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John McDowell's Minimal Empiricism - Interpretation and Critique

Summary

The dissertation offers an interpretation of John McDowell's philosophical views on the role that perceptual experience plays in explaining the problem of intentionality and epistemic justification. It also provides a critique of the general philosophical thesis defended by the philosopher, which posits that the world, through perceptual experience, rationally influences the content of a subject's thinking.

In interpretation, I specifically focus on two fundamental aspects of McDowell's minimal empiricism: the metaphysical and the epistemological. Concerning the metaphysical aspect, the aforementioned position pertains to the intentionality of the mind. McDowell argues that thoughts, particularly beliefs and judgments, have the potential to be directed towards reality since they are directed at perceptual experiences that, in some cases, align with how things are in the world. In such cases, the act of perception serves as a conduit, enabling the direct transfer of content from the world to the mind. In the epistemological context, McDowell's perspective addresses the situation described by the following disjunction: experience is either consistent with the actual state of affairs or inconsistent with it. When dealing with the first type of experience, the subject has indefeasible justification for their belief about the world. Perceptual reason is considered indefeasible since it is grounded in the identity of the content of experience with the fact.

This interpretation also encompasses the thesis concerning the mutual dependence of the two aforementioned aspects of McDowell's philosophy. The metaphysical perspective, which includes the thesis that the content of some experiences is consistent with reality, implies that such experiences have the potential to constitute a direct and conclusive epistemic reason for the belief about the world. Conversely, from the epistemological perspective, which emphasizes the influence of the content of experience on the justification of beliefs, it follows that the world has a rational influence on the formation of the content of thinking.

The central thesis of the critical part of this dissertation is based on the claim of the interdependence of the metaphysical and epistemological aspects in McDowell's position. This thesis argues that minimal empiricism does not establish the possibility of a rational influence of the world on the content of the subject's thinking. I support this argument by drawing attention to the unsatisfactory conclusions arising from McDowell's epistemological disjunctivism, especially in the context of the internalism and infallibilism he adopts. In the subsequent part of the polemic, I demonstrate that these conclusions undermine the central assumption of the philosophy of the author discussed here, namely the belief in the possibility of the world's rational influence on the content of the subject's thinking. In light of the criticism presented, I conclude that the internalist concept of justification in McDowell's theory is inconsistent with the general assumptions of his philosophical project.

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The dissertation is divided into four chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion.

The first chapter provides a detailed reconstruction of the main thesis of minimal empiricism, which asserts that the concept of intentionality of empirical thinking can only be adequately explained in reference to perceptual experience. As part of this analysis, I offer a general characterization of the issue of intentionality, the problem of the nature of propositional attitudes, and the nature of structured judgments (Russellian and Fregean). Against this theoretical background, I present McDowell's account of the intentional nature of thinking and the intentional object. This account includes, among other things, the philosopher's views on truth, the metaphysics of singular thoughts, and the nature of conceptual content. Additionally, I discuss Wilfrid Sellars' views on the *Myth of the Given*, Robert Brandom's inferentialism, and the naturalistic concept of the relationship between the mind and the world. These positions complement the theoretical foundation against which McDowell formulates his minimal empiricism.

The second chapter of the dissertation continues the exploration of the metaphysical aspect of McDowell's empiricism. In this chapter, I reconstruct the British philosopher's argument that experience can, in some cases, be consistent with the way things are in the world. The presented argument is considered in terms of a transcendental argument. McDowell contends that the fundamental claim about the nature of the mind, namely that empirical thoughts have content, must follow from accepting the thesis that in acts of experience, we have access to how things are. The key point in McDowell's considerations is his concept of perception as a state with conceptual content. In this context, I reconstruct McDowell's conceptualism, identifying and explaining its most important assumptions and discussing its metaphysical implications. An important aspect of the analysis presented in this chapter is an attempt to place McDowell's conceptualism in the context of philosophical thought of Wittgenstein, Kant, and Hegel. At the end of the chapter, I discuss selected critical positions towards conceptualism, present potential responses to these criticisms, and analyze McDowell's modifications of his main theses in response to the presented objections.

The third chapter analyzes the epistemological aspect of McDowell's philosophy. Primarily, I present the context in which this philosopher develops his epistemology, with a focus on issues related to the object of perception and perceptual justification. My thesis is that the concept of perceptual justification proposed by McDowell, referred to in the literature as epistemological disjunctivism, stems from the rejection of the highest common factor thesis and the acceptance of the thesis about the phenomenal indistinguishability of veridical and non-veridical experiences. Moreover, in my analysis, I suggest that McDowell assumes in his position the dual nature of perception as a justifying factor. In his concept of perceptual justification, we encounter elements of internalism (the access of the subject's consciousness to the justifying factor and the possibility of its conceptual articulation) and externalism (the epistemic value of the factor depending on the occurrence of a relevant fact). To clarify the essence of McDowell's disjunctivism, I consider his position in relation to the knowledge of other minds, which is based on Wittgenstein's concept of the manifestations of a mental state as its criteria. In the subsequent analysis, I take into account the motivations that led McDowell to adopt infallibilism concerning perceptual knowledge. The chapter concludes

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with a reflection on criticisms of epistemological disjunctivism, including those articulated by Crispin Wright, and an indication of how McDowell refines his position in response to these objections.

The starting point of the fourth chapter, in which I present a critique of McDowell's position, is his epistemological disjunctivism, previously discussed in detail. My thesis here is that the philosopher does not provide a satisfactory concept of perceptual justification. The argument supporting this thesis is based on the observation that McDowellian disjunctivism does not imply that a subject can ever find itself in possession of an indefeasible perceptual reason. Furthermore, I consider the impact of such a situation on the key thesis of McDowell's minimal empiricism, which posits that the world can influence the subject's thinking in a rational manner. In this context, McDowell's claim that the world can exert a rational influence on an agent's thinking, or at least an influence consistent with McDowell's understanding of rationality, is called into question.

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