

# Book Review

*Reason in Nature: New Essays on Themes from John McDowell*, edited by Boyle Matthew and Mylonaki Evgenia. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. Pp. 382.

## 1. The transformative idea

The various themes explored in this superb collection of essays are organised around one thinker, John McDowell, and one central idea:

[I]ts overarching concern [is] with the transformative significance that *reason* has for human lives, and with the question of how this significance can be acknowledged without simply disregarding the fact that we are no more than *natural* beings, whose capacities for free thought and action must be rooted in our animal nature. (p. 2, emphasis in original)

As is well explained in the outstanding introduction, the idea animating the book is that we are rational animals, such that our rationality constitutively shapes the fundamental kind of animal we are. In turn, our distinctively rational form of animality shapes many of our most significant attributes. Even where we share generic forms of such attributes with other, non-rational animals, the specific forms that we instance are as they are because of our distinctive form of animality:

On the generalized transformative view, our human cognitive capacities in general—not just our perceptual capacities, but also our capacities for motivation, bodily action, and so on—are themselves transformed by our rationality. (p. 6)

By parity, it is to be expected that insofar as our rationality shapes our animality, and our animality shapes our perceptual and other capacities, the specific forms taken by our perceptual and other capacities are liable also to shape our animality and thence the specific form taken by our rationality.

This idea came to the fore in McDowell's work comparatively late, in his 1996 (first published in 1994) and 1998 (first published in 1996). However, as this volume attests, its traces are present throughout his work. Here, the idea is discussed in an enormous variety of contexts: Wittgenstein's reflections on meaning and understanding; understanding first and second nature; the role of rationality in action; the

nature and development of moral understanding; understanding Aristotle, Hegel, and German idealism more generally; and the natures of perception and knowledge, and their interrelations. In each case, the very high quality of discussion is a testament not only to the various authors' own insights and abilities but also to the value of the idea and its various actualisations in McDowell's work. One of the most striking features of the volume is the combined breadth and depth of McDowell's contributions to philosophy. Very few contemporary philosophers other than McDowell would be able to comment sensibly on all the essays it contains. And yet the individually expert contributors on each topic find that their thinking has been significantly shaped by McDowell's. I anticipate that his indirect influence will spread even further through careful engagement with this important collection.

To give a flavour of the depth and value of these various engagements with McDowell's work, I propose to focus on only one (or two) of its topics, perception and knowledge, as discussed in essays by Matthew Boyle, James Conant, and Sebastian Rödl. Even with this narrowing of focus, what I will have to say is, at best, fussily preliminary.

## 2. Perception

Given the initial characterisation of the transformative idea, we can distinguish at least three potential applications to human perception, in order of increasing strength:

1. A full understanding of human perception would depend on a full understanding of what it is to be human and so on a full understanding of human rationality;
2. Specific, and specifiable, features of human rationality impose specific, and specifiable, constraints on the form of human perception;
3. Specific principles govern human rationality, and some of the *same* principles also govern human perception.

Boyle's chapter, 'The Rational Role of Perceptual Content', goes straight for the strongest application, 3. It engages with a putative tension between three claims. First, according to McDowell, 'perception can give us reasons for judgment...only if the conceptual capacities that enable us to think about reasons are already at work in our perceiving itself' (p. 84). Boyle's version of this claim is (MR):

(MR) The same conceptual capacities drawn on in making judgments *must* also be drawn on in our perceiving the things concerning which we judge. (p. 85, emphasis added)

Although (MR) is a version of 3, it goes beyond 3 in claiming not only that conceptual capacities *do* figure in perception, but that they *must*. According to the second claim, 'it is hard to see how this claim [sc. the first claim] could

be explained without employing the notion of perceptual content' (p. 84). The third claim is that there is no notion of perceptual content able to sustain the required explanation (pp. 90-102). Boyle's aim is conciliatory: 'I will argue that one can coherently...accept (MR) and reject the idea of perceptual content' (p. 86). What is wanted, then, is an argument that whatever reasons there are for holding that perception *must* draw on conceptual capacities do not depend on the rejected claim that perception has content.

Boyle's argument has three stages. In the first, he argues for a specific form of the claim that perception lacks content: 'perception simply presents us with [for example] the actual colours of things, which are not themselves classified in any way whatsoever' (p. 95), where an 'actual colour' is 'an actual case of something's being a determinate colour' (p. 100). His claim is that in order to have content, perception must present us not only with things but also with determinate properties of things: the cube's being pink, for example. However, all that perception presents us with is particulars, be they objects, episodes, or cases of objects' having properties (for example, property instances). (To understand this stage, it is crucial that one treats factive perception—for example, seeing that there is a pink cube—as a special, and plausibly derivative, case: roughly, knowing by perceiving.)

The conclusion of Boyle's first stage is apt to seem incompatible with McDowell's demand that perception supplies *reasons*: my reason for believing that the cube is pink would have to be a *fact*—for example, a fact about the cube—rather than an object, episode, or case. Boyle's second stage rejects the demand:

The idea that perception must supply us with 'reasons' may artificially constrain our thinking here by encouraging us to look for some proposition-like ground that supports our judgment. But surely there is another variety of well-founded judgment, one that is grounded not on some other proposition or set of propositions, but rather on an exercise of a classificatory capacity in relation to a particular object. (p. 103)

I agree with the first two stages of Boyle's argument. However, relative to his aims, they induce a difficulty. What was to be shown was not only that perception *does* but that it *must* draw on conceptual capacities. But McDowell's putative reason for thinking so was that perception supplies reasons. In rejecting that putative reason, Boyle denies himself an argument for (MR). And although he considers another argument, from the alleged objectivity of perception (pp. 88-90, 105-108), he does not develop it (p. 108). Strictly speaking, then, Boyle doesn't defend the compatibility of (MR) with the denial that perception has content. At most, he defends only the weaker claim that perception's lacking content is consistent with its nonetheless drawing on conceptual capacities.

The defence of that weaker claim occupies Boyle's third stage:

We might understand Kant's idea that the presentations in an empirical intuition are unified by the categories as amounting to the suggestion that our capacities for sense perception are oriented toward determinate

forms of objectivity by the same basic functions of the understanding that allow us, at a different stage in cognition, to frame determinate judgments about the objects we perceive. It is, for instance, one thing perceptually to attend to a persisting substance, another to attend to one of its changeable accidents. On the reading of Kant's claim that I am proposing, our understanding of the difference between a substance and its accidents, which is exercised in one way when we judge a certain substance to have a particular accident, is also exercised in another, more basic way when we simply train our perceptual capacities on a substance or one of its accidents....Kant's doctrine...is that this focusing of perceptual attention itself draws on our understanding of certain fundamental formal concepts of knowable being, the categories. In this way, our capacities for conceptual understanding are drawn on in our perception itself, rather than merely in our perceptually-based judgments. (pp. 106-107)

The proposal that some of our conceptual capacities are involved essentially in the attentional directing of our perceptual capacities is very plausible. It would fit the natural-seeming idea that the exercise of perceptual attention is guided by the end of using our perceptual capacities to answer questions about our perceptible environments. Plausible as it is, however, it does not transparently support the target claim, that basic actualisations of our perceptual capacities, as opposed to our directing and exploiting those actualisations, draw on our conceptual capacities. On the face of it, the proposal grants our conceptual capacities only *causal*, rather than *constitutive*, dominion over perception. Furthermore, defence of the claim that perceptual actualisations do draw on our conceptual capacities would seem to depend, in turn, on the fugitive idea that categorial properties figure amongst what perception presents. Despite my admiration for his Kant-inspired proposal about perceptual attention, I wasn't convinced, therefore, by Boyle's attempted reconciliation of the target view of perception with even a de-musted (MR).

### 3. Perception and knowledge

As we've just seen, one application of the transformative idea seeks to connect perception with rationality or reason. The application has it that reason operates with reasons and that perception figures in explaining how reason has reasons with which to operate. On the plausible assumption that reasons are available to reason only if they are known, the application has it that perception figures in explaining some of what we know. Conant's chapter, 'Resolute Disjunctivism', seeks to develop and defend a very direct account of how perception figures: 'perception is a *capacity for knowledge*' (p. 117, emphasis in original). Successful actualisations of the power of perception are cases of knowledge, explained by the actualisation of that power, a capacity for knowledge.

It is worthwhile contrasting that view of the nature of perception with some others, on which perception is at most *part* of a capacity for knowledge:

1. Perception is a *capacity for perceiving* (with perceiving understood in something like Boyle's way), as sight is a *capacity for seeing*;
2. Perception is a *capacity for enjoying opportunities to know*;
3. Perception is a *capacity for enjoying both opportunities and abilities to know*—a capacity to possess something like Boyle's classificatory or recognitional capacities whilst occupying propitious circumstances for their successful actualisation, whether or not one exploits the opportunity through actualising the capacities.

For at least two reasons, this list interacts uneasily with aspects of McDowell's thought.

First, for reasons we considered in discussing Boyle, McDowell's treatment of perception leaves little space between 3 and the seemingly weaker options. For on McDowell's view, perceiving at all, and so enjoying a perceptual opportunity to know, must draw on conceptual capacities—that is, classificatory or recognitional capacities. So, on McDowell's view, one who fits 1 or 2 thereby fits 3.

Second, if we miss the form of perception Boyle discusses and so treat all forms of perceiving as factive, then we will leave limited space for options other than Conant's. For perceiving that the cube is pink—for example, seeing that it is—seems to be a form, or sort, of knowing that the cube is pink, so that if perception is a capacity to perceive factively, then it is thereby a capacity to know. As Conant discusses, McDowell tries to make space for option 3 by discerning a form of factive perception that offers opportunities for knowing that need not be taken up. But on the face of it, as Conant partly agrees, there is no such form. Now, the form of perception that Boyle seeks to characterise clearly does present us with opportunities to know that we need not take up (pp. 90–104). One can plainly see a pink ice cube whilst firmly believing that one is hallucinating and so refusing to believe, hence failing to know, that there is a pink ice cube there. Further, seeing the pink ice cube need not even present much by way of opportunities to know (perhaps the cube is bathed in blue light, glimpsed through mist, and so on). So, a sensitivity to this characteristic of one form of perception, combined with a failure to discriminate that form of perception from factive perception, might lead one to the view that one can perceive that there is a pink cube without knowing that there is. On the face of it, though, there is no such conception of factive perception; the putative conception is a mongrel.

I said that Conant partly agrees. More carefully, Conant thinks that it is possible to discern a form of factive perception that is not a form of knowing, but that it is derivative of a more basic form, in which perceiving *is* a form of knowing. Conant seeks to defend the basicness of that form, as what perception as a capacity is for, against McDowell's version of option 3:

A perceptual capacity, in the sense that matters for the disjunctive conception I have sketched, is a capacity—of course fallible—to get into positions in which one has indefeasible warrant for certain beliefs. (McDowell 2013a, p. 245, quoted at p. 117)

I agree with Conant that what McDowell aims to present here is a version of option 3, distinct from Conant's own view. However, given McDowell's aim, his formulation is puzzling. What McDowell means by having a warrant for certain beliefs is having a reason for those beliefs. And he understands having a reason for those beliefs to require being able to believe for that reason. But it is plausible that being able to believe for a reason requires one to *know* the reason. (McDowell 2013b seems to endorse a version of this requirement restricted to reasons for action.) It would follow that the view McDowell presents here collapses into Conant's, on which a perceptual capacity is a capacity to know. One suggestion would be that what McDowell should have said is closer to this: a perceptual capacity is a capacity to get into positions in which one could easily acquire indefeasible warrant for certain beliefs—for example, by actualising, in suitably committal forms, one's conceptual capacities.

What is Conant's argument for adopting his view of perceptual capacity over McDowell's? He presents his argument as an internal critique (p. 111), seemingly based upon a shared commitment to the claim that perception is 'a form of capacity whose most basic exercise is an act of self-consciousness' (p. 118). And if that is a shared commitment, then the initial difficulty for McDowell should be obvious. If the actualisation of perception delivers indefeasible warrants, then it delivers facts. So, we have, for instance:

(I) If one sees *p*, then *p*.

But now if the most basic exercise or actualisation of the capacity is self-conscious, then we have:

(II) If in the most basic exercise or actualisation of the perceptual capacity, one sees *p*, then one knows one sees *p*.

On the assumption that (I) is immediately obvious to anyone able to know they see *p*, we have:

(III) If in the most basic exercise or actualisation of the perceptual capacity, one sees *p*, then one knows one sees *p* and that if one sees *p*, then *p*.

And now on further assumptions about what else is immediately obvious, we have:

(IV) If in the most basic exercise or actualisation of the perceptual capacity, one sees *p*, then one knows *p*. (Compare pp. 128-134.)

Given the purportedly shared assumption in (II), this seems decisive. And I have already accepted the conclusion, that the basic exercises or actualisations of a factive-perceptual capacity are pieces of knowledge. However, although I'm pleased to be at Conant's destination, I'm not yet convinced that his route is viable. Internally, this general line of argument is not only obvious, but seems to be acknowledged by McDowell: 'Certainly one will not *say* one sees that *p* unless one accepts that *p*' (McDowell 2002, pp. 277-278, quoted at p. 125, emphasis in original). Substantively, the proposal that the connection between perceiving and knowing goes via self-consciousness seems to involve a dogleg and to base the more on the less straightforward. It is surely more obvious that seeing that *p* entails knowing that *p* than that seeing that *p* entails knowing that one sees. Furthermore, even on a view like McDowell's, which seeks to make out space between perceiving and knowing, it is not obvious that one cannot cross that space directly, by endorsing what one sees, without that depending on knowing what one sees (see, for example, McDowell 2009, p. 131). How, though, can Conant's argument be resisted?

The path of least resistance would be to allow that we *have* a capacity to perceive self-consciously, but to deny that it is the *most basic* form taken by our perceptual capacity. This would be to adopt a view on which perception is at most *part* of a broader capacity, in this case a capacity for self-knowledge. On this view, perception can be a capacity to perceive, and even to know, without yet being a capacity to know that one perceives or that one knows. Failing to have such self-knowledge would reflect one's overall fallibility by reflecting the fallibility of one's capacity to perceive or know self-consciously. But it would be consistent with the fully successful actualisation of one's power to perceive or know. (Conant seeks to block this path by arguing that a form of perception with instances that were not self-conscious would be precluded, by its form, from also having self-conscious instances (pp. 128-130). I didn't fully understand his argument but worried that it involved sliding from a form's being *consistent* with *absence* to its being *inconsistent* with *presence*.)

#### 4. Knowledge and self-knowledge

In discussing Conant, I suggested that a capacity for self-conscious perception (/knowledge) would be a power to know that one perceives (/knows). And I suggested that we might wish to resist the claim that our basic perceptual capacity has that reach. Rödl's chapter, 'Perceiving the World', seeks to argue that that claim is irresistible and that the (idle) wish to resist it is based on a failure to understand it. The bulk of Rödl's deep and interesting discussion is aimed at helping the reader to an appropriately deflationary understanding. Here, though, I have space only to discuss his initial argument for irresistibility.

Rödl's central argument is fast:

Must Steffi, in order to know *p*, know *Kp*? Must she, in order to know something, know that things are as they must be in order for her to know it?

...

It...makes no sense to answer 'no'. For then someone may know something while failing to know that she knows it. And then there is no such thing as saying 'I know'. Let it be that I know  $p$ . I do not thereby know that I know that; I cannot say whether I know it or not. However, if I cannot say that, I cannot assert  $p$ . This is not intelligible: ' $P$ , certainly. But I cannot say that I know that. For all I know, I have no idea whether  $p$  or not'. It may seem that I may come to know what I here declare myself not to know, namely,  $Kp$ . So let it be that I know  $Kp$ . However, as I do not know that I know that, I cannot assert it. I cannot say 'I know  $p$ '. What we just said about ' $p$ ' holds for any sentence, among them ' $Kp$ '. (pp. 195-196)

One initial line of argument here seems to be the following. 'Cannot assert  $p$ ' serves as placeholder for whatever barrier Rödl means to impose—for example, 'cannot correctly assert  $p$ ', 'cannot intelligibly assert  $p$ ', and so on.

- (I) Assume, for *reductio*, that it is possible that one knows  $p$  without knowing one knows  $p$ ;
- (II) One cannot assert  $p$  unless one knows  $p$ ;
- (III) One can assert  $p$  if one knows  $p$ ;
- (IV) From (I) and (II), one can know  $p$  without being able to assert one knows  $p$ ;
- (V) From (III) and (IV), one can fail to know one knows  $p$  while being able to assert  $p$ ;
- (VI) From (IV) and (V), one can be able to assert  $p$  without being able to assert one knows that  $p$ .

Aside, perhaps, from (III), this seems reasonable. The conclusion is that there can be cases in which someone knows  $p$ , and so is able to assert  $p$ , but is not able to assert they know  $p$ . However, that conclusion seems entirely unthreatening. What is wanted is a path from that conclusion to the further, problematic conclusion: that if we deny that to know  $p$ , Steffi must know she knows  $p$ , we will be forced to grant her the ability (say, correctly or intelligibly) to assert ' $p$  but I cannot assert that I know  $p$ '. The difficulty now is that it is unclear how to get from here to there. (Adding a requirement that intentional assertors must take themselves to meet conditions like (II) would deliver only that they must *take* themselves to know and not that they must *know* themselves to know.)

The only straightforward route that I can make out would go via the following:

- (VII) If one knows one doesn't know  $p$ , then one knows one cannot assert  $p$ ;
- (VIII) If one *doesn't* know one knows  $p$ , then one *knows* one doesn't know one knows  $p$ .



From (I) and (VII), we have that if Steffi not only knows  $p$  but also knows she *doesn't* know she knows  $p$ , then she knows she *cannot* assert she knows  $p$ . This is plausible and amounts to the claim that Steffi is appropriately sensitive to (II). From (III), we now have that, if Steffi knows she cannot assert she knows  $p$ , she *can* assert she cannot assert she knows  $p$ . What is needed now is a path from the opening assumption, that Steffi can know  $p$  without knowing she knows  $p$ , to the antecedent of (VII), that Steffi thereby *knows* she doesn't know she knows  $p$ . (VIII) forges that path. In combination with the other premises, we can derive that where Steffi knows  $p$  without knowing she knows  $p$ , she can assert ' $p$  but I cannot assert that I know  $p$ '. The difficulty now is that (VIII) is, at best, implausible. Indeed, it seems even less plausible than the claim it is being used to support, that one who knows thereby knows they know.

Perhaps there are other ways of deriving Rödl's problematic conjunction. And if not, perhaps there are more effective defences of his deflationary understanding of self-consciousness. Either way, that understanding is certainly worthy of more attention than I've been able to give it here.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of my all-too-preliminary engagement with three of the essays in this fine volume has been to give a flavour of the depth and value of their engagements with McDowell's work. Even with respect to the three, I've barely scratched the surface; the other nine essays, including the introduction, are similarly rich and significant.\*

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