Davidson and McDowell

on Justification

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11 July 2012

Contents

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor Martin Stokhof, without whom this thesis would not have had its current form and content. His detailed notes have not only taught me a great deal about my own topic, but have also made me aware of many general findings and customs in philosophy. By striking a perfect balance between being demanding and reassuring and by finding ample time in his busy schedule for meetings, he has helped me to make the most out of these few months. Then, thank you to Michiel van Lambalgen, for being willing to act as my second reader. Furthermore, I would like to thank Floris van der Burg and Christian Skirke for their enlightening comments on my first and second chapter, respectively. Of course, I could not have finished this thesis without the general support of my friends and family; trying to explain 'what on earth' I was trying to do in that thesis of mine has helped me to maintain an overview and hopefully, a critical eye. I want to thank Judith and Sidra specifically; our informal talks about philosophy so often made me see the direction in which I should be heading and were always, maybe more importantly, very entertaining. And lastly to Sara, whose support extended much beyond the important task of editing the linguistic aspect of my work.

Introduction

A question that has plagued humanity ever since it was explicitly asked in Plato's Theaethetus is: 'how is knowledge possible?' Various answers were formulated throughout the history of philosophy and a plethora of angles to approach the question have been attempted. Most of these angles involved trying to explain the relation between mind and world in such a way as to provide an explanation of how the beliefs we have in our mind reflect the way things are in the world. Roughly since the introduction of the pragmatic movement and through the writings of those affiliated with it, the assumption that the relation between mind and world must be established before setting out to show what the nature of 'knowledge,' 'truth,' and 'justification' is has been challenged. Rather than calling a belief 'true' if, for example, it corresponds with facts in the world, or coheres with its fellow beliefs, pragmatists adhere to the somewhat polemical slogan: 'a belief is true if it works.' As might be expected, this view invoked a storm of criticism, for it seemed a small step from 'truth depends on its practical consequences' to the relativistic 'anything goes' doctrine. And if no belief is eternally, conclusively, foundationally true, how can we still have a grip on the world?

Several authors have tried to find ways of coping with the legacy of pragmatism, either by incorporating parts of its findings into their theories or by arguing fiercely against its core principles. Among these authors are Ludwig Wittgenstein,[1] Donald Davidson, and John McDowell. While the former two philosophers adhere to some ideas voiced by those in the pragmatic tradition, the latter resides on the other side of the spectrum. In his influential book *Mind and World*, McDowell expounds a view that runs against Davidson's theory on vital points. He claims, for example, that Davidson's view on the relation between mind and world cannot properly

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[1]Although Wittgenstein did not react to the pragmatists explicitly – apart from some references to William James in his philosophy of psychology – his writings can be associated with pragmatic ideas, whether to a greater or lesser extent.

explain how our mind can have *knowledge* of the world, and that he ends up with leaving our mind 'spinning in a void.' Davidson replies that his beliefs *are* about the world, because they are *caused* by the world and that he does not need the rational relation between mind and world that McDowell proposes. In a nutshell, the difference between the two philosophers is that while Davidson's beliefs are justified in terms of other beliefs, McDowell's beliefs are justified in terms of the world.

My aim in the present thesis is to investigate the debate between Davidson and McDowell by conducting in-depth studies of their writings on the topics of epistemology, philosophy of mind and, in the case of Davidson, philosophy of language. The work consists of two parts, each comprised of two chapters. In the first part, both Davidson's and McDowell's position will be explained and examined, partly by providing an overview of recent papers of other authors who have contributed to the debate. The first chapter is devoted to Davidson and after explaining his causal relation between mind and world and his externalist view of meaning, I try to show that he does not make and does not *need* to make metaphysical claims of how mind and world are related, making the concept of truth a methodological necessity rather than something that *grounds* how beliefs can be about the world. Chapter two looks at McDowell's theory as presented in *Mind and World*, in which he argues for an understanding of the world as being a conceptual realm instead of a realm of scientific law, constraining our beliefs rationally instead of causally. After explaining his main motivations for developing such a conception, I look at commentators on the debate, reflecting on their arguments and formulating my own vision on what they contribute. Thereafter, drawing partly on my analysis of Davidson articulated in chapter one, I show why I think McDowell's criticism is unfounded. In part two I extract what I take to be the main question the debate centres around: how do we justify our beliefs? I claim that while Davidson can justify a belief in its own context, McDowell needs a deeper, context-transcending justification. In chapter three I point to an inherent problem to context-transcending or 'global' justification, based on the context-sensitivity of the *meaning* of a significant group of expressions of beliefs. In chapter four I outline a possible alternative to global justification, based on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, claiming that it makes McDowell's framework unnecessary and his criticisms of Davidson's theory problematic.[2]

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[2]Attentive readers might note that the topics I address border on the debate on scepticism. Modern epistemology in general, and Wittgenstein, Davidson, and McDowell to a greater or lesser extent have to account for the threat of scepticism, which nowadays often takes the shape of asking how we know we are not a 'brain in a vat,' our beliefs being

induced by electrodes managed by an evil scientist. In developing the argument, however, I chose not to address this debate explicitly. The main reason for this is that the authors I discuss do not do so either. The sceptical problem figures in the background of their writings, in the sense that their system provides an alternative to the sceptical stance. The main problems they are concerned with, however, extend beyond trying to answer the sceptic. McDowell, for example, asks himself the question of how we can have beliefs *at all*, and Davidson tries to go beyond the sceptical - anti-sceptical debate with his way of intertwining mind and world. Whether or not Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* is concerned with scepticism is a matter of debate, but my tentative reading of it, and certainly the way this book is relevant for the present endeavour, is that he does not try to answer the sceptic directly. This reasoning notwithstanding, where necessary some small references will be made to the sceptical - anti-sceptical debate.

Part I

Davidson and McDowell: the Debate

Chapter 1

Davidson's Causal Connection

Donald Davidson (1917-2003) was one of the most influential philosophers in the twentieth century, shaping the debates predominantly in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and epistemology. In order to provide an adequate background for understanding the debate between Davidson and McDowell, this chapter deals with those parts of Davidson's views that are most relevant for subsequent examination and evaluation in chapter two. My aim in this chapter is not to defend Davidson's approach, but I will read him sympathetically to facilitate a thorough understanding of the (often quite intricate) material. All three sections work towards explaining how Davidson conceives of the relation between mind and world and how this can be causal in nature while doing justice to the constitutive ideal of rationality. In the first section, Davidson's anomalous monism will be discussed, which explains how physical and mental descriptions do not yield two ontologically divergent realms: 'the mind' and 'the world.' The second section moves from the relation between descriptions and ontology to Davidson's theory of meaning and communication: how do we give meaning to these descriptions and how do we know that we speak about the same things when communicating? In the third section I provide an interpretation of Davidson as giving a functional account of truth rather than a view of truth that results from a metaphysical explanation of the relation between mind and world – one that is supposed to give foundations to the practice of justification. This paves the way for exempting Davidson from McDowell's criticism that Davidson leaves the mind spinning in a void, because he conceives of the relations between mind and world as causal rather than rational.

1.1 Anomalous Monism

In this section, I give an introduction to Davidson's position that mind and world are causally related. This I do predominantly by explaining his thesis of anomalous monism, and the intrinsically linked views of supervenience of the mental on the physical as well as the difference Davidson makes between generalisations and strict laws. With anomalous monism, Davidson innovatively severs the inference from conceptual dualism to ontological dualism; a step that had led Descartes to propose his dualism of mind and body. The latter held that since the concept 'cogitans' cannot be predicated of the body, and conversely the mind cannot be said to be 'extensa,' the mental and the physical must be two different ontological substances. Davidson opposes this inference by stating that whereas the mental and the physical are conceptually fundamentally different, ontologically they are one. In other words: while mental descriptions are not reducible to descriptions in the physical vocabulary, the events these vocabularies describe are ontologically identical. Davidson's anomalous monism starts from three premises:

1. *Principle of Causal Interaction:* At least some mental events interact causally with physical events.

2. *Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality:* Where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws.

3. *Principle of the Anomalism of the Mental:* There are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained.[1]

At first glance, these premises appear to be inconsistent, for if mental events interact causally with physical events they fall under strict laws, but that seems to be impossible given the third premise. The key to understanding the argument, however, is to see that for Davidson *events* are not the same as *their descriptions.* The event of Jane getting on a coach is ontologically one whether it is described as 'an escape from burdensome love and shattered expectations' or as 'body x being lifted into object y by force z.' The first principle says that Jane's mental state caused the physical event of her getting on that coach. The second premise states that there must be some description under which the event of Jane's wish to escape from burdensome love and shattered expectations and that of her sitting in the

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[1]'Mental Events' (1970), p.208

coach, and hence are causally related, instantiate a strict law. This seems to be in contradiction with the third principle, since it states that no strict laws can involve mental kinds: a strict law can only be formed in a conceptually closed system, and here Davidson adds that the only viable candidate is the conceptual system of physics.

To see why in fact the three principles do not contradict each other, it is helpful to apply a type-token distinction to events and their relations. While anomalous monism entails that no type-identity exists between mental and physical events, a token-identity does apply. Furthermore, while laws connecting physical events to mental events cannot be strict type-wise, they *can* be strict between two events as tokens, since the mental event described as a physical event can be subject to a strict law. The apparent contradiction is removed, because the second principle states that a strict law exists between two events *as tokens*, while the third principle conveys that *as a type* mental events cannot fall under strict laws.

But what exactly is this 'strict law' and how is it different from for example a true generalisation? As Davidson explains,[2] strict laws cannot contain clauses such as 'other things being equal' or 'under normal circumstances.' If a certain event is described in the physical vocabulary, it is clear which physically described event follows, will follow, or has followed; the two are united by an exceptionless law. With this explanation in mind, it becomes fairly easy to see why laws containing mental terms cannot be strict. A law relating Jane's mental state to her departure will always contain ceteris paribus clauses, because the mental is inherently intentional. As Davidson explains: 'when we use the concepts of belief, desire and the rest, we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in the light of considerations of overall cogency: the constitutive ideal of rationality partly controls each phase in the evolution of what must be an evolving theory.'[3] Attributing a belief to someone only makes sense against the background of a theory of rationality, which for Davidson minimally includes and is (partly) constituted by a general coherence of mental attitudes. Since this coherence is not acquired with concepts that belong to a closed system, but instead with 'beliefs,' 'desires,' etc., we must be prepared to adjust our theory about mental ascriptions, which makes it impossible to formulate strict laws on the basis of them. Interestingly, this quote shows Davidson's allegiance to Kant, since it creates space for the autonomy of the mental; a realm that is inherently dependent on our rationality and is not directly

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[2]'Laws and Cause' (1995)
[3]'Mental Events' (1970), p.223

determined by scientific laws.[4]

With his conception of the mental realm Davidson does not mean to imply that no true generalisations can be made with mental terms, nor that the mental is causally inefficacious, as some writers have argued.[5] He is far from arguing that the mental is unimportant, that the only 'true' science is physics, and that all books containing psychology, anthropology, or biology can be committed to the flames. Davidson holds that because of the absence of strict psycho-physical laws, we could never lose interest in mental explanations, even if a complete physical description was available. Instead, he proposes supervenience of the mental on the physical. This view entails that a mental predicate cannot distinguish entities that cannot be distinguished by any physical predicate. In other words, if the mental properties of an event change, they are accompanied by changing physical predicates.[6] Although some writers have argued that supervenience is inconsistent with anomalous monism because it implies the existence of psycho-physical laws,[7] Davidson explicitly denies this. He holds that anomalous monism only implies psycho-physical laws containing ceteris paribus clauses, not strict laws. Davidson adds that 'although supervenience entails that any change in a mental property p of a particular event e will be accompanied by a change in the physical properties of e, it does not entail that a change in p in other events will be accompanied by an identical change in the physical properties of those other events.'[8] Most authors that have claimed that anomalous monism is incompatible with supervenience charge Davidson with an epiphenomenalist view,[9] which leaves the mental causally inefficacious. Davidson does not concur with that analysis, however. Causality holds between two events no matter how they are described, and a different ascription of mental properties to an event implies a different physical constitution. Here, the type-token distinction is helpful again, because while events as they are described as a type of mental event they cannot enter into strict laws, as *tokens* they can.

In this section, Davidson's basic theory concerning the relation between the mental and the physical was explained; while the mental and the physi-

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[4]Closely tied to this idea of the normativity of the mental is Davidson's externalist view of the content of beliefs, which will be expanded upon in the next section.

[5]Kim, 'Philosophy of Mind and Psychology' (2003)

[6]In Davidson's 'Thinking Causes' (1993)

[7]See for example Kim, 'The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism' (1989)

[8]'Thinking Causes' (1993), p.7

[9]Epiphenomenalism is often a 'charge' because it implies that the mental is reducible to the physical (but see Chalmers's *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (1996) for denying this implication).

cal vocabulary are intranslatable, they describe the same ontological events. This means that the relation between mind and world is strictly causal; the thesis of anomalous monism states that no strict type-wise relation exists between beliefs and the world they are about, because such a relation necessarily involves mental terms.

1.2 Externalist Conception of Meaning

Closely tied to Davidson's account of how the mental and the physical are related is his view of what meaning is. Here, I expand on this view. More specifically, I show how the triangulation of two communicators and the world, and the concept of charity are interwoven to form an externalist theory of meaning. Whereas the previous section concerned the ontology of the world, its relation with the mental, and how strict laws and (true) generalisations differ, the present section centres around the questions of what meaning is, how we attribute content to our own beliefs and those of others, and how we justify these beliefs.

For Davidson, the question 'what is meaning?' is rearranged to 'how can we successfully communicate with one another?'[10] In other words, how can we know what our beliefs are about, and moreover, how can we know we mean the same thing as the persons we are speaking to? One way to enter into an exposition of the complex theory of meaning that Davidson has formulated is by starting with his statement that 'all that counts as evidence of justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs.'[11] This view can be contrasted with many theories of knowledge, for example those of the British empiricists, that take sensations as justifications for beliefs. Davidson defends his view with the argument that if you want to justify your belief with a sensation, it is the *awareness* of a sensation that does the justifying, which is just another belief.[12] Moreover, it is impossible to conceive that something non-propositional – i.e. a perception – can have a logical relation with something propositional – i.e. a belief.[13] Even stronger, there cannot be *any* epistemic intermediaries between mind and world, because if their link to the mental is causal, they do not justify our beliefs, and if they deliver information, they raise the question as to

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[10]This reformulation becomes apparent in Davidson's later writings, starting roughly in the nineties.

[11]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986), p.318

[12]Ibid., p.310

[13]In 'Responses to Barry Stroud, John McDowell, and Tyler Burge' (2003), p.695 summarising his view expressed in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986).

how *they* are justified; they cannot give us any certainty concerning their truth.[14]

If the justification of beliefs were an individual enterprise, Davidson's theory would allow for a picture of a person wrapped up in his own belief system, the content of which could have nothing to do with the world around her. As can be seen from Davidson's reformulation of the question of what meaning is, however, he does not allow for that possibility. The argument here is that first person's beliefs are trivially true:[15] *of course* my belief about that tree is true for me, but since that does not mean it complies with how the world is or other people's beliefs about the tree, it cannot form a basis for successful communication.[16] Here is where Davidson needs the concept of triangulation.[17]

Davidson states that a three-fold relation between a speaker, an interpreter, and the world is necessary for successful communication. Both persons try to interpret each other, making sense of each other's utterances by attributing beliefs to one another. The method of triangulation derives from the mathematical procedure of fixing two points and their angles to a third point in order to find the location of that third point. Similarly, two persons are 'fixed' and the object they speak about is found at the intersection of their own relation to it. Communication could not succeed, Davidson holds, if these persons were not causally related to the world. It is inherent to the practice of learning a language that our beliefs are causally tied to the world around us, since one of the practice's primal and necessary elements is ostensive learning – i.e. pointing at an object and naming it. In the triangulation relation, the nearest common cause of their linguistic reactions is what selects the object that their beliefs are about. Therefore, if words and thoughts are necessarily prompted by the objects that cause them, and if we display such similarity in our basic reaction patterns, how can we doubt

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[14]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986), p.311

[15]In this situation, the variable 'meaning' is known, since 'the speaker usually knows what he means.' ('First-Person Authority' (2001), p.14

[16]What basis exactly Davidson is looking for will be discussed in the next section.

[17]Triangulation is also a response to Davidson's 'Radical Interpretation': the thesis that since belief and meaning are interdependent, we cannot base the one on the other. In other words, if we want to know what a speaker's words mean, we need to know what her beliefs are, and the only way to access her beliefs is through the words she utters. This means that to be able to construct a plausible linguistic theory, we need to be radical interpreters in that we cannot assume anything about meaning or belief. The principles of triangulation and charity are solutions to this problem, but since the present thesis is not concerned with how a successful linguistic theory can be constructed, explanation of the theory of Radical Interpretation will be confined to this footnote and some marginal references.

that our beliefs and those of others are actually about the objects we think they are about? As Davidson succinctly sums it up: 'communication begins where causes converge.'[18]

As Davidson explains, however, triangulation is only necessary, but not sufficient for developing objective thought.[19] If we want to avoid the picture sketched above, of a person having beliefs he thinks are correct but which have nothing to do with the world, 'we must find a *reason* for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence.'[20] It cannot be a form of evidence, since that would be a belief that could be true or false again, which leads to an infinite regress. The reason, Davidson holds, for claiming that most of our beliefs actually reflect the world is that communication could not take off if a speaker was systematically deceiving her interpreters when assenting. Moreover – since one can have a different conceptual scheme without consciously deceiving someone – the very idea of a language that is intranslatable from the interpreter's perspective makes the concept of communication empty. As Marc Joseph reconstructs Davidson: 'the idea of concepts we cannot grasp makes a muddle of what we mean by a language.'[21] This idea ultimately derives from the view explained in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1973), in which Davidson overthrows what he calls the 'third dogma of empiricism': the difference between content and something that fits that content – a conceptual scheme. By discarding conceptual schemes altogether, Davidson blocks the option of two speakers having different, intranslatable conceptual schemes.[22]

Instead, we need to endorse the principle of *charity* when trying to interpret a speaker. Charity means that by default, a speaker's beliefs converge with the interpreter's; the principle tries to optimise agreement between two communicators. Because we read our own patterns of belief into the speaker's upon interpreting someone's linguistic utterances and behaviour, the variable of 'belief' is fixed. Recall that a theory of meaning depends on what we think a speaker believes. Belief being fixed, however, means that we can start solving the situation that Radical Interpretation confronts us with. Not only is it possible to formulate a theory of meaning, fixing belief is a *necessary* condition for arriving at a plausible view of what an utterer's

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[18]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986)

[19]'Responses to Barry Stroud, John McDowell, and Tyler Burge' (2003)

[20]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986), p.313

[21]*Donald Davidson* (2004), p.180

[22]This way of thinking about communication and its necessary requirements, and as to what kind of argument Davidson employs here will be discussed more elaborately in the next section.

words mean.

The principle of charity as we have formulated it, still leaves room for collective error. Granting that we cannot massively differ in our belief systems does not imply that we are right about the world; that our beliefs are true. Here is where we need to add Davidson's minimalist conception of truth. As Tarski formulated and Davidson acknowledged, truth is a primary, basic conception, which cannot be explained any further than that (in a nutshell) p is true means that p is *so*. Truth is thus not defined with reference to something foundation-like; a world in which things are thus and so which is independent from our belief forming processes. This shows that Davidson creates no distance between the conceptual scheme that we employ and the world upon which this scheme operates. The step from interpreting something that is being said to supposing that that belief reflects how matters in the world actually *are* does not need to be justified by referring to anything foundational, because the way we *form* beliefs already implies the world.[23] As Davidson himself formulates it: 'In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true.'[24]

Triangulation and the principle of charity together constitute an externalist theory of meaning. With externalism I do not mean to say that the meaning of a term is defined by its extension. Rather, I mean that – through the process of triangulation – the meaning of a term depends on the causal connections that are formed between speaker, interpreter, and the world. The content of belief is not determined from an internal, individual perspective, for example on the basis of sensations, but by an intricate relation between multiple persons and their causal connection to the world, and thus in Davidson's own words: 'as a matter of principle, then, meaning, and by its connection with meaning, beliefs also, are open to public determination.'[25]

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[23]I will come back to this notion of the world already being implied in the way we form our beliefs in Chapter 2, after having discussed McDowell's critique on Davidson.

[24]'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics' (1977), p.244. Sosa is unimpressed by Davidson's argumentation, since whether our words are about the objects we think they are relies on the fact that the principle of charity is indeed true. Only if Davidson's theory is already accepted, it provides us with justifications for our beliefs ('Knowledge of Self, Others, and World,' 2003). As to what kind of argumentation Davidson uses and whether it is acceptable, I will say much more in the next section.

[25]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986), p.315

1.3 Davidson's Functional Argumentation

In this section, I analyse Davidson's argument against the duality of scheme and content. While some authors claim the argument is verificationist,[26] others have grouped it in the transcendental category.[27] After explaining what usually defines these types of arguments, I will suggest that in fact, a functionalist approach can be discerned in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.' With a functionalist argument I mean roughly that for a certain process (which is unproblematically accepted) to function, certain conditions need to be there. This approach is distinguished from a transcendental argument because with the former, no commitment is being made to a particular ontology. Interpreting Davidson's argument as functionalist will allow us to complete our understanding of how he views the relation between mind and world.

The theory or principle of verificationism was originally developed by the logical positivists, and can be summarised as saying that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification. Postulating entities such as invisible colours, or unknowable facts would be ruled out, since their existence cannot in principle be verified. Often these types of arguments are used against the global sceptic, who holds that what we believe to be true has many alternatives between which we cannot conclusively decide. The verificationist subsequently replies that since these alternatives - such as an evil demon deceiving us while forming beliefs - cannot in any way be verified, they are meaningless and any theory containing them must therefore be abandoned. One of the most well-known philosophers to have analysed Davidson's discarding of the third dogma of empiricism as verificationist is Richard Rorty.[28] He claims that Davidson's argument is that there is no possible way to conceive of an untranslatable conceptual scheme. We simply do not recognise people using it, because attributing to them a scheme that leaves most beliefs false after they have been translated in the language of the interpreter cannot be distinguished from attributing them with no language at all; they may as well only emit meaningless sounds. Finding a translation scheme that would yield all or most foreigner's utterances false in our own language 'would merely show that we had not succeeded in finding a translation at all.'[29]

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[26]Most notably Rorty, 'The World Well Lost' (1972).

[27]Van der Burg, *Davidson and Spinoza* (2007); Maker, 'Davidson's Transcendental Arguments' (1991)

[28]'The World Well Lost' (1972)

[29]Ibid., p.653

While transcendental arguments are also often employed to answer the sceptic, they are very different in structure from verificationist arguments. The most common form in which the argument is built up is to formulate an uncontroversial premise Y, and state that for Y to be the case, precondition(s) X must necessarily hold. If Y is indeed accepted, you have then proved the necessary existence of X, even though X is not or cannot be verified directly. Or, as Stern formulates it in the context of an (anti-)sceptical debate: transcendental arguments 'begin from some sort of self-evident starting point concerning our nature as subjects (for example, that we have experiences of a certain kind, or beliefs of a certain kind, or make utterances of a certain kind) which the sceptic can be expected to accept, and then proceed to show that this starting point has certain metaphysically necessary conditions.'[30]

Van der Burg thinks that it is this type of argument that Davidson uses in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' instead of a version of verificationism.[31] Davidson's unproblematic premise, he states, is that we communicate. In short, communication presupposes that no radical indeterminacy arises with respect to another's belief systems; not only can we not make sense of people communicating if they have thoroughly different conceptual schemes, the whole *enterprise* of communication breaks down if radical untranslatability is possible. The argument is not verificationist, so van der Burg argues, because it does not hinge on the practical difficulty of not being able to understand unintelligible language. Instead it rejects utterances that we cannot understand because they '*could not, in principle* be translated.'[32] He grants, however, that there might be a version of verificationism that includes 'in principle' arguments and is not only based on practical inconceivability. Still, Davidson's argument would not fit that category, because of the way he conceives of the relation between mind and world. This is because a verificationist theory depends on an empiricist framework, and Davidson is not an empiricist. More elaborately, the claim that a (synthetic) sentence only has meaning if it can be empirically verified presupposes the distinction between a conceptual scheme and empirical content that needs to be analysed according to it, which is exactly the 'third dogma of empiricism' that Davidson seeks to overthrow.

I agree with van der Burg that the logical structure of Davidson's argument in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' is that of a tran-

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[30]'Transcendental Arguments: a Plea for Modesty' (2007), p.144

[31]*Davidson and Spinoza* (2007)

[32]Ibid., p.51

scendental argument, in the sense that an unproblematic premise is posited, after which the necessary conditions for that premise are given. However, I think analysing the argument as transcendental runs into difficulties. This is first of all, because these arguments are usually employed to answer the sceptic, while Davidson is not concerned with such a project. Upon Rorty's insistence[33] Davidson concurs that he does not answer the sceptic but rather tells the sceptic to get lost.[34] By giving 'a correct account of the foundations of linguistic communication and its implications for truth, belief, and knowledge,'[35] one does not answer the sceptic on her own terms, but rather makes it apparent why there is no justification for scepticism at all.

Furthermore, going back to Stern's definition of a transcendental argument, it is difficult to analyse Davidson's arguments as being transcendental because this type of argument tries to show that the unproblematic starting point has certain *metaphysically* necessary conditions. I am of the opinion that Davidson does not have a metaphysical project in mind, which becomes apparent if we look at his theory as a whole. It is not my aim here to give a full definition of what a metaphysical project is, since that is neither unproblematic nor necessary.[36] What we *can* say about metaphysics is that it tries to show 'what reality is really like'; it investigates ontology and aspires to give answers about the true or real nature of this 'being.' Two notions in Davidson's theory show that he is not interested in providing a conception of 'what reality is really like': his (minimal) conception of truth and the principles of triangulation and of charity.

As we have seen, Davidson employs a Tarskian notion of truth, which entails that truth is a minimal concept that is fundamental to the enterprise of giving meaning to linguistic utterances, and which cannot itself be defined. The sentence 'snow is white' is simply true if and only if snow is white. Davidson's understanding of truth can be contrasted with for example a full-fledged correspondence theory of truth, which states that truth is something a statement has if it corresponds to a fact in the world. This theory is clearly discarded by Davidson, seeing that rational relations can only obtain between beliefs and not between beliefs and the world.[37] Here, a distinction must be made between a real correspondance theory and a mild form, which

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[33]'Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth' (1986)

[34]In the afterword to 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986)

[35]Ibid.

[36]Which does not mean I wish to brush aside the debate concerning what metaphysics is. Rather, I want to distil minimal or uncontroversial principles that are part of a metaphysical project.

[37]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1986)

Davidson does endorse. Whereas the full-fledged form presupposes that a confrontation between the world and our beliefs is possible, and necessary to justify our beliefs, the mild form is basically a reformulation of the claim that there *is* still a concept of truth: 'truth is correspondence with the way things are.'[38] In other words, a mild correspondence theory presupposes that there really is 'a way things are' with which our beliefs can correspond; and Davidson's adherence to mild correspondance thus parallels his common-sense realism. As he puts it concisely: 'my slogan is: correspondence without confrontation.'[39] While it may seem that this makes Davidson adhere to a coherentist conception of truth which says that a belief is true if it coheres with other beliefs, Davidson has later acknowledged that he regrets the title of one of his most famous articles: 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge.' In the afterword to this article he writes that instead of proposing a real coherence theory, 'my emphasis on coherence was properly just a way of making a negative point, that "all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs."'

Davidson's minimalist conception of truth makes it dependent on successful interpretation, which means that truth itself is not foundational: justification of utterances about the world is not *dependent* on a definition or explanation of truth, but rather, the concept of truth is developed in the process of justification. In fact, utterances about the world cannot be justified in terms of anything foundational. Instead, to study what the world is really like is to study language, or more specifically: successful communication.[40] By looking at the totality of sentences to which speakers assent, paired with the conditions in which they are assented to, one can find the concept of truth, which is relative to the language in which the sentences are formulated. This shows that Davidson is not occupied with (foundational) metaphysics: instead of setting out with a theory of what the world is like, he starts with language and via successful interpretation the concept of truth is obtained.[41] His common-sense realism[42] ensures that if we accept that we

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[38]Ibid., p.308

[39]Ibid., p.307

[40]'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics' (1977)

[41]Note that this does not mean the concept of truth is not *important* for Davidson. On the contrary, truth is vital to the whole project of interpretation. He is not a relativist and holds on to some concept of objective truth, judging from the afterword of 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme': 'Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be.'

[42]I agree with Malpas in describing Davidson's common-sense realism as not being concerned with giving a metaphysical guarantee of the truth of our beliefs, but as inherently

can communicate – in other words that a linguistic theory is possible – there must for example be events in the world.[43] This means that while Davidson makes some claims about what the world should be like, judging from his theory of anomalous monism as explained in the previous section and more specifically, from the resulting claim that there are events in the world, he is not occupied with (foundational) metaphysics. That is, he does not *use* metaphysical claims to give foundations to the practice of justification and communication or to the concept of truth, but rather, the fact that there must be events is a 'side-effect' of these successful practices.

Now that it has been established that Davidson does not occupy himself with providing a (foundational) metaphysical system, it becomes apparent why it is problematic to reconstruct Davidson as employing transcendental arguments. It could still be argued, however, that while Davidson does not use *ambitious* transcendental arguments, he draws on a modest version of such reasoning, a distinction that is formulated by Stern.[44] According to him: 'a modest transcendental argument is one that sets out merely to establish how things need to appear to us or how we need to believe them to be, rather than how things are.'[45]. While it may seem that Davidson employs a modest transcendental argument, I think analysing the situation thus would not do justice to his overall theory. It will not help to state that it must *appear* that we are largely right about the world if there is to be communication at all instead of it actually *being so*, since still the distinction between what we believe and the world itself is presupposed. Seeing that Davidson explicitly denies this, his arguments cannot be reconstructed as (modest) transcendental.

Instead, I propose a functional approach. Where transcendental arguments are part of or supported by a metaphysical project, a functional approach is closer to a pragmatic outlook on the world, going beyond the realist - anti-realist debate. Though a functional argument needs to be distinguished from the theory of functionalism as it is employed to describe

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located: belief cannot be made to stand outside the world in the first place ('On Not Giving Up the World,' 2008)

[43]'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics' (1977), p.253. Details of which linguistic structures warrant this claim will be set aside for the moment. What is important here is not that there are *events* in the world, but that by accepting the possible establishment of a linguistic theory, certain very basic claims about what the world is like can be made.

[44]'Transcendental Arguments: a Plea for Modesty' (2007). Whereas Stern's main project in the article is to provide reasons for preferring modest over ambitious transcendental arguments, for our purposes only the distinction is relevant, in order to see whether analysing Davidson as a modest transcendentalist is appealing.

[45]Ibid., p.143

mental states, what the two notions have in common is that the focus lies on identifying something by how it *functions* rather than by what it *is*. Reconstructed thus, Davidson's argumentation reads that since communication is possible, we need to be largely correct about the world, simply because it functions that way. With this analysis, we eschew transcendental talk of what the world is like, while also avoiding the dichotomy between mind and world which is required for verificationist arguments. The line between a modest transcendental argument and a functional argument may seem thin, however I think it is an important one. While a modest transcendental argument makes claims about how the world must appear to us, being suitable for use in an anti-realist framework, a functional argument makes no such claims. Because of this, a modest transcendental argument presupposes that there is a dichotomy between what we believe and what the world is like, while Davidson's refutation of the third dogma makes this impossible.

With this line of reasoning, I have shown that Davidson's argumentation fits the functional category better than the verificationist or (modest) transcendental. Drawing from the general idea of his writings, neither the emphasis on metaphysics required for transcendental arguments nor the empiricist dichotomy between mind and world characteristic of a verificationist framework could be discerned. The reason that we need to be largely correct about the world is that communication simply works that way. Analysing Davidson's work in a way which shows that he does not adhere to the traditional view of the relation between mind and world, but that he intertwines these two realms in a radically different way. This will prove to be important in the next chapter, when we show how this exempts Davidson from McDowell's critique.

Chapter 2

McDowell's Rational Constraint

WhileDavidson holds that beliefs can only have rational connections to other beliefs, John McDowell (1942) proposes a thoroughly different view, as is displayed in his book *Mind and World* (1996). In this book, which has gained extensive and broad interest in the philosophical community, he proposes a Kantian framework to dissolve the traditional gap between mind and world. In this framework, the world rationally constrains the forming of our beliefs. The present chapter deals with McDowell's criticism of Davidson. In order to get a grip on the topic, the first section provides an introduction to what McDowell calls the 'two horns of a dilemma.' These result from a misconstrued picture of nature as the realm of law, which gives rise either to a species of foundationalism – 'the myth' – or a species of coherentism – Davidson's theory. In the first section, I give an introduction to the dilemma, where I focus on the rationale behind wanting to avoid the myth at all costs. The second expands on the criticisms that McDowell voices with respect to Davidson. Thereafter, the debate between the two philosophers will be put in perspective by looking at other authors who have contributed to the discussion. The third section deals with commentators who have expressed criticisms regarding McDowell's theory itself, while the fourth discusses the attempts that some authors have made to exempt Davidson from McDowell's objections. Furthermore, this section explains why Rorty's reconstruction of Davidson as a pragmatist and my view formulated in chapter 1 that Davidson employs functionalist arguments yield the thesis that for Davidson, the world is already 'implied' and that he does not leave the mind spinning in a void.

2.1 The First Horn: Introduction to the Myth

In this section, I give an introduction to McDowell's thought as developed in *Mind and World*. In order to do so, I will place McDowell's formulation of the so-called 'two horns of the dilemma' in context, both by looking at the broad aim of his theory and by explaining the links to his predecessors briefly.

As the title suggests, John McDowell's *Mind and World* aims to dissolve the problem of how our thoughts can have bearing on reality: how do we know our beliefs are actually *about* the world? A famous formulation of this philosophical worry is that we might well be a 'brain in a vat,' with wires attached to delude us into thinking we are situated in an actual world. What McDowell identifies as the root of the problem is that on the one hand we want our beliefs to be constrained by the world, but on the other hand, we want authority over how exactly we shape these beliefs, which makes it difficult to see how this process would work. We want to be able to say that my judgement that this ball is gold can be confirmed or refuted by the experiences that this ball provides me with. It seems unacceptable that one can make just *any* claim about the ball, even that it is in fact not a ball at all, but a baseball glove; our experience must be normative, justifying the claims that we make. The difficulty begins, however, when the question is asked how an impingement from the world – conceived as a realm describable by natural science – can provide us with *reasons* for accepting or discarding a certain belief.

This apparent impasse McDowell draws from Wilfrid Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1956) in which the concept of the Myth of the Given is developed. Sellars diagnosed modern empiricism with being deceived by a myth in the sense that it expected sensations to fulfill too many roles. On the one hand, sensations have to be causally effected; there must be a direct causal relation from the world to sensations, just like the fact that stepping off a cliff causes you to fall down is not open to interpretation. On the other hand, sensations are required to be epistemically efficacious; they must provide us with reasons for establishing a belief. This double requirement is impossible according to Sellars, and he reformulates it as saying that nothing can be at the same time in the space of causes *and* in the space of reasons. McDowell agrees with Sellars that these Givens having to play a double role are mythical; foundationalism as it is thus conceived is the first horn of a dilemma.

This might make it seem attractive, McDowell adds, to run into the other horn of the dilemma: stating that the mind needs no rational constraint

from the world and only causal relations hold between the two domains. This view McDowell attributes to Davidson, adding that it is unattractive because it leaves the mind spinning in a void. A more detailed analysis of McDowell's attack on Davidson will be given in the next section; for now it suffices to explain shortly what argumentation underlies this view. McDowell's main reason for criticising Davidson is that the latter's view leaves it unintelligible how our thoughts can have empirical content. Having the world only causally constrain our mind is not enough to show that our thoughts are actually *about* our surroundings; our thoughts need to be *intentionally* about the world, something which cannot come about through mere causal relations.

McDowell formulates his solution to the apparent dilemma between the two horns in Kantian terms. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) Kant aimed to solve the dilemma of how knowledge is possible by urging that 'receptivity' and 'spontaneity' must be in tight cooperation with one another. Whereas receptivity refers to our capacity to receive intuitions – i.e. experiences organised in a spatio-temporal framework – spontaneity is understood as a *sui generis*[1] capacity, where our concepts – i.e. the categories – operate on those intuitions to form knowledge of the world. McDowell agrees with Kant that representational content is constituted by an interplay between concepts and intuitions, and that one without the other cannot account for the possibility of knowledge.[2] McDowell further analyses that this means that all experiences have conceptual content; there is no non-conceptual representational content to be found in the mental realm. With this statement McDowell predominantly responds to Gareth Evans, but also to Willard Quine,[3] whose theories, he claims, are a version of the Myth of the Given.

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[1]Translated as: of its own kind/unique in its characteristics

[2]To the issue whether or not McDowell is a real Kantian, various opinions have been voiced. Michael Friedman, for example, in 'Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's Mind and World' (1996) argues that Kant's framework only works if seen in its historical context. Kant tried to accommodate the new idea of nature represented by the scientific revolution, while McDowell works with an entirely different conception of nature when trying to partly re-enchant nature – a notion which will be explained later on. Olav Gjelsvik agrees with Friedman that McDowell is not a real Kantian, claiming that 'much of his Kantian terminology and conception of the problem in his book is unnecessary and perhaps even misleading' ('Experience,' 2004, p.190). In his 'Reply to Olav Gjelsvik' McDowell himself reacts that even though he does not give 'the big transcendental idealist story about how empirical content is possible' and he is thus not a Kantian all the way, his use of the terminology still touches the intuitive core of Kant's work (2004, p.194).

[3]According to McDowell, Quine falls prey to the myth because his notion of experience as sensory impingements cannot function as a justification. His claim that only the theory

According to McDowell, experiences that are non-conceptual cannot stand in rational relations to our beliefs and thus cannot fulfil the epistemic role these experiences are required to play.

If *all* experience is conceptual, the outer boundary to the conceptual sphere – which is usually drawn around the mental realm – is pushed outwards. In theories that in McDowell's view fall prey to the Myth of the Given, only the mental is conceived as the normative realm; it is only our mind that decides whether certain beliefs or utterances are justified. McDowell now wants to extend the conceptual realm to include these perceptions, because the normativity needs to come from the interplay between receptivity and spontaneity. In fact McDowell claims there is *no* outer boundary to the conceptual;[4] the conceptual domain includes not only the mental, but also the world. Reformulated: there is no side-ways on view from which we can look at the conceptual domain, because there *is* nothing besides that domain. The concepts operative in spontaneity are the same concepts that are supplied to us by the world, which means that Sellars's space of causes – which McDowell reformulates as the space of (natural) law – is contained in the space of reasons. McDowell thus in some way remains faithful to Sellars's distinction, in the sense that he distinguishes between natural-scientific intelligibility and reason-giving intelligibility. However, he adds that 'we need not identify the dichotomy of logical spaces with a dichotomy between the *natural* and the normative,'[5] stretching Sellars's original distinction to quite some extent. His reason for this is that 'if we conceive the natural as the realm of law, demarcating it by the way its proper mode of intelligibility contrasts with the intelligibility that belongs to inhabitants of the space of reasons, we put at risk the very idea that spontaneity might characterise the workings of our sensibility as such.'[6] In other words, what McDowell means to say is that the natural world need not be deprived of the norms that govern our beliefs, because otherwise it is left unexplained how spontaneity and receptivity can cooperate.

So, what is reality like for McDowell if the conceptual realm extends beyond the mental realm? Here is it helpful to see that while reality is within

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as a whole instead of individual sentences can face the tribunal of experience (in his 'Two Dogma's of Empiricism,' 1951) cannot change the fact that experience is conceived as unconceptualised, raw data. In a similar vein, Evans holds that our experience cannot be fully conceptual, because our concepts are too course-grained to account for our perceptual experiences (see for example his *The Varieties of Reference*, 1982).

[4] *Mind and World* (1996), lecture 2, section 5.
[5] Ibid., introduction, section 8.
[6] Ibid., p.71

the conceptual sphere, it is still independent from our thinking. With this statement, McDowell explicitly responds to the possible criticism that his theory is idealistic – a movement that denies the premise that there exists anything outside our thinking. However – and this is one of the main innovative insights that McDowell advocates – needing a constraint from outside *thinking* does not entail that we need a constraint from outside *thinkables*: 'perceptible facts are essentially capable of impressing themselves on perceivers in states or occurrences of the latter sort.'[7] On the side of the subject, we receive conceptual perceptions passively. The fact that for McDowell there is no outer boundary to the conceptual means that he cannot follow Kant in positing a noumenal world – a world that is beyond the sensible. On the contrary, a supersensible world implies a sideways-on picture, which McDowell explicitly refutes. Instead, 'when one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case.'[8]

McDowell's alternative to the two horns of the dilemma seems to be quite unusual and puzzling,[9] for how can our conceptual domain *include* the world? To see how McDowell's account works, it is helpful to look at his formulation of Second Nature. Originally deriving from Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, McDowell uses the concept to explain how our natural world is in fact already infused with normativity. Our idea of the world should be reconceived from a realm of pure natural law to a domain in which spontaneity is active in shaping our lives. Again, there is no side-ways on picture from which we can view our world, we are situated in the world and its practices: we conceive our practical situation from a specific outlook.[10] The world is not a domain in which we create our own norms, however; i.e. it is not a solipsistic universe which inherently depends on our presence. On the contrary, it 'is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them.'[11] Note here that McDowell makes the step from experience being conceptual in nature to the world being suffused with norms. This step is intuitive when realising that the concepts operative in perception are the same that are used in making judgements. Whether claims are justified thus does not hinge on a world as conceived as a realm of law, but on a world as it is cut up by concepts that *we* employ. So, if the world is suffused with norms, and we occupy a place in the world, then every exercise of reason we undertake will be from

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[7]Ibid., p.28

[8]Ibid., p.27

[9]Perhaps mostly for philosophers based in the analytic tradition.

[10]Ibid., lecture 4, section 7

[11]Ibid., p.82

a specific normative standpoint. In this way, not only do we capture ways of living, we are also situated in these ways; there is no standpoint outside the space of reasons that we can occupy.

McDowell concludes that if we conceive nature as a realm of law, it is difficult to see how we can unite mind and world to form a satisfying picture of how we can acquire beliefs that are about that world. The only two options that seem to be left are either following the non-conceptualists in their claim that the world impinges on our experience directly or siding with Davidson's claim that the world only causally constrains our mind. The former fall prey to the Myth of the Given, while the latter leaves the mind spinning in a void, or so McDowell claims.

2.2 The Second Horn: Spinning in a Void

So far, I have only explained McDowell's critique on Davidson's theory briefly. In this section, my account will be deepened. It will become clear why McDowell thinks that in Davidson's view, empirical thoughts cannot have content.

Even though McDowell attacks Davidson's theory on a number of (crucial) points, in fact he is also deeply inspired by his views. Both philosophers agree, for example, on the notion that the constitutive ideal of rationality must be *sui generis*; rationality does not arise from causal processes or law-like regularities, but instead is an irreducible, autonomous realm.[12] The locus of the dispute between McDowell and Davidson is how this rational realm connects to nature; while the latter holds that causal connections between the physical world and our beliefs suffice, McDowell requires a *rational* constraint from the world. These causal connections that Davidson proposes fall outside the space of reasons – the realm wherein conceptual capacities are operative. Mere causal connections between mind and world, according to McDowell, imply that 'experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility,'[13] which consequently means that there is no justification involved in the world's impact on our senses.

The picture Davidson sketches stays far away from the Myth, since there are no Givens from the world that are expected to play a justifying role. McDowell's position is, however, that it recoils too much from the Myth, by thoroughly underestimating what its appeal was in the first place. The

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[12]Although for Davidson, this realm does not need to be *ontologically* autonomous, in the sense that mental events (as tokens) are dependent on their physical counterparts.

[13]*Mind and World* (1996), p.14

reason for falling into the Myth was to avoid seeing the mind as a self-contained, unconnected realm which could be situated in the world as we generally assume it, but which might as well only be connected to wires in an experimenter's lab. What we want to avoid here is a picture in which we are confined within the space of thinking; a picture which leaves our thoughts incapable of telling us how the world around us really is.

Davidson is not blind to the threat of an unconnected mind that spins in a void. His response to the picture is that 'belief (...) is intrinsically veridical,'[14] through the notions of triangulation and charity. As he explains in a reply to Rorty: 'These [basic perceptual beliefs] I hold to be in the main true because their content is, in effect, determined by what typically causes them.'[15] With this Davidson means to say that a belief is *about* a certain object, because it is *caused* by that object, where the cause is determined by triangulation of two communicators and the world. In this way, our beliefs are triangulated with meaning and truth to the effect that what we believe is necessarily connected to how the world in fact is.[16] The principle of charity subsequently ensures that in our everyday life we must also *assume* that beliefs are veridical: communication could not lift off if we would not employ the principle of charity. That is, due to the constitutive nature of rationality we need to assume that others are right about the world in order for interpretation to be possible at all.

McDowell highly doubts whether this sense of veridicality soothes the worry we have about our minds being unconstrained with respect to the world. In his interpretation of Davidson, we could still make statements that are largely true about our electronic environment, if we were a brain in a vat. Although McDowell only explains this interpretation very briefly in a footnote, the idea here is that for Davidson, the relation between belief and truth is mediated by the meaning that is attached to the language in which the belief is formulated. Whether or not our statements are true about the world depends on what meaning is attached to these statements. Davidson's notion of veridicality in concrete circumstances would thus imply: 'Certainly your belief is about a book, given how "a book" as you use the phrase is correctly interpreted.'[17] For McDowell, this could still mean that this 'book' we are talking about is in fact a conglomerate of artificial electronic impulses. What McDowell forgets or at least does not mention here, however, is that Davidson does not only combine belief with interpretation, but also with

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[14]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' afterword
[15]'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Discussion with Rorty' (1999), p.19
[16]Be it that 'the world how it in fact is' is conceived in a minimalist truth framework.
[17]*Mind and World* (1996), p.17, footnote.

language acquisition and use. The meaning of the term 'book' is acquired and used in a necessary triangulation of two persons *with the world*, which means that the world is already included in the body of beliefs.

For McDowell, Davidson's notion of veridicality comes too late: 'when Davidson argues that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, he helps himself to the idea of a body of beliefs, a body of states that have content.'[18] How these beliefs acquire content is exactly what is in question, according to McDowell. He claims that beliefs can only have empirical content if thoughts and intuitions are rationally constrained by the world; thoughts without intuitions are empty. As to what exactly this rational constraint involves, Robert Brandom offers helpful insights.[19] He analyses that three criteria are inherent to McDowell's notion of rational constraint: the world must *normatively* constrain the mind, it must do so with *conceptual* norms, and these concepts must be the same as those operative in making judgements.[20] Subsequently, Brandom takes issues with McDowell's conclusion that Davidson's constraint does not satisfy these criteria. It would be beyond the scope of the present endeavour to fully explicate the argument, but in short he states that McDowell slides from the position that the *world* has to constrain beliefs to *experiences* having to do so. While Davidson's theory does not satisfy the latter, he does account for the former, due to his externalist conception of meaning. Here McDowell overlooks several alternatives, because of his individualistic outlook on belief justification.

In short, McDowell attacks Davidson for leaving the mind spinning in a void, by only proposing causal connections between mind and world. Davidson's argument that beliefs are predominantly veridical, which is supported by his views on interpretation comes too late for McDowell; it does not show how beliefs can have empirical content in the first place.

2.3 Challenges for McDowell

The debate between Davidson and McDowell has generated much interest in the philosophical world. It is my aim in this and the next section to use some of the most important arguments from other philosophers relating to the debate to create a more thorough understanding, and to use them as a stepping stone for my own analyses. These arguments can roughly be divided into two categories: the ones who try to exempt Davidson from McDowell's

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[18]Ibid., p.68
[19]'Perception and Rational Constraint' (1998)
[20]Ibid., p.370

critique, and the ones who point to problems with McDowell's theory itself.[21] The first category mostly concerns arguments that emphasise certain parts of Davidson's theory to show that he does not leave the mind spinning in a void. This category I will discuss in the next section, since it can be related more closely to the general argument I develop. The arguments that tackle McDowell's view in itself, however, I will discuss here, partly to situate the debate in contemporary discussions, and partly to analyse how exactly McDowell conceives of the interplay between receptivity and spontaneity. If McDowell's intricate theory is understood more thoroughly, a well-informed discussion of McDowell's criticism of Davidson can be developed.

The arguments concerning McDowell's theory can roughly be divided into the ones that point to what I would term 'technical' problems, and the ones that provide a meta-outlook on his theory. In the first category, most authors have found fault with the way in which McDowell conceives of receptivity and his connected view of the world as being inside the space of reasons. A general worry is voiced by Roger Gibson when he asks the question of how the world as 'a totality of thinkables' can be conceived. If the world is inside the space of reasons, and this space is formed by concepts that we employ, does that not yield an idealist picture of the world? Gibson grants that it does not do so explicitly, since 'McDowell distinguishes *acts* of thinking from *thoughts* (i.e. thinkables) and then goes on to identify the world with the totality of thinkables which exist independently of anyone's thinking them.'[22] If, however, these thinkables exist independently of anyone's thinking, how are they to be individuated, and for whom are they thinkable? McDowell replies that his conception of the world as thinkable items is not as metaphysically substantial as Gibson believes it to be.[23] The world is 'everything that can be truly thought to be the case,'[24] and since there is enough room for error, the world is indeed not conceived of as an idealistic world; as a mere reflection of the norms that we supply.

As to whether in McDowell's theory there is indeed enough room to

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[21]Surprisingly enough, there are no commentators who side with McDowell completely in this debate, at least not to my knowledge. Some authors have placed critical remarks on Davidson's theory itself, however, such as Gjelsvik in his article 'Experience' (2004). Here he writes that for Davidson, the concept of error is hard to explain, and that in order to solve this problem he should say that not only beliefs, but also 'appearances' can justify beliefs. Luckily, McDowell himself has published numerous replies to his critics, of which the relevant arguments will be extracted and assessed in order to make it a relatively balanced discussion.

[22]'McDowell on Quine, Davidson and epistemology' (1999), p.133

[23]'Reply to Gibson, Byrne, and Brandom' (1996)

[24]Ibid., p. 284

decide that what we thought to be the case is in fact wrong, Gibson raises doubts. He wonders how we can distinguish between misleading and non-misleading experiences in McDowell's system. How are we to decide that one perception we take in is really an aspect of the world, while another is merely an appearance? McDowell replies that there is no conceptual difficulty; there is no common element to a perception in veridical and deceptive situations here, and we can point to facts about for example the lighting conditions to explain why certain situations are deceptive. With this, McDowell adheres to the theory of disjunctivism. This theory says that perceptual statements such as 'it seems that p' do not imply a 'p-like entity', with respect to which we have to provide an overarching theory of why we are justified in claiming p instead of being subject to hallucinations. Instead, these sentences are made true *either* by p *or* something that looks like p. The fact that individual observers might not be able to distinguish between genuine perceptions and hallucinations does not warrant the sceptical claim that therefore all experiences can be misleading, according to McDowell. The two kinds of perceptions simply do not belong to the same class of mental events.

If we analyse Gibson's argument as saying that when we are presented with a certain perception in receptivity, we still do not know whether that perception comports with the world, a similar argument has been voiced by other authors. Stroud, Marmol, Ginsborg, and Davidson point to difficulties with seeing the world as presenting 'appearings,' which need not necessarily be judged as actually being the case.[25] In other words: if the world supplies merely propositions, or 'things being thus and so' to which no truth value is attached, how can we subsequently use this perception to justify our beliefs about the world? As Stroud formulates it, openness to reality is lost if these epistemic intermediaries do not tell us anything about how the world really is,[26] i.e. if what they present is not believed by us to be so.[27] McDowell disagrees that seeing something to be the case must entail endorsement of that claim.[28] He provides the example of someone thinking that the lighting

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[25]'Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought' (2002); 'Conceptual schemes and empiricism: what Davidson saw and McDowell missed' (2007); 'Reasons for Belief' (2006), respectively.

[26]'Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought' (2002), p.88

[27]Now we can note the difference between these and Gibson's arguments as well; while Stroud, Marmol, Ginsborg and Davidson believe that appearings cannot function in justificatory relations, and thus are contaminated too much by the 'world side' of the traditional dichotomy, Gibson's argument is the opposite, stating that they are influenced too much by the mind.

[28]'Reply to Barry Stroud' (2002)

conditions are very bad when she sees that a tie is green; in that situation she does not actually believe the tie is green. While McDowell might be right in analysing the situation in this manner, it still leaves open the question of how the justificatory relation in this case works.

This is exactly what Ginsborg notes when she analyses that McDowell cannot appeal to facts such as for example the lighting conditions to explain why sometimes one is justified in endorsing a claim and at other times is not.[29] While Davidson does account for this kind of reason-giving, since it is the interplay between two speakers and the world which decides whether something is reasonable, McDowell requires the person to be able to justify her belief from a first person perspective. As Brandom analyses: McDowell thinks that 'the one whose judgement is justified must be the *same* one who can appeal to the external constraint in justifying it.'[30] This, according to Brandom, is a much too narrow view of what a rational constraint of the world is supposed to be. McDowell forgets that the practical implication of spontaneity is social in nature, and thereby provides an individualist outlook on the practice of reason-giving. McDowell responds that the rational constraint as Brandom conceives it 'does not yield anything genuinely recognizable as a rational vulnerability of thinking to the world,' because it is only the interpreter that has access to the observational reports.[31] He thereby rejects Brandom's suggestion to broaden the view on what a rational constraint should be; he stands by his opinion that one should have first person access to the rational constraint and rejects Brandom's analysis of his view as individualistic.

So far, roughly three possible problems have been pointed to: what 'the world as thinkables' exactly means, whether the rational constraint from the world can account for the possibility of error, and why it is necessary to have the same person who wants to justify her beliefs be able to appeal to the rational constraint. The first question can be structured by asking whether McDowell intends thinkables to be *actual* or *possible*? With this I mean respectively (normative) structures as they actually are in the world or as they can possibly be, constrained by for example human nature or the course of history. In the latter case, McDowell cannot possibly hold that his view is not metaphysically substantial, since a world containing items that do not need to be there *actually* is not a world we conceive of in common sense. Therefore I suspect McDowell means the former – that the world as

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[29]'Reasons for Belief' (2006)

[30]'Perception and Rational Constraint' (1998), p.373

[31]'Reply to Gibson, Byrne and Brandom' (1996), p.294

a collection of actual thinkable items constrains our thought. This brings us to the second problem, however, for if the world is suffused with our norms, and those norms are actual, how can we account for error? We cannot be wrong about the world if the norms we collectively developed necessarily comport with the world. McDowell can only resort to a majority-vote about the world: you know you are wrong if the norms created by the majority are not your norms. This, however, is incompatible with McDowell's insistence on the world *itself* as necessarily constraining our thought. Furthermore, not only do I agree with Gibson's worry about the conceivability of the world as thinkable items, and with Stroud, Marmol, Ginsborg, and Davidson when they raise doubts about the possibility of error, I share Brandom's criticism when he says that McDowell's rational constraint is too strict. I would even go further in saying that the concept of a rational constraint from the world is rather dubious in itself and that (if conceived of in this form), it is not necessary. Providing an argumentation for this statement will be a central feature of part two, but for the present let me say that I agree with Davidson's common sense realism; we do not need to justify our beliefs with reference to a foundational entity such as 'the world,' but rather, our beliefs need to be largely true in order for communication to be possible at all.

We can see that authors have not only raised doubts about how receptivity operates, but also about the justificatory relations it is supposed to provide. Gjelsvik, on the other hand, comments on McDowell's notion of spontaneity. He argues that McDowell's understanding of spontaneity leaves it too free; he conceives of it as an unconstrained realm, which is what led him to propose the constraint from the world in the first place. What McDowell does not realise, however, is that spontaneity is itself not unconstrained; as Wittgenstein showed us we cannot help but believe certain things. While McDowell thinks spontaneity must terminate in every context, with the help of this rational constraint from the world, in fact Wittgenstein thinks every explanation comes to an end somewhere, without necessarily requiring an external constraint. McDowell himself claims that Wittgenstein's insights concern different problems.[32] While I agree with Gjelsvik in the sense that I think Wittgenstein's ideas on knowledge and justification are more intuitive than McDowell's, I am not sure whether Gjelsvik is right in using Wittgenstein's view in a McDowellian or Kantian vocabulary when he says that for Wittgenstein, spontaneity itself is already constrained. One of Wittgenstein's most promising points, in my opinion,

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[32]'Reply to Olav Gjelsvik' (2008)

is that there is no dichotomy between spontaneity and receptivity.[33]

Whereas the previously discussed authors have commented on rather specific aspects of McDowell's theory – i.e. his notions of receptivity, justification, and spontaneity – other commentators have issued reflections on a meta-level. The most relevant reflection is that McDowell is sometimes analysed as being some kind of foundationalist. Glüer for example, thinks McDowell looks for ultimate reasons to constrain beliefs, which makes him a foundationalist.[34] This is not to say that he actually succeeds in finding these ultimate reasons, or so Glüer argues, for McDowell cannot grant perceptions such a role. Note that this is a similar argument to those discussed above which claim that a perception which is not necessarily believed cannot provide justifications for further beliefs. Glüer finds this problematic, because McDowell seems to need this appeal to ultimate justifications or foundational evidence, when trying to show how we can know what the world is like. McDowell sees no problem with this, since receptivity is *passive*; we do not supply our subjective view but receive how the world is directly. Glüer retorts that that might well be, but that 'rejected and accepted perceptual propositions are equally passive.'[35] Similar to Glüer, Wright sees McDowell as some form of a foundationalist.[36] He analyses that instead of rejecting the Myth of the Given, McDowell recasts it, since 'what is given in experience is essentially of the form: that P – that so-and-so is the case.'[37] With this taking in of the world McDowell implies that there is something given in the world, which makes him some kind of foundationalist. McDowell, however, views the terminology of perceptions as foundations as 'unhappy.'[38] The 'foundations' are partly held in place by the 'superstructure'; the concepts that are operative in receptivity are the same as those in spontaneity, or so he claims. As will be discussed in the next section more thoroughly, I largely concur with Glüer's and Wright's view. Of course, calling him a foundationalist is quite a polemical statement, because foundationalism as such is exactly what McDowell opposes by renouncing the Myth of the Given. He certainly does not adhere to foundationalism in the sense of maintaining that there is a space of law that gives foundations to claims made in the space of reasons. If, however, foundationalism is thought of as a position

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[33]In chapter four of this thesis I will go into this argument more deeply, after having discussed Wittgenstein's ideas in *On Certainty* more extensively.

[34]'On Perceiving That' (2004)

[35]Ibid., p.206

[36]'Human Nature?' (2002)

[37]Ibid., p.145

[38]'Reply to Gibson, Byrne, and Brandom' (1996)

saying that constraints do not come from basic beliefs, then McDowell does fall into that category. Whether or not McDowell is a real foundationalist, I agree with the gist of the criticism discussed above in the sense that McDowell focuses too much on his rational constraint from the world, while in fact this is not necessary.

In this section, I have explained, discussed, and evaluated a selection of critiques on McDowell's theory. While some authors have focussed on the technical aspects of McDowell's views, others provided meta-arguments. The most important problems that we have found are that McDowell leaves it unclear how we can account for the possibility of error, that if appearings are not necessarily endorsed, they cannot justify beliefs, and that the rational constraint McDowell proposes is unnecessary or even harmful.

2.4 Spinning in the World

Most of the problems discussed in the previous section lead up to the point that I – and others with me – want to make in the present section, which is in a nutshell that McDowell's main criticism of Davidson – i.e. that he leaves the mind spinning in a void – can be countered. First I discuss some points other authors have made briefly, only to situate my argument in recent debates. Subsequently Rorty's reconstruction of Davidson as a pragmatist will be examined, whereafter I can argue via those claims – which I will partially endorse – and on the basis of my reconstruction of Davidson as employing functionalist arguments, that Davidson can be exempted from McDowell's critique.

The parts of Davidson's theory that authors address to show that he does not leave the mind spinning in a void are his epistemological reliabilism and semantic externalism,[39] his interpretivism,[40] his common sensical realism and holism,[41] and his refutation of the third dogma.[42] All these arguments are voiced to show that Davidson leaves no gap between mind and world, i.e. between our beliefs and the objects they are about. With epistemological reliabilism Brandom means that if true beliefs are the outcome of reliable belief-forming processes, the perceiver is entitled to them.[43] Davidson's semantic externalism was discussed elaborately in chapter 1, section 2 but in

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[39]Brandom, 'Perception and Rational Constraint' (1998)

[40]Manning, 'Interpretation, Reasons, and Facts' (2003)

[41]Malpas, 'On Not Giving Up the World' (2008)

[42]Marmol, 'Conceptual Schemes and Empiricism: What Davidson Saw and McDowell Missed' (2007)

[43]'Perception and Rational Constraint' (1998), p.371

short entails that it is the interpreter who decides on semantic content of an utterance. If these two aspects of Davidson's theory are accepted, McDowell's rational constraint is actually fulfilled: 'From the point of view of the *interpreter* (...) the relation between the facts and the reports or perceptual beliefs is not merely a causal one, but also one rationally assessable in terms of the *truth* of those reports or beliefs, relative to the independent facts.'[44] Accordingly, if the rational constraint means that our beliefs need to be constrained by the facts, and that this relation should be rationally assessable, Davidson does not leave the mind as an unconstrained realm.

Be it in different words, I think Manning's basic claims coincide with Brandom's. While the latter draws on semantic externalism and epistemological reliabilism, the former makes essentially the same point by analysing Davidson as an interpretivist. Interpretivism according to Manning means that 'the meanings of a speaker's words and the contents of her propositional attitudes are constituted of those meanings and contents that she would be ascribed in the course of an interpretation, (...) undertaken under certain idealized constraints.'[45] Though focusing less on the *interpreter* having access to the rational constraint, Manning agrees with Brandom that the process of (radical) interpretation and its resulting principles of triangulation and charity already establishes a connection between a speaker's beliefs and the world.

Malpas's argumentation is closely tied to Brandom's and Manning's and adds Davidson's common-sense realism and holism concerning the mental to the list of things that exempt him from McDowell's critique. The holism of the mental that Manning attributes to Davidson makes sure that having a belief is not seen as an inner or private state 'whose connection with the world can always be doubted,'[46] but rather, as something that is already necessarily connected to the world via triangulation. Davidson's common-sense realism Malpas claims to entail that 'that to which philosophy has to do justice, is our ordinary, everyday involvement with the world.'[47] Since Davidson gave up the duality between conceptual scheme and the world, the world as it common-sensically is, was *drawn in* rather than lost. With this analysis, Malpas has found an ally in Marmol, seeing that the latter claims that McDowell overlooks Davidson's rejection of the third dogma.[48]

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[44]Ibid., p.371-372

[45]Manning, 'Interpretation, Reasons, and Facts' (2003), p.346

[46]Malpas, 'On Not Giving Up the World' (2008), p.206

[47]Ibid., p.201

[48]Marmol, 'Conceptual Schemes and Empiricism: What Davidson Saw and McDowell Missed' (2007)

In order for McDowell to formulate his problem at all, he needs to presuppose the distinction between the conceptual realm and its empirical content, while for Davidson beliefs already have content. Davidson's rejection of the duality of scheme and content makes it impossible to conceive of a Kantian framework of intuitions and their organising concepts in the first place. I agree with Malpas and Marmol that Davidson's holism and his rejection of the third dogma exempt him from McDowell's critique. In charging Davidson with empty beliefs, McDowell forgets that for beliefs to function as they do, according to Davidson, they *necessarily* have content: 'In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.'[49] In other words, discarding the third dogma implies that there is no 'empty conceptual framework' and that instead, the world is already implied. However, I do not fully agree with Marmol that McDowell presupposes a real Kantian dichotomy between the conceptual realm and its empirical content. McDowell's conceptual relation between mind and world blurs the distinction that Kant made between transcendental idealism and empirical realism.

Through the eyes of Brandom, Manning, Malpas, and Marmol we have now seen how Davidson's way of looking at belief-formation – through triangulation and charity – seems to exempt him from McDowell's critique. The arguments made by these four authors can be summarised as saying that McDowell is not justified in criticising Davidson for the 'emptiness' of his beliefs, because for Davidson beliefs are already suffused with content. I fully agree with these claims. All aspects of Davidson's theory that these authors have addressed, point to the general view that there is no such thing as an 'empty belief.' As we have seen in section two of the present chapter, however, McDowell retorts that Davidson's notion of veridicality starts too late, since Davidson *presupposes* that beliefs already have content. In order to counter McDowell's retort, I will first look at Rorty's way of explaining Davidson's concept of truth, i.e. by interpreting him as a pragmatist. Rorty thinks Davidson belongs to the pragmatic movement shaped by Peirce, James, and Dewey, in the sense that 'only if we drop the whole idea of "correspondence with reality" can we avoid pseudo-problems.'[50] Rorty bases his interpretation of Davidson as a pragmatist mostly on his minimalist conception of truth: for Davidson, 'true' cannot be defined and has no explanatory use, and sentences are neither made true by the world, knowers

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[49]'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1973), p.20
[50]'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth' (1986), p.339

nor speakers. According to Davidson (and Rorty himself) it is misleading to speak of 'truth as a relation between beliefs and non-beliefs (non-causal) that must be analysed before one can rebut the sceptic.'[51] Davidson himself 'pretty much concurs' on Rorty's analysis.[52] He does not fully agree with Rorty's analysis of him as a pragmatist, however, in the sense that pragmatists often do not distinguish between truth and justification. While like the pragmatists, Davidson does not commit to a stance in the (anti-)realist debate and in a sense goes beyond it, he differs from most writers in the tradition in maintaining this distinction between truth and justification. That is: whereas 'justification is relative to many things: the availability of evidence, the expense of obtaining it, our audience, ours standards of evidential support, and so on,'[53] truth is not. Still, he does not adhere to a substantial notion of truth, because 'truth isn't a norm in addition to the norm (norms?) of justification'[54]: he does not need to define truth in order to explain why a belief is justified.

Now that we have expanded our knowledge of how Davidson conceives of the concept of truth and how this connects with the (anti-)realist debate, I can employ the functionalist interpretation of Davidson's arguments to show why McDowell's retort – i.e. that Davidson's appeal the veridicality of beliefs starts too late – does not work. Seen through McDowell's eyes, Davidson's argument takes contentful beliefs as a premise and subsequently concludes that these beliefs must be largely veridical. As we have seen in chapter 1, section 3 however, Davidson argues from the premise that we can communicate to the conclusion that we must be largely right about the world, without getting involved in metaphysical statements. The argument does not rely on beliefs being contentful, because that would be a metaphysical statement about the relation between mind and world. Furthermore, 'contentless beliefs' (or 'contentful beliefs') do not figure in Davidson's theoretical vocabulary; due to his rejection of the third dogma these concepts simply cannot be employed.

For McDowell, one of the main misconceptions in contemporary philosophy of mind/epistemology and the root of the two horns of the dilemma is that nature is conceived of as a realm of law. McDowell's own framework with the cooperation between receptivity and spontaneity, and the rational constraint from the world that comes with that is supposed to change that conception. While I do not wish to argue against McDowell's view how the

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[51]Ibid., p.336
[52]'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (1972), afterword
[53]'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Discussion with Rorty' (1999), p.18
[54]Ibid., p.17

world should be conceived of here, I do think his analysis of Davidson as adhering to the 'old-fashioned' notion of the world does not do justice to the latter's views when placed in a broader context. It is true that David-son emphasises that only the physical sciences can yield explanations of the world that are law-like. Davidson's ontology, however, consists of events that can be described in the physical *and* the mental vocabulary. In Mc-Dowell's treatment of Davidson, the latter's realm of law is equated with 'the world' and dualistically set against the mental. But the core idea in Davidson's anomalous monism is that there is no such thing as two onto-logical substances. The mind is not dualistically set against the physical, law-like realm but instead supervenes on it.

Perhaps McDowell's criticisms would be justified if Davidson was a 'real' realist; if the (true) descriptions we give display reality as it really is, instead of remaining silent about it. I agree with Malpas and Rorty, however, in their belief that Davidson cannot be given a place in the realist - anti-realist debate.[55] Whereas Malpas describes him as a common-sense realist and Rorty as adhering to the pragmatist movement which supersedes the real-ism - anti-realism dichotomy, the relevant idea here is the same: Davidson does not want to give a foundational metaphysical view of what the world is like, other than the functional statement that the world must consist of for example events, in order for communication to be possible. In conclu-sion: seeing that Davidson does not adhere to the metaphysical separation between mind and world, McDowell's argument that Davidson's notion of 'nature' is flawed does not hold.

In this section we have seen attempts to repel the McDowellian criticism that Davidson leaves the mind spinning in a void. Whereas the authors pointed to different aspects of Davidson's theory, the gist of their argumen-tation was similar: Davidson's framework already *implies* the world; there is no possible construction of the notion of empty beliefs. Subsequently, the arguments developed in chapter one to the effect that Davidson's argument are functionalist in nature and Rorty's explanation of Davidson's notion of truth repelled McDowell's arguments that Davidson *assumes* beliefs to have content and that Davidson's conception of nature is problematic, respec-tively. All in all, these arguments have shown that McDowell's critique is problematic and that Davidson does not leave the mind spinning in a void: the image of the mind as spinning *in anything* is flawed.

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[55]Malpas, 'On Not Giving Up the World' (2008); Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth' (1986)

Part II

Justification

Chapter 3

Context-dependent Justification

The debate between McDowell and Davidson discussed in part one raises systematic questions. In this second part I extract the most pressing question and formulate an answer to it. One of the main issues the debate centres around is what kind of certainty we need regarding our beliefs. In other words, how do we know that what we believe does not completely miss the mark? And how can we know we are not trapped in our own (collective) belief system, completely detached from the world as it is? Davidson formulated an answer from an externalist perspective, using his minimal account of truth and the principles of charity and triangulation to arrive at the conclusion that there is no gap between the world and beliefs to be bridged by epistemic intermediaries. McDowell, on the other hand, requires certainty from an internal perspective: the subject justifies her beliefs by appealing to the rational constraint from the world, and the world as it were supplies the norms with reference to which she can justify her beliefs. As we have seen in the previous chapters, while McDowell is a direct realist, Davidson could be said to move beyond the traditional realist - anti-realist distinction, his common-sense realism and the use he makes of functional arguments being rather close to the pragmatist tradition. This narrows our question down to: 'Do we need justification in terms of "the world itself," or can we get by with "what works" in a certain situation?'

As might have been intuited from the first two chapters, I want to argue for the latter, i.e. I want to claim that the justification we need for a significant portion of our beliefs is context-based rather than in terms of the world as it is. To substantiate this claim I will present a three-step

argument, where the first two steps will be explained in the present chapter, and the third in the last chapter. In order to help the readers to maintain an overview, a schematic outline of the argument is given below:

1. Some beliefs can only be justified locally, not globally

2. Those beliefs cannot be justified in terms of the world

3. However, these beliefs can still be (functionally) certain in their context

As might be noted, while the first two arguments show negatively how some beliefs cannot be justified in terms of the world, the third demonstrates that this is not disastrous for our thinking on justification, providing a positive alternative to the picture that all beliefs need to be justified in terms of the world.

3.1 'Some beliefs can only be justified locally, not globally'

Here, I issue a three-step argument to show that for some beliefs, their justification is context-dependent in the sense that their justification cannot be extended to all possible contexts. That is, for a significant portion of beliefs, x, it is so that while they are justified in a particular context c, they might not be in context d. Those beliefs are justified only in their context, without having to and being able to rely on some deeper *philosophical justification*; a justification that is 'beyond' any particular situation or way of looking at the matter. This is because a) beliefs are linguistically structured, b) an utterance's meaning is established in a context, and c) the exact meaning of the expression of some beliefs cannot be abstracted to a global context. Another way of describing the argument is that I try to show how *meaning contextualism* leads to *epistemic contextualism*, the former stating, in a nutshell, that the meaning of utterances is context-dependent, while the latter implies that different contexts can have different epistemic characteristics, or in particular, different epistemic norms.

Before starting off the argument, I want to make explicit what kind of epistemic contextualism I adhere to when showing how it is dependent on meaning contextualism. In order to do so, a framework developed by Pritchard is helpful.[1] Here he distinguishes between 'semantic contextualism' as put forward by DeRose and Lewis and 'inferential contextualism,'

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[1]'Two Forms of Contextualism' (2002)

proposed by Williams, and subsequently combines the two to form his own version: a 'two-component' contextualism. While it would be beyond the scope of the present endeavour to explain these different forms of contextualism in great detail, it is expedient to look at them briefly. What all versions have in common is that they hold that 'key epistemic concepts like "knowledge" and "justification" are context-relative.'[2] The most important difference between the two main forms of contextualism is that with the former, authors focus on conversational contexts while with the latter, contexts are differentiated according to inferential structure. A conversational context changes when a different conversational situation arises, which can even be as quickly as when another speaker joins the conversation, or a question of a different type is raised. For example, if a group is talking about which animals they have seen in the zoo, the conversational context changes if someone raises the question: 'How do you know there were *really* animals?' Differentiating contexts on the basis of inferential structure, on the other hand, relies on what counts as evidence and on which statements are considered to be relatively certain, creating categories such as for example 'everyday contexts,' 'scientific explanation contexts,' and 'sceptical contexts.' That is, whereas in everyday contexts, nobody would doubt that the sun is round, a mathematician can doubt whether the sun is (perfectly) round, and in sceptical contexts, the belief that there is a sun in the first place can be questioned. What this means is that contexts for epistemic contextualists are more narrowly defined than for inferential contextualists: what is the same context for the latter can be different for the former, but not vice versa.[3]

Pritchard formulates an alternative to the accounts explained above, by strengthening inferential contextualism by accounting for some realisations expressed by the semantic contextualists. He works out an intuition that Williams had, namely that while a belief may be true in a certain context, that does not mean that it can appropriately be asserted in that context. This makes *truth* context-dependent in the inferential contextualist sense, and *propriety* context-dependent in the semantic contextualist sense.[4] For

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[2]Ibid., p.19

[3]Consider a situation of two persons looking at the sun while trying to explain the phenomenon, the first speaker being a novice and the second an expert. Even here, the context on the epistemic contextualist's account would change once the expert's question is raised, even though it might seem as though the context only changes on the inferential contextualist view.

[4]It is not my aim here to contribute to the contextualist debate, but rather, to use Pritchard's observations for framing my own theory.

now, it suffices to say that in developing the argument in the present chapter, I adhere to Williams's notion of what epistemic contexts are, individuating them according to their general inferential structure.

Now that it has become clear in which epistemic contextualist tradition I situate myself, we can set out to develop the argument that some beliefs can only be justified locally. Here, I start with the Davidsonian premise that there is no deep difference between the structure of a belief and its linguistic expression. As his minimalist account of truth shows, the structure of a belief is thus that it can always potentially be translated into language. Moreover, triangulation of meaning, belief, and truth shows that beliefs are mediated by (linguistic) meaning in order to say something true or untrue. That is, if a belief is to be tested or evaluated, we need to know what you *mean* with the expression of your belief, i.e. what the words it is made up of mean.[5]

That beliefs are structured linguistically does not imply that they are context-insensitive. On the contrary – following Wittgenstein – the second step of the argument I outline in this section is that linguistic meaning is inherently tied to the context in which it is expressed. This view runs throughout his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), and is most commonly expressed by the simplified statement 'meaning is use.' Arguing against the Augustinean picture that the meaning of words can be 'looked up' in an abstract realm, every word denoting a certain object and sentences being composed of such objects,[6] Wittgenstein holds that a word's meaning can only be established within a language game. The exact meaning of the word 'car' when used by a child pointing to a toy is different from someone shouting it when a car is approaching you full speed, even though the meanings are related.[7] To the question whether the former context – i.e. pointing and naming – renders an appropriate description of what a word means, Wittgenstein replies: 'yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe.'[8]

Following Wittgenstein here, I argue with Travis against Evans's so-

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[5]Note that this premise is neutral with respect to the question how *thoughts* are structured; whether they are conceptual or non-conceptual is not influenced by the statement that *beliefs* are structured linguistically.

[6]Ibid., §1

[7]The point that meaning is tied to a context could be made very easily if non-literal meanings would be included, since they are even more clearly context-dependent. To make the argument even stronger, however, drawing on these non-literal meanings will be avoided.

[8]Ibid., §3

called 'generality constraint.'[9] The generality constraint reads that if you know how to apply a concept to one thing, you know how to apply it in all contexts.[10] Travis argues that while you may know the truth conditions of 'green' in the context of salamanders, these truth conditions may change in other logical spaces, even if they are in fact not far off, such as those referring to people.

This does not mean that I follow Travis's 'radical contextualism' in all respects, which I take to imply that *all* utterances of beliefs mean something different depending on their context of utterance. Instead, a mild form of meaning contextualism is proposed here, which states that the meaning of a significant portion of our beliefs is inherently context-dependent. That is, while 'the square root of 4 is 2' might mean the same thing in all contexts, an everyday proposition such as 'the car is a good way to travel' has a different meaning when uttered while chatting about summer plans or when used in a scientific context, such as for example in an environmental assessment report. Note here the difference between *epistemic* contextualism, as was used above, and *meaning* contextualism. Where the former term implies that what counts as 'knowledge' and what is 'justified' is context-dependent, the latter states that the meaning of words and sentences can vary when they are uttered in different contexts.

Even though my meaning contextualism is 'mild,' I do not refer merely to the indexicality of meaning, in the sense that words such as 'he,' 'that apple,' or 'today' change meaning when used in a different context, because they now refer to a different item. The difference between my meaning contextualism and the indexicality of meaning is that for the latter, the appropriate portion of the context can in principle be distilled, whereas I want to go further by claiming that at least for some utterances, what the context supplies to their meaning cannot be suitably specified. That is, with indexicals it is clear what part of the context we must look at in order to acquire the meaning of a sentence. For example, in establishing the meaning of 'that girl is eating a sandwich,' it is clear that we must look for a girl (eating a sandwich) in a certain context in order to fill in the indexical 'that girl.' However, for some expressions of beliefs, their meaning is more inextricably context-dependent. Thus, the picture I am arguing against is one in which an utterance with meaning m is used in context c where it is

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[9]Travis, 'On Constraints of Generality' (1994); Evans, 'Demonstrative Identification' (2003)

[10]Or in Evans's own words: 'For any two thoughts, Fa and Gb, and for any thinker, s, if the contents of Fa and Gb are conceptual, then (if s understands both Fa and Gb, s also understands Fb and Ga).' (Ibid., p.69)

clear exactly how c influences m. In Wittgensteinian terms: the boundaries of a language-game are not logically demarcated, and very often we even make up its rules as we go along with the game. Even in the rather well-defined game of chess, what the specific context adds to the meaning of the utterance 'rook' can change, for you can explain a novice what all the different pieces are called, but you could also mean 'hand me your rook please.'[11]

Now, what is the problem with establishing what the context supplies to the change of meaning? Can we not say that in the context of 'name-giving' the utterance 'rook' means *this* and in the context of a 'request' it means *that*? The problem is that if you want to explain the change of meaning fully, you would have to specify the context to such an extent that you would end up with only one specific context. That is, spelling out what a context supplies to the meaning of an utterance either looses generality or precision. One could for example state that in a 'request' context the utterance 'rook' means: 'hand me your rook please.' Note, however, that the specification of this context is not enough, since a request could also be to stop banging the rook on the table. And how could we clearly demarcate a game of chess? Would a game in which the rook can only go three steps at a time be included? It is not argued here that a context is always inherently inspecifiable, but rather, that if explicating it is done to such an extent that it fully explains the changes of its utterance's meanings, very limited to no generality is left, which means that it fundamentally misses its purpose. Thus, meaning contextualism as I advocate it, implies that a sentence does not point uniquely to a meaning floating around in an abstract realm; that is why according to Wittgenstein, we cannot know the rule apart from its applications. With Rorty, 'It seems perfectly clear, at least since Wittgenstein and Sellars, that the "meaning" of typographical inscriptions is not an extra "immaterial" property they have, but just their place in a context of surrounding events in a language-game, in a form of life.'[12] Therefore, our beliefs cannot be thought separately from the world, because they are linguistically mediated and are acquired in a social environment.

Having explained how the meaning of an utterance is inextricably bound to its context, let us examine what this means for the practice of justification.

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[11]Here, I do not wish to argue that there is no *similarity* between the meaning of the word 'rook' in one context and the other. Of course, if we want to account for language acquisition at all, there must be a common element in the uses of the word. However, I claim that that 'common element' cannot be captured in a rule and that the exact meaning of the utterance 'rook' can change from one context to the next.

[12]*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), p.25

What would global justification consist in? I intend the term to mean 'to justify something in an abstract, logical realm,' irrespective of its practical, concrete context. This would be of the form: 'x' is justified because y implies x and y is the case, where x is an utterance asked to be justified, y is a statement that would support x, and both x and y have a stable, context-independent meaning. As we have just seen, however, for many beliefs the meaning of x cannot be clearly delineated or extracted from its context. One could say that logical justification can still work, if the meaning of x and y are context-*dependent*, but made 'stable' through modification by their contexts. This would read 'x_c' is justified because y_c implies x_c and y_c is the case (which would work in the case of indexicals). However, as we have seen above, adherence to mild meaning contextualism does not merely state that meaning is dependent on how the indexicals are filled in. Rather, for some beliefs, their meaning is context-dependent in that sense that they cannot be *extracted* from their context; it is not clear what exactly their context supplies to their meaning. In other words, since c cannot be logically demarcated without either loosing generality or precision, the influence of c on x or y cannot be established with great precision. Since for some beliefs, their meanings cannot be extracted from their context to an abstract realm, it is problematic to justify them globally.

Illustrating the above reasoning with an example of actual justification works as follows: imagine a group of friends making summer plans to go to a small village in the North of France, preferably by public transportation. In this conversation, Sophie says: 'the car is a good way to travel.' If Sophie had been asked to justify her statement, she would have answered something like 'there's like five houses there!' which presumably would have been accepted in the situation described above. Trying to justify this statement on a global level, however, would run into serious difficulties. We would not want to accept 'there are five houses in the neighbourhood' as a justification for why the car is a good way to travel to be valid in all contexts. Even if the indexical 'there' was filled in by 'the destination village,' the reasoning does not make sense on an abstract level and will not be generally accepted in other contexts. But can't we describe the context in which the utterance was made in a way that would allow for generalisation to other contexts? This could read something like 'a group of friends having a conversation about plans to go to a destination, with a preference for travelling with public transport.' Obviously, specifying a context in such detail loses a great deal of generality, for how many contexts would actually conform to that description? However, specifying the context in more general terms, such as 'everyday context' or 'informal conversation' would not make the

justificatory process acceptable. Thus, circumscribing the context in which the belief was uttered cannot be done without either losing generality or precision, which makes it difficult to describe the influence the context has on the meaning of the utterance and consequently, problematic to justify the belief in a global frame of reference.

The three-step argument developed above can also be seen as showing how epistemic contextualism relies on meaning contextualism. Since the *meaning* of the expression of beliefs can change from one context to the next, the process of *justification* will change too, creating a different epistemic context. Further, meaning change is not the same across all contexts: seeing that a context in which two friends talk about the weather is very similar to one where a third friend joins them, the utterance 'it is very bright' will not change its meaning drastically. It *will*, however, if this conversational context is compared to a situation in which a physicist speaks of the luminescence of the sun in year y, pointing to a picture of it on a powerpoint presentation. With this qualitative difference of meaning-change across contexts, we can explain why some contexts employ a different inferential structure. In everyday contexts the statement 'the sun is round' is acknowledged to be certain, and something on which further justification can be built. However, in scientific contexts this statement might not be accepted so easily; it might still be a subject of discussion whether the sun is *perfectly* round. This observation can be explained by the fact that the meaning of 'sun' and 'round' imply different things in both contexts: in the former they have their everyday meaning, but in the latter, 'the sun' takes on the meaning of roughly 'the sun as we explain it in physical theory' and 'round' has mathematical properties that might not allow the sun to fall in its category. Thus, I think Pritchard and Williams are right in distinguishing epistemic contexts by their inferential structure, and I want to add here that 'inferential structure' for a large part depends on the extent to which meaning changes across those contexts.

In conclusion, since beliefs are structurally dependent on their linguistic expression, and the meaning of some linguistic expressions is inextricably bound to its context, some beliefs are also inherently context-dependent. Justifying those beliefs, therefore, is not done in a logical space 'up there,' but can only be done convincingly in the same or a sufficiently similar context in which the belief is expressed.

3.2 'Those beliefs cannot be justified in terms of the world'

Now that I have established that some beliefs are not justified in an abstract realm, but rather that their justification is always tied to a context, I can show that this implies that those beliefs cannot be justified in terms of the world. To establish this thesis, I will first explain what justification in terms of the world would look like. Thereafter, I expand on why this form of justification relies on the possibility of abstract justification, which as we have seen in the previous section, is highly problematic. As we will see, a key premise in this line of argumentation is that if we believe the world is foundational to the justification process, we need to believe it is consistent.

Before explaining this line of reasoning in more detail, I will describe what picture of justification I am arguing against and what is intended with the expression 'in terms of the world.' What I mean by justification in terms of the world rests on a view of beliefs as being somehow disconnected from the world. It entails that the world is one domain and the mind (where beliefs reside) is another. Justification, in this picture, is something that happens between beliefs and the world; in order to be able to utter a certain sentence truly, it needs to be bounded by the world as it is. For example, the utterance 'I am eating an apple' is justified if the entity it refers to either *is* an apple or *invites* the predicate 'apple.' This manner of justification can be contrasted with a view that allows only beliefs to justify other beliefs. Applied to the example above, 'I am eating an apple' can be justified by for example the utterance 'it is red and grows on apple trees' or 'you know I like eating apples.' The proposed contrast between beliefs being justified by how matters in the world stand and beliefs being justified by other beliefs does not imply that on the former view, beliefs cannot be *supported* or *explained* by other beliefs. Of course, the utterances just mentioned can be used to make the statement 'this is an apple' plausible, but the significant difference is that on the former view, beliefs are only really justified if they are foundationally made true by the world; they must rest on a deeper justification, namely a philosophical analysis of the relation between mind and world.

Note that 'justification in terms of the world' as explained above is neutral in the debate between realists and anti-realists with regard to their question if the universals in our beliefs are ontologically *there* in the world. On both views, the underlying premise remains that there is a philosophically significant gap between our beliefs and the world which needs a bridging

mechanism. The former stance demands that the universals we predicate of certain items are actually there in the world. The latter group on the other hand, holds that only individuals exist in the world and that correctly predicating universals of them depends on proper thinking about their relations, or on the mental concepts that are applicable to them (nominalism and conceptualism, respectively).[13] Thus, whether a certain predicate is a universal, a particular or a trope, and whether these reside in the world or are appropriately asserted of an individual through similarity relations or set-membership is of no importance for the main point here. This point is that in justifying the utterance on one of these views, one makes the statement that the world is such that it *includes* or *invites* the predicate.

The latter of the two contrasting views I have formulated above – i.e. that beliefs are justified by other beliefs without reference to a foundational, philosophical justification – rests on a minimalist conception of truth, such as Davidson's. Employing a minimal notion of truth implies that adding 'is true' to a statement is the same as asserting the statement itself. Truth as such is not a substantial concept; truth does not 'constist in' anything. In the words of Wittgenstein:

> 'At bottom, giving "This is how things are" as the general form of propositions is the same as giving the definition: a proposition is whatever can be true or false. (. . .) Now it looks as if the definition – a proposition is whatever can be true or false – determined what a proposition was, by saying: what fits the concept "true," or what the concept "true" fits, is a proposition. (. . .) But this is a bad picture. (. . .) Just as the proposition that only a *proposition* can be true or false can say no more than that we only predicate "true" and "false" of what we call a proposition. And what a proposition is is in one sense determined by the rules of sentence formation (in English for example), and in another sense by the use of the sign in the language game.'[14]

Where I take Wittgenstein to point in this passage is exactly this minimalist conception of truth that Davidson uses: the words true and false when applied to an utterance do not define whether something is a proposition or not; instead, their use is merely determined by our grammar.[15] Employing a minimalist account of truth subsequently implies that we cannot rely on

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[13]For a proper overview of the problem of universals and the realist and anti-realist solutions to it, see Armstrong's book *Universals: an opiniated introduction* (1989).

[14]*Philosophical Investigations* (1953), §136

[15]I take it that a minimalist account of truth is very close to, if not the same as, a

truth to justify our utterances; truth does not 'glue' the division between mind and world and does not give a statement any metaphysical import.

After having explained what justification with reference to the world would look like, I now turn to expound on how this relies on abstract justification, which proved to be problematic for a significant portion of beliefs in the previous section. In a nutshell: if beliefs are justified in terms of the world and given that the world as we think of it must be a stable realm, abstract justification is necessary. That is, we have seen that justification in terms of the world means that beliefs are justified because the world *is* that way or *invites* beliefs to be that way. Further, I take it as an unproblematic premise that the world as we think of it, certainly if it is used to justify beliefs, is a stable realm. Evidently, the world is in constant flux in the sense that it is subject to time; minimally, every physical object changes as it grows older, moves around or ceases to exist. What I mean by the word 'stable,' however, is that the world is *determined* at every moment. We might not *know* what the world is like, but if the world is to provide grounds for thinking, it cannot be so that at one moment 'x is an apple' and the next (or seen from a different perspective) 'x is not an apple.' Even if the world is in constant flux, it needs to be in a determined flux; within a reasonable time frame, the world cannot be both x and *not-x*. Further, if one wants to justify a belief in terms of the world, it would be something like 'belief b is justified because the world *is* b^{16} or invites us to hold b.' It follows here that in order to support the belief properly, the world cannot be both b and *not-b* at the same time. In other words, if one wants to build judgements on the world, it better be a firm ground.

So, for the world to be such a firm ground, it needs to be stable; it cannot change from one context to the next. As I showed in the previous section, local justification cannot underlie such reason-giving, since with that mechanism no stable meaning can be formulated. A belief is justified on that view, if the (informulable) rules of the language game are obeyed, which is not sufficient for justification with reference to the world. Subsequently, the inappropriateness of *any* local justification for those beliefs implies that instead, global justification is necessary. That is, if there is – in principle – no space for the meaning of those beliefs to change from situation to situation, abstract justification must be relied on. Since abstract justification was shown to be problematic for a significant subset of our beliefs, consequently

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deflationary theory of truth. This theory states that saying that 'snow is white' is the same as saying that 'snow is white' is true. Also, a deflationary theory seems to come with an anti-metaphysical stance.

[16]This can be b itself, or a 'physical version' of the mental item b.

justification in terms of the world is too.

In arguing against the view that for beliefs to be justified, justification in terms of the world is *always* necessary, I am very close to Rorty and his exposition of the misleading picture of philosophy (or more specifically, epistemology) as being 'the mirror of nature.'[17] In Rorty's view, knowledge or language does not need the foundations that epistemology tries to provide. He argues against philosophy as a discipline that needs to 'sort out' how the mind can have knowledge of the world, but advocates a thorough going naturalism. In fact, there is no metaphysical gap between mind and world. Rather, the intuitive difference between the two realms stems from 'the difference between a language suitable for coping with neurons and one suitable for coping with people.'[18] The similarity here with my view as outlined above is that at least for some of our beliefs, no 'general foundation' can be found, and as we will see in the next chapter, in fact no such foundation is needed.

In conclusion, I have shown in this section what is meant by 'justification in terms of the world': a mechanism that is needed to bridge the gap between beliefs and the world, where beliefs are justified because the world *is* so, or *invites* them to be so. Since this form of justification must be built on stable foundations, where changes in meaning from one context to another are intolerable, it cannot rely on local justification but instead rests on global justification. As I have established that for some beliefs global justification is inherently problematic, justification with reference to the world for those beliefs is thereby challenged.[19]

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[17] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)

[18] Ibid., p.355

[19] Presumably, many links to the stances apparent in the debate between Davidson and McDowell discussed in part one have been found in this chapter. These links will be made more explicit in the last section of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Certainty as a Positive Alternative

In the last chapter we saw that for a significant set of beliefs, their justification can only be local and not global. That is, since their meaning is inherently tied to a particular context, these beliefs cannot be justified in the abstract. Subsequently, since we need to believe that the world is a determined, stable realm, these beliefs cannot be justified in terms of the world, seeing that this would rely on a form of global justification. Now, what prospect for these beliefs remains? Do the problems of their global justification mean that they are unfounded – that they are ephemera, whose meaning cannot be pinned down? And, does this imply that there is no normativity in play for these utterances, that they are thus epistemically unreliable, and that in fact, 'anything goes'?

In the present chapter, we will see that the problems sketched for a global justification of a relevant set of beliefs do not imply that these beliefs are 'groundless' or that normativity in establishing them is completely absent. In order to do so, I give a positive alternative to the picture that beliefs need to be justified in terms of the world, inspired by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). By drawing on the Wittgensteinian distinction between *knowledge* and *certainties*, it can be shown that instead of all beliefs having to be 'metaphysically true' in order to be justified, they can be *functionally certain*. Hereafter, I will investigate what implications this positive alternative has for the debate between Davidson and McDowell and how we can view the matter from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

4.1 'However, these beliefs can still be (functionally) certain in their context'

In this section, I examine Wittgenstein's insights in *On Certainty* to see whether they can provide a positive alternative for the negative claim made in the previous chapter, i.e. that since for some beliefs global justification is problematic, they cannot be justified in terms of the world. In order to do so, I will explain Wittgenstein's views and subsequently I will make the connection to the framework provided in chapter three.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein displays a critique of – and provides an alternative to – both foundationalism and scepticism in thinking about knowledge. Moore, who replied to scepticism by offering a theory of foundationalist nature, used common sense knowledge to prove the existence of the external world.[1] Though Wittgenstein was very impressed by his paper, he found the argument unsatisfying and set out to show how it could be reconceived. Moore's argument comes down to: 'here is a hand' is a piece of knowledge that is true, and since a hand is an external object, thereby it is proven that there exists an external world. Wittgenstein replies that the claim that 'here is a hand' is true can easily be refuted by the idealist: 'From its *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so.'[2] To show that this does not mean we have to fall back to scepticism, Wittgenstein develops his distinction between *knowledge* and *certainty*. In a nutshell, having knowledge means that you can give reasons for believing something, while certainties are methodological posits that are necessary for playing the game of knowledge and doubt in the first place. Delving into the first category more elaborately, to be able to say that you know something means to be able to back up your claim: '"I know" often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know.'[3] Similarly, to know something also entails that you know what would prove your statement wrong.[4] Translated into an example: for Dan to be able to say that he knows La Mancha is in Spain, means that he will know what proves and disproves his claim. That is, if he would type in 'La Mancha' on google maps, this would yield either confirmation or disconfirmation of his claim. In a situation where he would utter 'I know that La Mancha is in Spain' and he would show his friends this fact on the computer, they would accept it.

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[1] 'Proof of an External World' (1939)
[2] *On Certainty* (1969), §2
[3] Ibid., §18
[4] Ibid., §66

In contrast, certainties cannot be part of the language-game of reason-giving. Certainties are methodological in nature; they provide the frame-work, or the riverbed, in which to conduct our investigations. These 'hinge' propositions are necessary to be able to play the game of knowing and doubt-ing; they are the positive outcome of Wittgenstein's claim that 'explanations come to an end somewhere.'[5] The (radical) sceptic's statement that we can doubt everything we know is contested by Wittgenstein, for 'doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt.' That is, we cannot even *understand* the practice of doubting if we doubt everything at the same time. If, for ex-ample, someone would suggest that the pieces in chess are changing while we are playing the game, we would not consider that to be real doubt, rather, we would think she is crazy. This means that we *have* to be certain about some facts, for if we are not, 'you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.'[6] Certainties are beyond the process of confirming or discon-firming, because their contradiction cannot rest on firmer grounds: 'but if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he be-lieves.'[7] For example, evidence counting against the claim that the water in the Netherlands is drinkable, such as 'my aunt got sick after drinking it last week' will always be less certain than the statement itself; we are inclined to dismiss the evidence rather than give up the initial utterance.

The question that can rise now is that if no evidence can be given to ground certainties, what remains of their epistemological status? Here I want to argue for an interpretation of *On Certainty* as being against episte-mological realism – a term that is explained by Pritchard as 'the view that the objects of epistemological inquiry have an inherent, and thus context-independent, structure.'[8] That is, certainties are *functionally* or *method-ologically* certain in a particular context; they are not fundamentally true (or false) regardless of the context in which they are employed. Rather, they are the implicit rules of a language game, as Wittgenstein explains: 'The propositions [the certainties] describing this world-picture might be part of

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[5]*Philosophical Investigations* (1953), §1

[6]*On Certainty* (1969), §114. Here, we see an interesting parallel between Davidson and Wittgenstein, in that they both interweave the process of learning the meaning of words with the acquisition of beliefs. On the basis of human rationality, we would adjust the meaning of a word if it would give rise to an impossible set of beliefs; since the meaning of 'doubting' is acquired in the same context as we are trying to make sense of other's beliefs about doubting, we optimise rationality rather than sticking to a meaning that would yield an impossible world view.

[7]Ibid., §243

[8]'Two Forms of Epistemological Contextualism' (2002), p.38

a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.'[9] Further, the truth of these propositions is not 'eternally fixed': 'The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift.'[10] This does not leave us with radical conceptual relativism, or an 'anything goes' picture of the world, for 'I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.'[11] This quote I take to imply that while the water moves constantly, the riverbed only shifts after a lot of pressure from the water. The certainties are not radically relativistic, because they only change if without the change, we could not make sense of our utterances anymore.

And what about the concept of truth; is there still such thing for Wittgenstein? As I interpret On Certainty, Wittgenstein employs the same minimalist truth that we have attributed to Davidson in chapter one. With respect to the truth of *certainties* he writes: 'If someone asked us "but is that *true*" we might say "yes" to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say "I can't give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same." '[12] Here we see that our practices still yield a source of normativity; it is not the case that anything can be true or that certainties are not constrained in any sense. However, we do not need *ultimate grounding* of these certainties for them to be true; 'the *truth* of certain propositions belongs to our frame of refrence.'[13] With respect to *knowledge claims*, Wittgenstein holds that what it would mean for them to be true is relative to the certainties.[14] That is, if we would doubt the certainties, the whole game of giving evidence for knowledge claims and consequently endorsing them would be different. More specifically: 'Well, if everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it – is it then certainly true? One may designate it as such. – But does it certainly agree with reality, with the facts? – With this question you are already going round in a circle.'[15] Besides showing clearly that Wittgenstein does not adhere to a correspondence theory of truth, this quote tells us that also for knowledge claims, Wittgenstein does not propose a substantial concept of truth, but rather remains silent about its exact

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[9]*On Certainty* (1969), §95
[10]Ibid., §97
[11]Ibid., §97
[12]Ibid., §206
[13]Ibid., §83
[14]Ibid., §138
[15]Ibid., §191

nature.

Now that we have a good overview of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, we can see how his views connect with the analyses conducted in chapter three. Recall that here it was shown that for some beliefs, it is problematic to justify them in terms of the world, since this relies on abstract justification, while the meaning of those beliefs turned out to be inextricably context-dependent. In the upcoming paragraphs it will become clear that this does not imply that these beliefs are adrift, but rather, that they can fit in the knowledge-certainty scheme that *On Certainty* provides. Seeing that for propositions to count as certainties or knowledge they do not have to be epistemically real according to Wittgenstein, the beliefs that turned out not to be justifiable in terms of the world might not be in such a dramatic position. That is, Wittgenstein shows that having no ultimate grounding of beliefs does not necessarily imply that normativity is absent; normativity can arise out of the methodological certainty of particular propositions.

So how exactly do the two frames of reference – Wittgenstein's and the one displayed in chapter three – combine? I would like to argue here that the category of inherent context-dependent beliefs forms a sub-class of Wittgenstein's category of knowledge. It is clear that these context-dependent beliefs are not part of the category of certainties, since their epistemic status does not remain (relatively) constant across contexts. Furthermore, it still makes sense to provide reasons for them; their truth is not methodological and is also not unproblematically accepted. Likewise, the category of context-dependent beliefs does not coincide perfectly with Wittgenstein's propositions of knowledge. That is, while propositions that count as knowledge *may* be context-dependent – in principle, evidence for them is provided in a particular context – their meaning does not *necessarily* shift if uttered in a different context. Thus Wittgenstein's category can include propositions, such as 'a windmill is generally more than four metres high,' which meaning remains fairly stable across contexts; justifying this belief does not necessarily have to be done locally.

Now, just like knowledge claims can rest on certainties without having to be epistemically real, the context-dependent beliefs I described earlier do not have to float free of a normative framework. For example, even though the meaning of 'the car is a good way to travel' can change its meaning from one context to the next and thereby cannot be justified globally or in terms of the world, this does not imply that instead of this utterance, *anything* could have been said. That is, 'swimming is a good way to travel' would not have been accepted in the context of planning a trip from the Netherlands to France. In its context, 'the car is a good way to travel' is

justified by referring to evidence such as 'no public transport is available near the proposed destination' or 'the petrol will be less expensive than train tickets,' etc. If these claims are further substantiated, ultimately they rest on certainties such as 'there is no ocean between the Netherlands and France' and 'a car can be used as a means of transportation.' While not all certainties underlying this chain of justification can be made explicit, just like not all rules of a (language-game) are formulable, they do yield a normative framework for us to judge whether the belief is true or not. Thus we see that no correspondence with the world, or ultimate grounding, or philosophical investigation of the relation between mind and world is necessary for beliefs to be justified, on a minimalist conception of truth.

In conclusion, I have drawn on Wittgenstein's distinction between knowledge and certainty and the interpretation of On Certainty to refute epistemic realism and instead to advocate a minimalist account of truth. This helped us to see that the category of beliefs that could not be justified in terms of the world does not just float around, but rather is held in check by a normative frame provided by their context and the underlying certainties.

4.2   Back to Davidson and McDowell

In this last section, I want to apply the observations made in chapter three and the preceding section to the debate between Davidson and McDowell. By examining how this argument can fit the frameworks that Davidson and McDowell operate in, we will see what conclusions can be drawn from the claim that not all beliefs can be justified in terms of the world and from the alternative, positive picture I have sketched in the preceding section. In short, I will argue that the observation that some beliefs cannot be justified globally or in terms of the world will make McDowell's construction of the 'rational constraint from the world' problematic, and moreover, that the alternative picture sketched by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* makes this rational constraint unnecessary.

Before embarking on this line of argumentation, a short recap of McDowell's views and specifically, his critique on Davidson is useful. In *Mind and World* he claims that *rational* relations must obtain between beliefs and the world for beliefs to have any content at all; the concepts operative in spontaneity must already be provided by receptivity, for otherwise it is not clear how they are constrained by the world. Therefore, the world must be a conceptual realm, in which we are situated with a particular normative outlook. This implies that the world cannot be thought of as a realm

of law, as it is traditionally conceived, since it is shaped by our practices and infused with normativity. This world seen as a 'totality of thinkables' subsequently can issue a rational constraint for our beliefs. In contrast, in Davidson's theory there is a *causal* connection between our beliefs and the world, and beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs. McDowell claims that this leaves the mind spinning in a void: if 'experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility,'[16] then there is no justification involved in the world's impact on our senses. Furthermore, Davidson helps himself to a body of beliefs with content if he replies that beliefs are by nature veridical.

Now, in order to show that for some beliefs McDowell's rational constraint from the world is problematic, I explain how this version of justification is 'in terms of the world.' As I have used the expression, justification in terms of the world means that in order to be able to utter a sentence truly, it needs to be bounded by the world as it is. That is, in order for a belief to be justified, the world needs to *be* so, or must *invite* the belief to be so. In my opinion, this is exactly what McDowell intends his rational constraint from the world to do. Thus, a belief is justified if the norms in the conceptually structured world supply that it *is* thus and so. Be it metaphysically substantial or not, McDowell bridges the gap between mind and world by letting spontaneity be constrained by receptivity: empirical evidence, which is conceptual in nature, tells us whether certain ways of thinking about the world are justified. Thus ultimately, beliefs are justified because the world *is* so; they are justified in terms of the world.

Of course, we must not forget that the world as McDowell conceives of it is not a realm of law, and further, that the gap between mind and world that he bridges is not as large as it is in a Cartesian framework. Instead, the boundary of the conceptual is not drawn around the mind, but includes the world, which makes the world a totality of thinkables. It could therefore be replied that what we meant by the world in the phrase 'in terms of the world' in section two of chapter three is not McDowell's world. Note, however, that the concept of world in this phrase was not at all narrowly construed. The only demand that was placed on the term is that it concerns a world that can either *correspond to* a belief or *invite* a belief to be so. Further, in making the step from global justification to justification in terms of the world, I argued that the world as we think of it must minimally be a *determined* world; within a reasonable time frame the world cannot both be *x* and *not-x*.

So can McDowell's world be an undetermined world; ie., a world that is

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[16] *Mind and World* (1996), p.14

not only in constant flux, but in constant intrinsically undetermined flux? If so, however, what is left of 'world'? As Gibson and Friedman would probably agree,[17] in order for 'world' to be a separate concept from 'mind' to begin with, it needs to be more substantial than an undetermined flux. For how is it to constrain beliefs, if it can both be x and non-x? If McDowell's world would be an undetermined world, no rational constraint would be possible to begin with, and thus the theory could not account for the possibility of error. This kind of world could not be what McDowell had in mind, and therefore the problem remains that for some beliefs, justification in terms of the world is not possible.

Secondly, I set out to show that the rational constraint as McDowell proposes is not necessary. While McDowell claims that *On Certainty* deals with other issues than his own writings,[18] I agree with Gjelsvik that Wittgenstein's ideas should be considered a plausible alternative by McDowell.[19] In fact, I do not agree that the questions *On Certainty* deals with 'have to do with entitlement to believe this or that rather than a threat to the very idea of objective purport'[20] that McDowell himself tries to solve with *Mind and World*. The threat to the very idea of objective purport is *exactly* one of the most central issues that Wittgenstein's common sense realism tackles, by showing how, rather than by appealing to ultimate evidence, beliefs can be true or real if they are held in check by the hinges. *On Certainty* shows us not that spontaneity is in itself already constrained,[21] but that objectivity is possible even though in some contexts the riverbed with reference to which our beliefs are justified can in fact shift. That is, the process of justification does not need to appeal to ultimate foundations, or to a tight collaboration between sensibility and spontaneity; rather, justification can be in terms of other beliefs, or in the case of the certainties themselves, can appeal to their methodological status as being functionally true.

To make this last statement more explicit: in justifying our beliefs, it is not necessary to appeal to a rational constraint from the world. An alternative picture is sketched by Wittgenstein, when he says that a class of beliefs does not *need* evidence, and in fact functions as an anchor or

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[17] Seeing that they argue McDowell's world is too idealistic: 'McDowell on Quine, Davidson and epistemology' (1999); 'Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's Mind and World' (1996), respectively.

[18] 'Reply to Olav Gjelsvik' (2004), p.195

[19] 'Experience' (2004)

[20] 'Reply to Olav Gjelsvik' (2004), p.195

[21] For if it would only claim that, as Gjelsvik holds ('Experience' 2004), I think McDowell's concern that *On Certainty* deals with other issues and that the mind is still spinning in a void *would* be valid.

framework for evidence-giving practices. Thus conceived, this justificatory process functions within its appropriate context and does not itself need foundations from outside of that context. Be it rather 'fluid' beliefs – beliefs that change their meaning and truth value fundamentally when uttered in different contexts – or more stable beliefs, all can be justified in the context of the framework that is created by the certainties. This means that they can all be justified in terms of other beliefs, which are certainties themselves or are dependent on the certainties in a derived or even inexplicit fashion. Both beliefs that can and those that cannot be justified globally do not necessarily have to be rationally constrained by the world in order to be objective; their normative framework can be created by the certainties. This normative framework ultimately derives from the constitutive ideal of rationality, which implies that the ultimate source of normativity in the end is (human) rationality. In order to play the game of justification and doubt, we work from the supposition and ideal that we and our fellow players are rational: 'when we say that we know that such and such..., we mean that any reasonable person in our position would also know it, that it would be a piece of unreason to doubt it.'[22]

The view I display here challenges McDowell's critique on Davidson that allowing only causal connections between mind and world leaves it unexplained how beliefs can have content at all, by showing how Wittgenstein's alternative picture does *not* leave the mind spinning in a void, while it does not need to take recourse to a rational constraint from the world. That is, Wittgenstein showed how by 'mere' justificatory relations between beliefs, the notions of objectivity and normativity of those beliefs can be saved. To conclude, the observations I made in the present and preceding chapter show that at least for some beliefs, McDowell's rational constraint from the world is problematic, seeing that for those beliefs, justification in terms of the world is impossible. Furthermore, I argued that this rational constraint is unnecessary, if we take Wittgenstein's ideas displayed in *On Certainty* to point to an alternative picture of the justificatory practice.

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[22] *On Certainty* (1969), §325

Conclusion

In this thesis I have investigated the debate between Davidson and McDowell and from this discussion I extracted one of the central questions: 'how do we justify our beliefs?' In part one, I looked at the relevant parts of Davidson and McDowell's philosophies, and subsequently examined the debate between them in more detail, partly through the eyes of other commentators. I argued that Davidson's way of conceiving of the relation between mind and world and the way that beliefs and meaning are constructed in his system exempts him from McDowell's criticisms. Davidson and McDowell agree that the world conceived of as an (unconceptual) realm of law cannot justify our conceptual beliefs, a view which emphasises the constitutive ideal of rationality. Where this leads Davidson to the statement that rational relations can only obtain between beliefs, McDowell proposes a reinterpretation of the world as a conceptual realm which exerts a rational constraint on our beliefs. McDowell's problem with Davidson is that having only causal relations between mind and world makes the mind spin in a void and leaves it unexplained how we can have beliefs at all. I have argued, however, that interpreting Davidson as not being interested in a metaphysical project to provide foundations to the practice of justification implies that his way of looking at mind, world, and their connection is essentially different from the traditional construction of the dichotomy. That is, he does not *need* to bridge a gap between the two realms to account for justification, because in order to be able to communicate at all we need to be largely right about the world.

In part two, I looked at the role of justification in the theories of these two philosophers. In chapter three I argued that justification of some beliefs is inherently context-dependent, because the meaning of their expression changes from one context to the next. In this way, epistemic contextualism was shown to be dependent on meaning contextualism. This subsequently implies that justifying beliefs in terms of the world is problematic, since it depends on a context-insensitive justificatory practice. Wittgenstein's *On*

Certainty, as I showed in chapter four, can provide an alternative to the picture that beliefs need to be justified in terms of the world. In order to be able to play the game of justification at all, we need a framework in which to make our claims to knowledge, which can be provided by some beliefs that are 'certain.' In this way, beliefs are justified in terms of other beliefs, while the system of beliefs is still normatively constrained. Reapplying this line of reasoning to the debate between Davidson and McDowell, I argued that for some beliefs, McDowell's rational constraint from the world cannot work, and furthermore, that the constraint is not necessary. Appealing to the constitutive ideal of rationality makes sure that our beliefs are about the world and that we can communicate with each other.

On a meta-view, I have shown that the traditional question 'how is knowledge possible?' need not be answered by providing a metaphysical explanation of the relation between mind and world that will subsequently yield foundations for the practice of justification. That is, no reference needs to be made to 'what the world is really like' for beliefs to be justified. This does not mean, however, that I advocate idealism. Rather, I am closer to common-sense realism in the sense that I have problems with positing a metaphysically substantial view that does not *follow* from common-sense principles, such as the idea that we are rational or that we communicate. With a metaphysically substantial view I mean a theory about the world that does not comport with how we usually think of the world, i.e. a world with people, mountains, events, and trees. In conclusion, I take rationality and communication to supply enough norms for the game of justification, in that they show that we need to rely on certain beliefs, and relying on those beliefs provides the hinges around which our mind can spin.

Of course, there were time and space constraints while writing this thesis. Therefore, I want to end this piece of work by pointing to some aspects that I have mentioned but which can be explored more elaborately in further research. First of all, I want to point out the functionalist interpretation of Davidson's argument in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'. I am very curious to see how exactly this analysis fits into the larger debate between verificationist and transcendentalist interpretations and whether a functionalist analysis can shed light on other aspects of Davidson's body of work. Secondly, I think the influence Hegel's thought has had on McDowell's theory is a very fascinating subject, one which I have not been able to go into. Examining this link might make it more clear what kind of world McDowell has in mind and how exactly he balances on the line between realism and idealism. Finally, I was very impressed by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, as the reader might have noticed. It would be interesting to see whether

the findings in this book could be extended to problems in other areas of philosophy and beyond, such as the question in ethics and psychology of how we justify our own actions.

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