirst.[2] I argue that the forms of knowledge can be seen as inhabiting the space of reasons. I then show how one of the key features of the space of reasons — the making of judgments — is also a key feature of education and learning.

Second Nature and the Space of Reasons

I will begin by giving a brief account of McDowell's epistemological position. His exposition is wide-ranging but the force of his argument is lost unless its different strands are held together. His starting point is Immanuel Kant's well-known remark that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind,"[3] which McDowell thinks underpins what he sees as a pernicious, oscillating dualism. On the one side is, borrowing from Wilfred Sellars, the "Myth of the Given," and on the other side is a coherentism that McDowell attributes to Donald Davidson.[4] The problem with relying on the "given" is that it is not clear how the relation between sense experience and concept can be considered as one of genuine justification since unalloyed, bare sense data is simply "other" to conceptual thought. Hence we are obliged to veer toward Davidson's view that the only thing that can count for holding a belief is another belief. Yet this approach, McDowell thinks, condemns us to a "frictionless spinning in a void," and we are recoiled back to the myth of the given in order to find some kind of constraint or underpinning to our beliefs (*MW,* 11). Davidson's solution to this (that the relation of belief to the world must be causal) is certainly an explanation of our beliefs (or conceptual scheme), but it is not a *justification* of them: for, according to McDowell, I cannot justify those beliefs in terms that make sense from the standpoint of those beliefs.

McDowell's proposed solution is in two stages. First, he insists that receptivity at its most basic, passive level is always conceptual: there must indeed be constraint on beliefs but this constraint need not be outside what is thinkable. Moreover, this "thinkable content" is linked to a wider repertoire of content without which individual bits of receptivity could not be experienced as anything intelligible (*MW,* 28). It is because of this that "experience" never comes without conceptual content: for example, in color discrimination I understand the concept of "red" as not blue or green and this understanding characterizes color experience as well so that there is not a two stage process of, first, the onset of raw sense data followed by, second, some internal processing of this data. Yet, McDowell is also insistent that this conceptualized experience does act as a constraint upon belief that potentially can answer to

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worlds being "thus and so" (*MW,* 26). But it is the second stage of the solution that moves the whole argument up a gear. McDowell proposes that humankind has a "second nature" in which sensory processes and other experiences that we share with the natural world become saturated with conceptual meaning. This formation and acculturation is analogous to the development of ethical dispositions and practical reasoning so that what McDowell is proposing is an Aristotelian form of habituation that extends beyond the ethical into the domain of the epistemological. That is to say, experience is formed through a receptivity that is itself conceptualized. This habituation into the world, not only through the formation of dispositions, but through the development of our very cognitive faculties, suggests, McDowell thinks, that experience is never directly of the "given" (for example, in the form of raw sense data) but is impregnated with what he terms "conceptual content." This implies that an experience has a cognitive admixture, so that, for example, a certain level of meaning is also conveyed even if this is inchoate and indistinct.

I have mentioned in passing the analogy with an Aristotelian account of the development of virtues, but interestingly, McDowell draws on two further historical accounts of this habituation to the world. One suggestion is that it is possible to interpret the account of *praxis* in Karl Marx's early writings in terms of a second nature that arises out of human activity itself (*MW,* 117–19). Indeed, when Marx criticizes traditional materialism for supposing that the world is experienced passively, "in the form of an object or perception," as opposed to being the product of "sensuous, human activity," then there is indeed a close parallel to the criticism McDowell makes of traditional empiricism, which stands accused of falling victim to the myth of the given.[5] The conceptualizing of receptivity plays the same role for McDowell as conceiving human activity in terms of *praxis* did for Marx: it is not just that the world is transformed through human activity, but the way in which that world is *experienced* is also transformed. If this is the case, then the theory of alienation itself could be recast and reinterpreted as nothing less than the alienation from the flourishing of this second nature. This could arise through the brutalization of social and working conditions that reduce a person to the point of enjoying only the animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating (*MW,* 118).

Further, McDowell appeals to the concept of *Bildung*: second nature is also a function of upbringing and self-formation (*MW,* 87–8). What this suggests is that the development of second nature is not only the inevitable by-product of linguistic practices but is also something that can be purposefully shaped and nurtured. And this development may not only occur at the level of belief but also through what might be termed the aestheticization of experience. The sculpting of the antennae of experiencing — that is, the cognitive and emotional process through which content is drawn in and interpreted — is something that can be purposefully crafted. It is not that experiences — in terms of their content — are somehow neutrally drawn in and then subject to an internal processing that varies depending on what kind of dispositions and character a person has developed. Rather the very mode of experiencing itself — that is, the character of the experience — is subject to cultural and educative formation. Second nature is not a black box, internal to each of us, marked

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"personal development"; rather, it is manifest in all the different ways in which the process of experiencing itself takes place.

Thus the idea of the space of reasons emerges as the realm in which justifications for beliefs are sought, from the standpoint of agents who have developed a second nature. It is conceptualized experience, in the form of beliefs, which enable there to be a space of reasons since it becomes possible to challenge experience at the level of justification. On the one hand, the space of reasons constitutes the structure within which meanings and intelligibility emerge; on the other hand, it is not merely self-generating without any constraint. The space of reasons does not dissolve the dualism of mind and world: rather, it provides a way of thinking through that relationship.

In a later essay, McDowell links experience to judgment so that it is proposed that "what we need and can have is the idea of a case of receptivity in operation that, even while being that, is an actualization, together, of conceptual capacities whose active exercise, with the same togetherness, would be the making of a judgment."[6] If we construe judgment as making up one's mind about how things are — as coming to have a view of the world — then we can see that the process of judging is emblematic of what the space of reasons is about because, of course, my judgment may come to be questioned by others and, indeed, by myself. In judging I am proposing a view of the world that is quite different from merely *asserting* that things are thus and so. The space of reasons must be able to permit more than mere assertion and counter assertion if the process of justification is to be given room. Moreover, the process of judgment (as opposed to assertion) would not be possible without the possibility of constraints on what seems reasonable. And these constraints do not merely arise from the counterjudgments of others but also from their having a world in view that is the *same world* for each. For without this there would merely be so many conceptual schemes each with their own, separate world in view: the very essence, that is, of an epistemological frictionless spinning in a void.

It may be thought that a different view of McDowell's perspective is feasible. This could take the form of treating the justificatory character of the space of reasons as essentially naïve, a realm that in time will be replaced by a naturalist discourse that will be satisfied with descriptions of states of affairs (be they mental or nonmental) and causal explanations of them. Nature is best considered, on this view, as the "disenchanted" realm of law that is impervious to human design and intentionality. According to McDowell, such a standpoint sets up two contrasting (and ultimately futile) paths: first, that of "bald naturalism" (which insists that our space of reasons be recast so that it coincides with the realm of law; and, second, rampant platonism, in which the space of reasons is cut off from nature entirely and permitted to pursue its own introverted and unfettered purposes (*MW,* 76–7; 77–8). The problem with bald naturalism is that its reductivist program in effect writes spontaneity out of the relation between mind and world; the problem with rampant platonism is that spontaneity — the operations of the understanding, suitably structured — is treated as *sui generis* and nature treated as a mere side effect of its deliverances. McDowell's position can be seen as an attempt to think through the tensions between mind and

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world and, at the same time, resist temptations to dissolve one of these two terms into the other.

What starts as an epistemological problem of the relation between mind and world is addressed not only through an alternate epistemology but also through a historicization of knowing and belief in the account of second nature. The clear implication of McDowell's argument is that education and learning take place in the space of reasons. Does the development of second nature take place simply through participation in a language community, or can it (indeed, must it) be subject to further guidance, development, art, and purpose? Presumably, the nurturing of the space of reasons must surely be a purposeful endeavor: paradoxically, the development of the realm within which spontaneity flourishes cannot be left to chance. Yet the development of second nature should not be supposed to take on the character of extrinsic, instrumental purpose, as if learning to live within the space of reasons is merely a goal that can be achieved through extra hard work and forward planning. This is not only because the process of learning and acquiring second nature is one of living a life but also because the constraints on the space of reasons — encountering a world that is "thus and so" — ensures that the best laid plans and goals may be frustrated. The development of second nature is not a process that can be brought about by means of a comprehensive pedagogic strategy. The role of pedagogy must be conceived along more modest lines.

Would the extrusion of the realm of law from second nature imply that scientific approaches to learning are inherently misguided as an attempt, knowingly or not, to fashion human sensibility in ways of non-spontaneity? What McDowell calls "bald naturalism" is a form of reductivism — whereby the space of reasons gets overwritten by natural law. We can see, once we reject bald naturalism, why the space of reasons must be *sui generis* (without lapsing into rampant platonism). The implication is that approaches to teaching and learning that are dictated by science (for example, by forms of behaviorism) amount to bald naturalism. This implies that teaching and learning must employ the methods appropriate to the space of reasons — justification and judgment. Learning to live within the space of reasons cannot be brought about through causal means.

"Forms of Knowledge" and the Space of Reasons

If the purpose of education is to develop the capacity to act and judge within the space of reasons then what role does the acquisition of knowledge play? The seminal essay on the relation between knowledge and education by Paul Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge" is still, in my view, very instructive. The essay is in four parts. The first part focuses on the role of knowledge drawn from a reading of ancient philosophy that envisages the development of mind through knowledge, which both furnishes a knowing of reality in terms of truth and, through this process, also plays a central role in the development of the good life. Knowledge therefore plays, on this reading, both an epistemological and an ethical role. In the second part, Hirst considers certain modern (in fact, mid-twentieth century) proponents of the idea that the purpose of education is to cultivate certain attributes of mind (such as, effective thinking, communication, and ethical judgment). He

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makes quick work of showing that such attributes cannot be developed without disciplinary (subject) engagement in which is embedded what counts as effective thinking, good communication, and the like (*LE,* 90–5). In the fourth section, Hirst elaborates in more detail what he envisages to be a knowledge-led curriculum, of which the details need not concern us since over the passage of time new disciplines and subdisciplines have emerged while others have receded.[7] It is the third part of the essay that is of most interest here.

Hirst begins by disavowing the suggestion in the first part of the essay — namely, that the relation between knowledge, mind, and reality has a "metaphysical" basis — and initially goes on to suggest that the relation between mind and knowledge is rather "logical," such that the achievement of knowledge "necessitates" the development of mind. This thought, however, is not developed and Hirst then goes on to suggest that the focus of knowledge is rather "experience, structured under some conceptual scheme" (*LE,* 97). "Experience" is explained in terms of "sense perceptions, emotions or different elements of the understanding" which it is suggested "are intelligible only by virtue of the conceptual apparatus by which they are articulated" (*LE*, 97). This sounds as though Hirst, in separating out experiences as such from the conceptual apparatus through which they become known, is sailing perilously close to the muddy waters of the myth of the given. What emerges, however, is that forms of knowledge become coextensive with forms of experience. For, first, experiences can only be articulated through conceptual forms — they can only be recognized as experiences of such and such character because they are presented and articulated through a conceptual apparatus. Second, the system of concepts takes the form of publicly known and shared criteria for their application — it is this that allows experiences to be recognized, evaluated, and compared. Third, this structuring of experience is not confined to traditional academic divisions of knowledge since "the forms of knowledge are the basic articulations whereby the *whole* of experience has become intelligible to man" (*LE*, 98, emphasis added). The generation of knowledge — that conceptual apparatus through which experience becomes intelligible — pervades the whole of experiences of humankind. The clear implication is that experience is constituted through the forms of knowledge: "it is by its terms that the life of man in every particular is structured and ordered … without its structure all other forms of consciousness, including for example, emotional experiences, or mental attitudes and beliefs would seem to be unintelligible" (*LE,* 98). This thought is developed further under the fourth characteristic of Hirst's conception, namely that the experiences we undergo must not be thought as primary or foundational but are themselves in part the product of meditation, evaluation, and validation of those publicly specified criteria that identify and articulate experiences themselves (*LE,* 97–8).

Although Hirst postulated the concept "forms of knowledge," I show that this could just as well have been recast as "forms of experience." It is often supposed that Hirst proposed the forms of knowledge in terms of so-called "propositional knowledge" — inert statements bundled into disciplinary domains that generations of children and students are obliged to learn, repeat, and forget.[8] It is assumed, in other words, that the forms of knowledge are disconnected from experience, whereas in

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fact they arise from a certain understanding of the structuring of experience. I want to suggest, then, that to the extent that the "forms of knowledge" characterize the articulation and intelligibility of experience, they inhabit the space of reasons and are pervaded by this space. Forms of knowledge can be seen as clusters within that space and as exemplifying the character of that space, namely giving and justifying reasons. One of the problems, however, with Hirst's theory of knowledge is that he never quite differentiated between what McDowell terms the "realm of law" (that is, the realm of causal explanation, fetishization of which leads to bald naturalism), and the space of reasons, namely that justificatory realm in which experience of the world is made intelligible. If, then, the forms of knowledge are identified solely with the realm of law, it is not difficult to see — indeed, it is perfectly understandable — why so many have had problems with it. Nevertheless, Hirst does make it clear that the forms do include (for example) moral knowledge, literary and aesthetic appreciation, as well as the traditional disciplines in the sciences and mathematics.

However, apart from the space of reasons/realm of law distinction, there is another feature that plays an increasingly major role as McDowell's analysis has developed and that is also a crucial feature of the forms of knowledge, once viewed through the perspective of the space of reasons. This is the role played by judgment, namely the ability to constitute a state of affairs as having certain features and to evaluate their relative importance. Judgment is usually contextual so that the discrimination of a state of affairs (which, it should be noted, can be mental or nonmental or a combination of these) is situated within a wider understanding. When we refer to the forms of knowledge as underpinning educational purposes, then the ability to make judgments occupies a central place. Learning does not merely consist of the mastery of concepts and information: what we are looking for is the ability to make judgments. Understood in this way, learning becomes an active process that engages and challenges the learner in two distinct ways.

The first links judgment and responsibility, and it is described by McDowell in these terms:

> judging can be singled out as the paradigmatic mode of actualization of conceptual capacities, the one in terms of which we should understand the very idea of conceptual capacities in the relevant sense. And judging, making up our minds what to think, is something for which we are in principle responsible — something we freely do, as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives … and this freedom, exemplified in responsible acts of judging, is essentially a matter of being answerable to criticism in the light of rationally relevant considerations. So the realm of freedom, at least the freedom of judging, can be identified with the space of reasons.[9]

Roughly speaking, there will be at least some of our beliefs for which we are less likely to be held to account in the sense that they are formed through the world's being "thus and so." But supervening on such beliefs are a complex of beliefs — judgments — for which we *are* accountable. Engagement with forms of knowledge is therefore a risky endeavor since we are responsible for our judgments and being able to account for them is also what one has to do if one lives within a space of reasons. The kinds of judgments one makes, as far as learning is concerned, will range from the theoretical and the interpretive down to the severely practical. For example, the deliverance of a judgment may be a decision on which form of

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clinical treatment is most appropriate, on the one hand to a judgment that assesses the weight of responsibility accruing to Germany in terms of the causes of the World War I, on the other. The learner, in acting and making judgments thereby becomes accountable. Viewing the forms of knowledge through the perspective of the space of reasons brings this out.

The second feature is the way in which subjective or agent-centered considerations must be laid aside. When Hirst speaks of knowledge that is subject to publicly specified criteria, we can see that coming to be acquainted with such criteria helps us extrude personal considerations in reaching a judgment. That one is held personally accountable for making judgments in accordance with impersonal criteria takes some time — many years — in learning, and if the beginnings of this are started in primary schooling, it certainly takes the whole experience of education at all levels before the appropriate habituation is in place. The paradox of judgment is that while subjective perspectives are to be eschewed in reaching a conclusion, one is nevertheless held responsible for a judgment in which there is a certain personal investment. The process of education helps learners to practice the art of judgment in which the consequences are by and large confined to the classroom — a necessary preparation for the time when one's judgments really start to count.

In a brief article published in 1998, Hirst disavows the central thesis that he developed in the 1960s. He suggests, "social practices and practical reason are the fundamental concerns of education, not propositional knowledge and theoretical reason."[10] The thinking behind this arises from a pragmatist turn of mind, in which it is held that "reason operates most fundamentally in the satisfaction of physical, psychological and social needs and interest … what is rational is what is successful in experience."[11] In some ways, this new approach can be interpreted as having a perspective on knowledge that goes beyond the realm of law ("propositional knowledge and theoretical reason") toward a more expansive view of the reach of the space of reasons, which does indeed reach into the realm of the practical. In part, this is what the idea of "second nature" is all about. It follows, therefore, that the "forms of knowledge" can indeed include what has traditionally been termed vocational knowledge. Moreover, it also implies that even traditional disciplines (history, biochemistry) may be taught in practical ways in such a manner as to encourage learners in the making of judgments. However, when Hirst now maintains that reason is to be placed at the service of needs and interests, then here, I think, he takes a step too far. For needs and interests themselves must be evaluated within the space of reasons in order to see what counts as a need or interest, in accordance with (as the Hirst of old would say) publicly specified criteria. Needs and interests must be identified and justified *within* the space of reasons. Moreover, through the activities that generate knowledge within the space of reasons, new needs and interests may arise (or old ones modified); knowledge activities cannot be placed in service of needs and interests that they themselves may help to generate.

Conclusion

It should be noted that the capacity for judgment is internally related to an understanding of context. While one may, through experience, acquire the disposition

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of a judging temperament (for example, through the habit of discounting personal preferences), this in itself is no substitute for an engagement with some context. Hence, there is no skill of "judging" that can be transferable. If learning is to involve as one of its central features the making and contesting of judgments, then there is no escaping the difficult process of building up and understanding appropriate knowledge-contexts. In this respect, the early Hirst's central thesis that education comprises the pursuit of forms of knowledge still stands. Through the perspective of the space of reasons, knowledge can be viewed not so much as a set of inert propositions but as a domain that is contested and subject to revision — a domain in which judgments are backed by reasons and invested with personal commitment. This makes for a knowledge-based curriculum which goes well beyond the naive informational sets associated with the kind of curriculum advocated by E.D. Hirsch.[12] Moreover, the emphasis on reason and judgments suggests rich pedagogical implications, for example in the direction of inquiry-based learning. But these must be left for another essay.

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1. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). This work will be cited as *MW* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Paul Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge," in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. R. S. Peters (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 87–111. This work will be cited as *LE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929).

4. William Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science,* vol. 1: *Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1956), 298–9; Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, ed. Donald Davidson (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press), 137–158.

5. See Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society,* ed. L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 399–400.

6. John McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 249.

7. Originally, Hirst identified seven forms of knowledge: mathematics, the physical sciences, the human sciences, history, religion, literature and the fine arts, and philosophy and moral knowledge. In addition there were interdisciplinary "fields" of knowledge (*LE*, 104–105).

8. See, for example, the comments of John White, "Why General Education? Peters, Hirst and History," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, Supplement 1 (2009): 138. Here it is suggested that Hirst's view of the curriculum rested on a conception of the value of knowledge as "intrinsic." See also Roger Marples, "What is Education For?" in *The Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Bailey (London: Continuum, 2010), 38; in which the propositional character of Hirst's conception of knowledge is discussed.

9. John McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5–6. See also David Backhurst, *The Formation of Reason* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 75.

10. Paul Hirst, "Philosophy of Education: Evolution of a Discipline," in *Fifty Years of Philosophy of Education: Progress and Prospects*, ed. Graham Hayden (London: Institute of Education, 1998), 19.

11. Ibid., 18.

12. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

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