

BELIEF AND SPONTANEITY

In Lecture III of *Mind and World* (2nd ed. § 6, p. 60-63, tr. fr. p. 93-96) the course of his discussion of Evans' views on non-conceptual content, John McDowell makes some remarks on belief and judgement. These remarks are somewhat orthogonal within McDowell's general line of argument in the, which I shall not examine here¹, but they seem to me both significant for his overall project and controversial.

Evans is concerned with the distinction between informational content of perceptual experience and belief content and rejects the idea that the former could be "prima facie inclinations to believe". He intends, reports McDowell, to reserve the term "belief" to a more sophisticated cognitive state, connected to the notion of judgement and reason. McDowell adds:

"That is, to put it in the terms that I have been using: we should reserve the idea of a belief for something that can be understood only in the context of the idea of spontaneity, the idea of an active understanding in which the subject takes rational control of the shape of her thinking. Not that all one's beliefs are the result of actively making up one's mind. But there is a point in reserving the title of belief for a kind of cognitive state that is essentially within the scope of one's powers of actively making up one's mind; even in the case of a belief that one simply finds himself with, the question of one's entitlement to it can always be raised. We can sum up what Evans is suggesting about belief in saying that belief is a disposition to make judgements, and judging is essentially an act of spontaneity." (M&W: 60)

McDowell here recruits Evans' idea that belief content is unlike experiential content in that the former, but not the latter, involves the exercise of conceptual capacities and it involves a sensitivity to reasons, and he argues that this sensitivity and this exercise are already present in experience itself. This does not mean, according to McDowell, that experience is the exercise of active judgements: experience is passive, but the capacities are conceptual, and are exploited in judgements. Let us prescind here from the McDowellian thesis that the content of experience is conceptual, and let us consider only the view of belief and judgement which is present in this passage. In what sense is it "active" and "essentially an act of spontaneity"?

McDowell has defended elsewhere this conception of judgment:

"Judging, making up one's mind 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. Of course a belief is not always, or even typically, the result of our exercising this freedom to do what we think. But even if a belief is not freely adopted, it is an actualisation of capacities of a kind, the conceptual, whose paradigmatic mode of actualisation is in the exercise of freedom that judging is. 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 realm of freedom of judging, can be identified with the space of reasons." (1998: 434)

On this view, one has a control over one's beliefs – and they are in this sense the exercise of an active and free power which makes one responsible of what one believes – when one has the capacity to attend to reasons. Let us call this *rational control*. McDowell makes clear that the active control of our beliefs in judgment does not consist in our capacity to be able to "believe at will" or to "decide to believe", either directly or indirectly. His view is not a form of doxastic

¹ My excuse for choosing to discuss here what seems a side issue in M&W is that I have already discussed with McDowell's views in other places (Engel 2001, 2002, and his reply McDowell 2004)

voluntarism. If our responsibility in judgment does not come from an act of the will, where does it come from? It comes from the fact that in judging, we are “able to take rational control of the shape of our thinking” and from our being located in the “space of reasons”. It is not difficult here to recognise the Kantian conception of freedom as autonomy, which other writers have also developed in the recent past. For instance Robert Brandom writes:

“Kant’s reconciliation of us as free in virtue of being rational, with us as bound by norms in virtue of being rational – and so of freedom as constraint by a special kind of norm, the norms of rationality – accordingly involves treating the normative status of moral obligation as instituted by normative attitudes.” (Brandom 1994: 51)².

But we still have to understand how a subject being constrained by the norms of reason can be free in his judgements and responsible of them. As I understand McDowell’s view here, the kind of freedom that we enjoy in belief answers at least to two conditions. An agent is a responsible believer, when: a) he is responsive to reason and to the norms of belief ii) he is responsive to reason when he is able to reflect on his own reasons for believing. With a) comes the idea that the agent has to recognise his commitment to a specific kind of norms, those of reason. b) is less clear. McDowell admits in the first passage that not all of our beliefs are the result of our “actively making up one’s mind”: some of our beliefs are non-conscious or not fully conscious. But the fact that we can, in certain circumstance exercise our judgment in a critical way is condition by our being *reflectively* conscious of our judgements, and able to undertake the commitments to the norms that we recognize.

But it is here that I find a difficulty for McDowell’s conception (and for any, broadly speaking Kantian conception of this kind). If we try to spell out these conditions it is not clear in what sense we can call a belief “active” or the product of “spontaneity”. In the first place, is obeying a norm, including a norm of reason, the product of an active state of mind? To consider only logical norms, which presumably are the basic ingredient of the space of reason), these are usually thought as constraints which we have to obey in a passive mode. Even if one does not subscribe to Achilles’ injunction to the Tortoise in Lewis Carroll’s famous story – “logic will take you by the throat and force you to do it”, even if we do not succumb to the picture of “the hardness of the logic must”, our commitment to logical norms is all but active. In the second place, the condition on judgement which makes it reflective is problematic. For if we suppose that an agent who follows the norms of reason has to have a higher-order judgement to the effect that he follows a norm of reason, how can this higher order judgement have any effect on his judging. Here again this is of of the lessons of Carroll’s story: judging that one is subject to a norm does not *by itself* make our mind *move*. This is why simply adding the proposition that “if , if P then Q, and P, then Q” does not help in order to infer the conclusion.³ In other terms, entertaining the higher-order judgement that a certain norm of reason is in place does not, by itself, make us follow the norm.

Now another option is open to the Kantian. He can argue that there is a certain kind of control that we have over our judgements which is not reflective. This idea, which also comes from Gareth Evans, and which has been taken up by many writers recently, is that when we form a belief or a judgement with respect to the truth of a proposition, we do not “ascend”, so to say, to a reflective belief that we believe that P is true, but we simply ask ourselves *whether P*. It can be argued that the basic norm for belief – a belief is correct if and only if it is true – is implicitly involved in the very exercise of such judgments. Some writers (e.g. Hieronymi 2006) talk in this case of the “evaluative control” which we have over our beliefs, and contrast this control with the kind of “manipulative” control that we have over our beliefs when we

² see also, for a view which has many similarities with McDowell’s on this point, Burge 1995.

³ The point is well put by Blackburn 1995, who actually applies it to practical reasoning

intend to have them for practical reasons and not for epistemic reasons. There is an evaluation indeed, but how can the fact that his evaluation is constitutive of the immediate relation that we have towards our own beliefs make it a *control* at all? Judging whether P is not in any sense controlling one's attitude towards P. At best it is a *precondition* of having other attitudes, and of being able to revise one's beliefs in the light of new information, and to engage in inquiry. But it can hardly be constitutive of judgement. In other words rational control over our judgements cannot be constituted by our awareness of them, be it reflective or not.

What McDowell might mean here may be different, and it is suggested by his talk of "actualisation of capacities". He might mean that it is the *possibility* of exercising the capacity to judge critically which is involved in judgment which sets us free in thought. This can happen in particular when a notice a conflict between our judgements and the norms of rationality. But how can this capacity be *already* present in perception through its being conceptual if it is to be understood as a *further* development of the capacity of judging in conscious thought?

A more plausible description of our capacity to judge might be the following. We have first-order beliefs, which are rational or not. We do not have any control over them. They are just forced upon us. Neither do we have control over the norms of rationality. We do not become rational just by being aware of our beliefs and of the norms which govern them. Certainly if a conflict arises between one's first order beliefs and what one believes that one ought to believe, then one should try to change her beliefs. But one does not do that because one is aware of these norms and of her beliefs. One does it because one has to comply by these norms, and is forced to do that.

This weak version of the idea of rational control over our judgements, seems to be much more plausible. It says that awareness of our own beliefs and of the norms of reasons is a precondition of rational control, and that if we have this awareness, then we can be in a position to accept certain beliefs and reject others. But it does not say that control is effectuated by this very awareness. It says that it is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. Certainly to be able to maintain a certain belief, to stick to it, or to reject it, I must be conscious of it. And to assess it, it seems that I must be aware of the norms which govern it. It is quite compatible with the weak version to deny that there is no active control at all on thought. The role of action in thought is at best indirect. It is prefatory, but not constitutive of thought. There is no reason to withdraw the traditional Humean empiricist motto that "Belief belongs to the sensitive, rather than to the cogitative part of our natures."

I may have misinterpreted McDowell here, but in any case I'd be interested in learning more about the elusive passages that I have quoted above.

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