

REASONS, CAUSES AND EXPERIENCE: EXTENDING ANOMALOUS MONISM

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Abstract

After briefly reviewing Sellars' and Davidson's arguments against the myth of the given (or the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content, as the latter calls it), I discuss Davidson's coherentist alternative and his well know argument in favour of the identity of mental events and physical events. I highligh some compatibility problems between his arguments against the third dogma and his defence of anomalous monism. I make two recommendations: to accept the dual (rational and causal) character of experience, and to reject any identities between the physical and the mental which are not fully holistic.

Keywords

Anomalous monism, Donald Davidson, experience, myth of the given, causal relations

1. Introduction

In this paper I am going to review McDowell's criticism of the myth of the given and his contention that coherentist positions such as Davidson's motivate the acceptance of the myth rather than the avoidance of it (McDowell 1994, pp. 14-18). In epistemology, both foundationalism and coherentism share the axiom that experience is less than rational, i.e. that our perceptions are somehow separated from our conceptual, doxastic states. Both positions can be avoided by an understanding of experience which rejects the possibility of separating the world's and the person's contributions. I will finish by recommending this approach to experience as a natural complement to Davidson's anomalous monism. Anomalous monism cannot be a thesis about the mind, without also being a thesis about experience and the world. This extension has dramatic consequences for Davidson's philosophy of mind and causation, but allows to retain with renewed strength his epistemological theses.

2. Reasons and Causes

I am late for an appointment and the person waiting for me asks me why I am late. I tell her that the bus broke down, and it took me half an hour to find another one. To her ‘why’ question I give a causal answer. I am not justifying myself, merely explaining what happened. I am not justifying my delay, but merely letting her know the events that caused it. As McDowell would say, I am only offering an exculpation. Exculpations allow us to shake off responsibility on the results of our actions. On the other hand, I could also have answered her question with a justification: I could have said that I am half an hour late because I know that she is always half an hour late and I didn’t want to wait that long. Both responses are adequate to why questions, because why questions are ambiguous between “What is the reason why” and “What is the cause of?”. This is why “Because ...” is the standard beginning of the answer. Nevertheless, if I accept responsibility for my delay, and justify it, I am, at the same time, offering a reason (my knowledge of her unpunctuality and my desire not to wait) and a cause of that delay: “The cause of my delay is that I know you are always late”. Reasons can play the role of causes in our explanations, and they do so by appealing to propositional attitudes, to beliefs and desires. But only reasons serve as justifications. This is why understanding all doesn’t amount to forgiving all. For instance, giving an account of the German situation after the Versailles Treaty could perhaps be enough to explain the emergence of Nazism, but it isn’t enough to justify it. A justification must appeal to reasons. Mere causal stories won’t do. When we offer a causal explanation for a certain event, we are placing the event on the “realm of law”. When we offer a rational interpretation of an action, we place it in the “space of reasons”.

3. The Dualism of Scheme and Content

Parallel considerations can be given for knowledge. McDowell thinks, with Davidson, that to justify a doxastic state (a state of believing or knowing) we can only appeal to another doxastic state. The idea that we can establish a separation between our conceptual scheme and the empirical content which fits into it and gives it its ultimate foundation has been challenged by Davidson (see Davidson 1974). A reason for holding a belief cannot be anything which is not rational itself. If empirical content is separable from conceptual scheme, then it cannot play the rational role which is needed. Hence, for Davidson, the space of reasons does not extend beyond the space of concepts. The claim that some of the content of our mental states is non-conceptual, like the older claim that, at bottom, all our worldview relies on non-theory laden sensations, on sense-data, could only be of interest for a scientific, causal explanation of knowledge, but it has no epistemological value.

4. The Myth of the Given

A similar criticism has been labelled by Sellars. The claim I just spoke of, the dualism of scheme and content, he calls the myth of the given. It is the idea that the whole edifice of our knowledge rests on something externally given, something which itself isn’t part of our knowledge. Wilfrid Sellars starts his opposition to the myth by questioning attempts to found the edifice of knowledge in any sort of pre-epistemic awareness. He distinguishes between two kinds of awareness: awareness in the mere sense of being awake, and awareness in the sense of self-consciousness. The second one is a sufficient condition for knowledge, while the first one is just necessary.

To put it in a Hegelian fashion which doesn’t violate Sellars’s intentions: full-blown knowledge is only obtained when awareness of the self and awareness of the world are integrated; we know the world by means of knowing ourselves, and know ourselves by knowing the world. Naked, pre-conceptual, interaction with the world (for instance, quickly retiring our hand when burned) cannot count as knowledge because knowledge is subject to rational revisability, which involves

the use of concepts. Learning a public language is our way of becoming rational. In acquiring a public language we also acquire a conception of the self, a world of public physical objects and, ultimately, a mind.

Sellars's criticism of the idea of the given is explicitly directed towards sense-data theories of knowledge. The classical concept of sense datum arises from the mixing of two kinds of ideas: first the idea that there are certain inner episodes, such as sensations of red, which can occur to animals without any prior process of learning and concept formation; and second the idea that there are some inner processes which are the non-inferential knowings that certain things are, say, red, and that these processes are necessary for all empirical knowledge.

The first idea comes from the attempt to explain sense perception scientifically. Sensations are normally brought about by the presence in the neighbourhood of the perceiver of the adequate physical object. But, while babies and other non-linguistic animals can have them without 'seeing that' (that is, without seeing the objects as objects), adults do so when they are caused to have such a sensation. There is no reason to suppose that having the sensation of a red triangle such as a baby would have it is a *cognitive* or *epistemic* fact. Nevertheless, there is a temptation to assimilate sensations with thinkings, and attribute to the former the intentionality of the latter. One way of avoiding this assimilation is taking sensations to belong to a special kind, neither epistemic nor physical. But this has led to the following unfortunate line of thought: given that experiences (seeing something as something, what I called before 'seeing that'), such as ostensibly seeing a red physical surface, are sometimes non-veridical, the foundation of empirical knowledge cannot rest on them; therefore this foundation must lie on something else, namely sensations, which are assimilated in their intentionality to thoughts (and hence, made epistemic), and which are *ex hypothesi* far more intimately related to mental processes than to external physical objects. Sellars criticises both the assimilation of sensation and thought, and the overlooking of the possibility that sensations be unveridical (a possibility which must exist if we want to talk of them as being veridical).

Sellars's criticism points out that we cannot hold that the results of an innate capacity (our passively receiving inputs from the world) entail something (knowledge) which is itself the output of an acquired capacity (rationality, through language learning). What brings empiricism to this *cul de sac* is running together a causal story (which concerns the necessary enabling conditions of knowledge, such as having a brain and receiving stimuli in our nerve endings, i.e. being a sentient creature) with a rational one (which concerns the conceptual and justificatory relationships between mental states, i.e. it concerns sapience). And as being awake isn't sufficient to be conscious, having neural episodes isn't enough to have knowledge. Knowledge partially depends on the world and on public standards of justification. There is nothing wrong in studying the causal mechanisms behind reason, and we can characterise them in pre-epistemic ways, and relate them, causally, to epistemic episodes. But we are not going to obtain a justification for our beliefs from the neural activity which makes them possible. At most we'll obtain an 'exculpation'. Sense impressions, or sense data, or non-conceptual content are the given only if we want them to play an epistemological work. But they are perfectly respectable concepts within the scope of the philosophy of psychology.

A different way of phrasing Sellars's point is saying that concepts capturing properties of public objects are prior to concepts which apply to appearances: "I have, in fact, being claiming that *being red* is logically prior, is a logically simpler notion, than *looking red*." (Sellars 1963, p.142). We cannot ground our knowledge of the world on our knowledge of inner states, because the latter presupposes the former. This idea didn't lead Sellars to refuse a role to inner episodes, as Gilbert Ryle did (see Ryle 1949). In fact, Sellars even accepts an epistemic role for such episodes. But, our reports about them, even though they can be observational, non-inferential, reports,

they are such in the same sense that reports about molecules can be non-inferential. Sense impressions are theoretical entities, according to Sellars, and we learn how to use the theoretical models on which they belong only after we have already acquired the “manifest image” of public physical objects in space and time.

One of the forms taken by the myth is the idea that there is a structure of facts such that not only each fact can be non-inferentially known to be the case but presupposes no other knowledge, and that such non-inferential knowledge is the ultimate court of appeal for our claims about the world. Sellars point out that it is part of the myth to identify non-inferential with independent of all other knowledge.

Sellars accepts the non-inferential character of some knowledge, and its being the ultimate source of appeal of empirical belief, but not the idea that there is knowledge which doesn't presuppose other knowledge. A report of a belief can be non-inferential in the sense that the reporter's commitment to the belief is motivated as a response to non-linguistic events on her environment, rather than as a response to another belief or set of beliefs. But this doesn't mean that such non-inferential beliefs constitute an independent and autonomous sphere. Concepts that can be used to make non-inferential reports must be also available to be applied inferentially, as the conclusions of inferences whose premises are the non-inferential uses of other concepts.

Sellars thinks that foundationalism forces us to choose between empiricism (all knowledge rests on experience, which doesn't rest on anything) and coherentism: “Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once” (Sellars 1963, p.170).

5. Coherentism

A coherentist theory of knowledge is precisely Davidson's alternative to the myth of the given (see Davidson 1983). It is a response to Quine's pretence to have it both ways: experience cannot be outside the sphere of justification and simultaneously work as a tribunal for our beliefs. For Davidson, the duality of factors that persists in Quine is itself a dogma. This dogma separates between conceptual scheme, what Quine calls language, and empirical content, what Quine calls empirical significance. Davidson's attack on this dogma comes from both sides; from the side of the conceptual scheme by pointing out that mutually unintelligible world-views don't make sense and from the side of empirical content by highlighting that experience cannot be a basis for knowledge from outside the scope of our beliefs.

Given that we cannot appeal to anything outside the space of reasons to justify a belief, and that experience for him is outside this space, we cannot appeal to it to offer reasons for holding a belief. But, if experience, which provides our only contact with the world, cannot play any justificatory role for our knowledge *of* that world, what can? Or, to phrase it in a different manner, if experience only provides brutally causal connections between the empirical world and our knowledge of it, what guarantees that our knowledge is knowledge of the world? The options which this view of experience leaves us are very unattractive. The most obvious one is to say that the world that we know is no more than a projection of our cognitive make-up. We know the world as we do because we cannot do otherwise, considering the way we are made. Either there is no such thing as the world as it really is, or the world as it really is cannot be known by us. But, of course, to oppose these options, this separation between what there is and what we know, was precisely one of the motivations of Davidson's coherentism in the first place.

Davidson retained his commitment to a purely causal role for experience until the end of his

life.¹ Allow me to quote at length from the introduction to the recently edited third volume of his collected papers (2000, p. xvi):

What I would most like to correct is the impression that I think experience and perception play no role in our beliefs about the world (...). I was so eager to get across the idea (for which I should have given credit to Wilfrid Sellars) that epistemic intermediaries between the world and our beliefs are a mistake that I made it sound to many readers as though I were repudiating all serious commerce between world and mind. In truth my thesis then as now is that the connection is causal and, in the case of perception, direct. To perceive that it is snowing is, under appropriate circumstances, to be caused (in the right way) by one's senses to believe that it is snowing by the actually falling snow.

The idea that, in order to explain empirical belief or empirical knowledge one needs to appeal to relations other than conceptual ones (such as the merely causal relations between the actual snowing, the believer's sensory input and her belief that it is snowing) invites the criticism of making a mystery of the connection between thought and the world.

6. The role of Experience

It is easy to see why McDowell says that Davidson's coherentism, rather than being an alternative which avoids the myth of the given, is precisely what motivates coming back to that myth. We want our beliefs, our worldview, to revert to the empirical world, because it is their main function to make sense of that world. And the defender of the myth will claim, against Davidson, that ultimately they receive their justification from the world's impact on our senses.

We have to find a way to restore our confidence on the openness of our knowledge to the world, without falling on the idea that the world blindly imposes itself on us. McDowell does this by recommending a different conception of experience, one which isn't merely causal, as it is for Davidson, but which doesn't sneak in justifications from outside the space of reasons. And this conception is Kant's in the sense that it demands no separations between the subject's contribution and the world's contribution.

Both mind and the world can be approached from the perspective of the natural science and from the perspective of radical interpretation, that is, from a reason giving perspective. The former offers us laws which explain the causal connections between the posits of physical science and those of neuroscience. The latter perspective gives us rationalizations of the relations between the usual objects that we "naturally" find in the world and which nicely fall under the terms of our natural languages and our beliefs, desires and other propositional attitudes.

Davidson's criticism of Quine is on the mark. Quine wants experience to be only a question of brute disturbance of our nerve endings, and at the same time he expects it to play the role of a tribunal to which our whole worldview should respond. But giving up on the second function reserved for experience by Quine leads us to a new problem: if experience is brute sensation, how can we hook our system of beliefs onto the world? Davidson doesn't seem to have an answer to this objection. If the only ground on which our worldview is sustained is its own coherence, and all conceivable worldviews must be compatible and translatable to ours in order to make sense, what role is left to play by the world, the "real" world with which our worldview deals? It is easy to see that dissatisfaction with coherentism could tempt some thinkers

¹ I have argued somewhere else that Davidson's acceptance of the nomological character of causality may itself be a dogma and, furthermore, may condemn the identities he establishes in his argument for anomalous monism between mental and physical events to the status of noumenal (see Pinedo, forthcoming). Of course, as an answer to the questions posed in the previous paragraph Davidson would answer: "it is not experience that plays any justificatory role, it is the world". However, it is difficult to see how the relevant, *conceptual*, features of the world could pass through the merely causal cum nomological bottleneck of experience (see Pinedo 2004).

to an appeal to the given, i.e. to something which simultaneously is outside the boundaries of our thought and plays a grounding role for this thought.

McDowell tries to offer an alternative to two opposed theories of evidence by offering a metaphysical theory, a theory of content. This makes sense if we interpret McDowell as extending and modifying the Davidsonian program. He shares with Davidson the theory of evidence: only that which is within the space of concepts is within the space of reasons, i.e. can play a justificatory role. But McDowell extends the space of concepts, and with it the space of reasons, further than Davidson does. This is his manner of bringing back the “friction”, the constraint on our thought, without falling back into the myth of the given. Perceptual states count as evidence for our beliefs because their (conceptual) content is rationally linked to the content of the beliefs.

What McDowell criticises in both Davidson and Sellars is the idea that we can separate impressions (impacts of external reality on our nerve endings) from appearances (perceiving that things are thus and so). McDowell builds on two ideas: (1) The rejection of the dualism of scheme and content (which he takes from Davidson) and (2) That the sphere of laws cannot cut its links from that of reasons. He criticises Davidson for not accepting (2). I think that the strategy is opened to Davidson. It is difficult to see why he wants to maintain Quine’s residual empiricism once that he gives up on the distinction between the empirical contribution of the world and the conceptual contribution of the subject. As a follower of Quine, he cannot avoid taking seriously the claims of what McDowell calls bald naturalism. Bald naturalism is the idea that the causal story is more real (more about reality or about the world) than the rational one. McDowell, on the other hand, places the physicist language-game in the context of the wider and more primordial commonsense (rational, normative) language-game.

Davidson has defended an ontological thesis about the relationship between mind and world which he calls ‘anomalous monism’. Anomalous monism starts with the idea that the concepts used by our commonsensical interpretation of people’s mental states cannot be reduced to the concepts used by a scientific, causal description of them. This is so the former are normative and, hence, not nomological, anomalous. On the other hand, psychological states can cause physical states, but all causation is nomological. Therefore each token of a mental event (if not each type) is also a physical event.

However, if we take Davidsonian interpretationism seriously, and if we allow for the physical base on which mental events supervene to include the person’s environment, we should extend anomalous monism to experience and the world. I call this position, which I believe is very close to McDowell’s, ‘holistic anomalous monism’. Two kinds of stories can be told about the world; in one of them, the interpretative one, we find people and public objects, it is normative and anomalous; the other, the causal one, comes after, and talks about organisms, atoms, and sensory irritations. The second is *de facto*, and the first is *de jure*. The world both causes and justifies our beliefs because the world can be described both in the vocabulary of natural science and of natural language. But by tying together the everyday world and the mind with experience, a token-identity theory loses its attraction, and leads us to ask whether the principle of the nomological character of causation can be argumentatively sustained or it is just another assumption inherited from the modern awe at science’s wonders.

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