



Received: 17-12-2024
Accepted: 27-01-2025

ISSN: 2583-049X

Second Nature: The No-gap Theory between the Mind and the World

Dr. Anestis Karastergiou

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.1.3730>

Corresponding Author: **Dr. Anestis Karastergiou**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss McDowell's concept of second nature and how the philosopher tries to formulate a theory negating the gap between the mind and the world. This concept will be understood as emerging from three basic concepts, self-activity, *Bildung*, and *hexis*, and governed by his view of language. However, this paper does not focus on his view of language, but on the conception of second nature and how important it is in his philosophical endeavor to break the philosophical tradition of the mind-

world dichotomy. After an initial presentation of his thought and the scope of his goal, a brief presentation of the critique he received follows with the aim to better understand his conceptual formulation. The significance of the philosophical problem McDowell addresses is stressed in this paper attempting to provide the grounds for reimagining a philosophical view of the world without the epistemological gap between the mind and the world.

Keywords: Nature, No-gap Theory, Mind, World

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight aspects of John McDowell's philosophical thought concerning the relationship between the mind and the world. An attempt will be made to summarize the main points of this reasoning and to provide a brief critique of it. To outline his no-gap view between the mind and the world, the philosopher attempts to test whether the question "How is it possible for empirical content to exist?", which has been and still is a concern for modern philosophy, is legitimate or emanates from prior beliefs based on false or at least precarious assumptions (McDowell, 2009b, p. 243) ^[4]. Its ultimate purpose is to show that the ability of thought to 'touch' the world should not be limited by any supposed difficulties (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-246) ^[4]. To do this he deconstructs both the question itself along with various answers that have been given to it.

His philosophical thought seems to trace its origins to analytic philosophy considering the methodology he uses in his book "Mind and World". He analyses various philosophical ideas in detail and elaborates on them to arrive at his own proposals. This is hardly surprising, given the wittgensteinian influences he has been subjected to, both in terms of analytical thinking and the more controversial notion of philosophical 'quietism'. But if analytic philosophy is based on the partial, in the sense of attention to detail and the treatment of each idea individually, and continental philosophy on the general, in the sense of realizing broader theories without focusing on exhaustive investigation of their details (Χατζημουσής, 2017, pp. 11-39; Μπαλτάς, 2013, p. 400) ^[10, 11], McDowell seems to vacillate between the two. This is of course plausible and legitimate for any philosopher whose work cannot be restricted by the confines of a categorization such as the above. In particular, his methodology belongs to analytic philosophy since, as Aristides Baltas points out, he analyses in a systematic way his own thought along with the thought of other philosophers' thought (Μπαλτάς, 2013, pp. 397-400) ^[11]. His reasoning, however, in terms of the elimination of the gap he proposes, seems to belong to the continental philosophical tradition in the sense that his proposal is presented in a schematic rather than a systematic way (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p.372) ^[9].

For the purposes of this paper, more emphasis is placed on the crucial concept of second nature to which most of the paper is devoted. Because, it is through this concept that the openness of the mind to the world, the "vastness of the conceptual" as the philosopher states (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 115) ^[9], and, finally, the whole project of the South African philosopher to remove the gap between the mind and the world by demonstrating its non-existence and to dispense with any philosophical concerns related to it, is understood. Finally, it is worth noting that MacDowell's text is dense and imbued with the philosopher's impressive ability to incorporate into his reasoning both Kantian and Aristotelian concepts and ideas from contemporary

empiricist philosophers. Therefore, an adequate treatment of these concepts cannot be realized here as this would be beyond the scope of this article. Instead, there will be a selective analysis of the most important ideas of the text and a critique of them in the light of what the philosopher himself and his commentators say.

The transcendental attribute of the question regarding the relationship between the mind and the world

Starting from the late discussion of the ideas introduced in his book "Mind and World", the context in which one ought to interpret John McDowell's philosophy becomes better understood. There the philosopher expresses the view that the fundamental question underlying the analysis of the relation between the mind and the world, viz: "How is it possible for experience to have a conceptual content?" is essentially a transcendental question in the Kantian sense (McDowell, 2009b, p. 243) ^[4]. More specifically, the philosopher brings out the transcendental attribute of a problem, which apparently wears the mantle of the epistemological (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-245) ^[4]. This problem is none other than the separation of the mind from the world, which arises from the question of whether conceptual content can be attributed to experience.

McDowell has already shown the weaknesses of many of the answers that have been proposed. Here the interest turns to the common point of these answers, which has to do with the epistemological approach to the question (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-252) ^[4]. Namely, to answer the question of whether experience can be given conceptual content, many philosophers resort to equating the question with other epistemological questions, such as that of whether and how knowledge of an empirical thing is possible and how it is attained (McDowell, 2009b, p. 244) ^[4]. McDowell wants to show that this skewed understanding of the question has to do with certain prejudices of philosophers, which stem from their belief that experience is impossible to have conceptual content (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-246) ^[4]. Starting from this they essentially attempt to take up the question by expressing in various ways the gap between the mind and the world (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-246) ^[4]. For instance, keeping in mind schematically Sellars' division between the Logical Space of Reason and the Logical Space of Nature or Law, one can see that philosophers like Davidson came to enclose, in a way, the conceptual in the Logical Space of Reason by leaving out experience and removing from it any conceptual content (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 246-252) ^[4]. Quine's court of experience is thus left isolated to "judge" things that can only have causal relations between them and not logical (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 244-246) ^[4]. Consequently, this court has no authority since the very process of adjudication presupposes the action of the conceptual equipment, which is in the Logical Space of Reasons, to which alone do logical relations belong (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 244-246) ^[4]. Others, like Evans, not wanting to deprive experience of all meaning and content, thought that the conceptual can enter experience through empirical judgments (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 153-158) ^[9]. But they still distinguish this kind of experience from experience with purely non-conceptual content, such as for example sensory experience (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 153) ^[9]. McDowell deconstructs these theories by demonstrating how the epistemological approach to the question often ends in a dead-end because of philosophers' insistence on

removing conceptual content from experience, from the world. In this way one understands more vividly why McDowell emphasizes the transcendental attribute of the question about the content of experience. In other words, according to McDowell it is better to dispense with the question about the content of experience if it is understood as epistemological and embedded within the assumption that the mind and the world belong to two different realms that do not communicate with each other. Only if it is reformulated as a transcendental anxiety, i.e., as a demand for an infinite understanding of whether there is a conceptual content in experience, using Kantian terminology (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-245) ^[4], does this question make sense. Then, it can be understood that there is no reason to insist on this anxiety according to McDowell's reasoning.

The concept of second nature

As is well known, the gap between the mind and the world is an important philosophical problem, which has its origins in the beginnings of so-called Western philosophy and perhaps even deeper in the past. From Plato to Descartes, to modern empiricists the existence or non-existence of a gap between the mind and the world has puzzled thought with the most strongly founded theories being on the positive end of the dipole. Moving closer to modern times, it is worth noting that the development of science in recent years has shown either explicitly or implicitly to support the assumption that there is a gap between the mind and the world. In scientific thought this can be understood if one considers how from the positivism of Comte and the logical positivists later (Κάλαρας, 1997, pp. 27-33) ^[8], one can get to scientism, which more or less dominates various branches of science and the philosophy of science (Bourdeau, 2018) ^[1]. Of course, this line of thought is not new. One can find it in the Baconian "enthusiasm" for the scientific method, with an emphasis on observation and deduction, at the beginning of the scientific revolution (Chalmers, 2014, pp. 1-3) ^[2]. If one wishes, one can go even further back to Aristotle, the first, for many, systematic observer of nature (Shields, 2015). Nowadays, this perspective, which very briefly and without any demands of exactitude is here identified with the scientific method, is called scientific naturalism or naturalism, as McDowell points out. From this it follows that there is a clear distinction between nature, the realm of laws, the realm of scientific research, and the spiritual world, the mind, or the logical realm of reason according to Sellars (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 53-69) ^[9]. The dualism of spiritual and material world, reason and nature, mind and world, seems to rest on fairly strong foundations both in philosophical thought and in the so-called common mind, in the sense that intuitively it is easier to perceive one's thought or, in general, one's inner world as something separate from its material and external world. Therefore, any attempt to remove such a dualism is very difficult if not impossible. Here 'impossible' should not be taken so much literally but in relation to the ability of such a removal to convince the proponents of dualism. Many attempts have failed in the past, though perhaps not disastrously, because they have succeeded in influencing philosophical thought concerning the renegotiation of this issue. Such a huge issue cannot be covered in the limited space of the present work but it is mentioned with the ultimate aim of providing an introduction to the difficult project with which John McDowell is engaged and to understand how important the

concept of second nature is in this context.

Undoubtedly, the concept of second nature is crucial to John McDowell's project of bridging the gap between the mind and the world, as it is a key point for overcoming any difficulties that arise in this endeavor. To begin with, one must look at the way in which this concept arises in the philosopher's reasoning. MacDowell's commentators such as Aristides Baltas in the epigraph to the Greek translation point out, and not without reason, that the basis of the concept is Aristotelian, and, in particular, it is based on the elaboration of virtue as a *hexis*, which the ancient Greek philosopher undertakes (Μπαλτάς, 2013, p. 405) ^[11]. Of course, this interpretation stems from McDowell's own words and is not disputed (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 206-207) ^[9]. However, the concept of second nature should perhaps not be based on this alone, as this is not the way to understand the South African philosopher's thought in its essence. On the contrary, if the concept of second nature is understood as consisting of three basic components, which possibly interact with each other, then it can become much clearer and it will reveal how important it is for McDowell's philosophical thought, at least as far as the relation between the mind and the world is concerned. One must combine these three components with a fourth and very important one, language, which plays a crucial role in MacDowell's philosophy, as the influences of the philosophy of language, mind, and, of course, Wittgenstein, are evident in his reasoning. Besides, he states that the conquest of language is akin to the conquest of a second nature (McDowell, 2009b, p. 247) ^[4]. Here, however, there is no space to expand on such a big issue, but it is sufficient to keep in mind that the acquisition of language governs the three basic elements presented below, making the practical application of the concept of second nature more accessible.

The three basic components are the Kantian concept of *self-activity* that will be understood through McDowell's interpretation (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 89-91, 147, 211-213) ^[9], the concept of *Bildung* (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 216-217) ^[9] that will be presented in more detail below and is a basic premise for the understanding of second nature as a concept arising from both philosophical, psychological, and, especially, psychoanalytical theories of man and, of course, the third and perhaps the most obvious component is Aristotle's syllogism of virtue as a *hexis* that has already been mentioned (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 206-207) ^[9].

It is tempting enough to attempt a separate reification of the three basic components, but this would go beyond the scope of this paper and would not help to better understand the concept of second nature. However, in brief, one could say that the Kantian concept of self-activity refers to the ability of man as a rational being to exercise its conceptual capabilities both to process sensory data, where self-activity cooperates with receptivity, and to reflect on its ideas (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 89, 210-215) ^[9]. Self-activity is based in the Logical Space of Reason using Sellarsian terminology, which is possessed by attractive relations and sets the limits of conceptual content (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 62-68, 89-91) ^[9]. *Bildung* is a concept of German philosophy, which refers to the formation of character, a kind of "building" of human moral character that leads to the maturation of man and enables him to acquire the ability to perceive reason in the "broad sense" (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 217) ^[9], i.e., to open his eyes to the world in an unprecedented way. McDowell refers to this as the

acquisition of a "second nature" (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 217) ^[9].

Finally, virtue as a *hexis* in Aristotelian philosophy is a special case in the sense that, as McDowell rightly foresees, it is not acquired in the same way as the other virtues are acquired. Broadly speaking, according to Aristotle, a *hexis* is a faculty acquired through habit. One learns something by constantly repeating the relevant actions, for example, as Aristotle mentions, one learns to play the guitar by playing the guitar and either becomes a good or bad guitar player (Αριστοτέλης, n.d.) ^[7]. As far as virtue is concerned, however, things are different. It is not enough to do virtuous deeds to attain virtue. Of course, one ought to do such acts as virtue is also a *hexis*, but that is not enough. In modern terms, one could say that doing virtuous deeds is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. This is what McDowell points out when he says that it is not enough to simply have the inclination to act in a virtuous way (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 206-207) ^[9]. Virtue presupposes the acquisition of Aristotle's *phronesis* or MacDowell's practical wisdom (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 207) ^[9]. In other words, to acquire virtue one must open one's eyes to the "mandates" of reason, to harmonize oneself with it in such a way that one acts according to its mandates that exist independently in the sense that they do not depend on whether the virtuous person has come to know them through habit (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 207) ^[9]. From the above it is also evident that the acquisition of virtue is akin to the acquisition of a second nature, which is in harmony with reason. With what has been said so far, the connection between Aristotelian virtue and the concept of a second nature is reasonably evident, as is its direct relation to *Bildung*, which also has to do with the acquisition of a second nature. The association of self-activity with these two is logical and strong, but not so obvious. To understand this, it is perhaps best to see the concept of self-activity as the last piece that comes to complete the MacDowellian concept of second nature. Specifically, if the first two concepts have to do with an evolution of man in order to reach second nature and his consequent opening to the world, it is self-activity that ensures the specificity of the human animal and guarantees its freedom. McDowell's thought about the differences between human and non-human animals reinforce this picture. Of course, it is necessary to understand self-activity as the possibility of reflective action on the part of the subject so as to avoid the legitimate misunderstandings that may arise from the complexity of this Kantian concept (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 91-97, 136-140, 210-215) ^[9]. If the first nature is common to both man and animals, it is the second nature that separates them. On the one hand, Aristotelian virtue and *Bildung* are the constituent components of this separation, but self-activity makes the difference. MacDowell stands on the fact that man as a rational being can reflect on his ideas at any time, whereas the same is not true of animals (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 269-274) ^[9]. It does not follow from this that animals are not open to the world in the sense that they cannot have external or even internal experiences, but that they can have them without, however, being able to reflect on them as man can (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 269-274) ^[9]. Another key feature of this position is that second nature remains nature. Man remains an animal and it is the human animal that acquires another way of being in the world, without this signifying that it conquers some higher level of

existence that separates it from the world (Μπαλτάς, 2013, p. 405)^[11].

Critical consideration of McDowell's ideas

A broader critique of John McDowell's philosophical thought regarding the relationship between the mind and the world might concern the way in which he deconstructs the arguments of philosophers who advocate separating the two into different logical spaces. Using sellarsian terminology, he speaks of the Logical Space of reasons on the one hand and the Logical Space of laws of nature, on the other (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 59; McDowell, 2009a, pp. 4-6)^[9, 3]. The former is governed by logical and the latter by causal relations, as has already been said. Many philosophers, such as Davidson, have tried to emphasize one of the two spaces, thus finding a solution to the problem of the gap, but not negating it. In contrast, McDowell attempts to show the non-existence of the gap without integrating his reasoning into either space. Hence the criticism he has received, which focuses on the idealism that flows from this mode of thinking, as well as the accusations of remaking the world magical (Williams, 1996)^[6]. Further analysis of these accusations is not the aim of this paper, as he has already responded to them. He does not accept that his thought belongs to idealism, nor of course to maternalism, as the whole of his work attempts to remove any philosophical concern arising from the dualism of reason and nature, which makes the accusations of idealism an outdated treatment of his thought in the light of traditional philosophy (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 116-120)^[9]. His lecture on the vastness of the conceptual, of course, reasonably refers to idealism, but in the light of his reasoning about second nature one can see that it is not essentially an idealistic view of the relationship between man and the world, but an approach that transcends the narrow confines of idealism and of raw, as he calls it, naturalism (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 69-70)^[9], of maternalism one might say (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 115-150)^[9]. The accusation of bringing back a magical attribute to the world is an issue that McDowell probably wants to dismiss without addressing it directly. In other words, he certainly reject the image of the taking out all magical elements of the world put forward by scientism, but he does not so much attempt to re-make it magical, which would suggest a restoration of pre-scientific and therefore obsolete ideas, as to reconcile the image of the world proposed by science with a view of man in it (Χατζημωυσης, 2017, pp. 113-122)^[10]. Perhaps this becomes clearer when one considers the South African philosopher's rejection of the lateral perspective (Μπαλτάς, 2013, pp. 402-404)^[11]. He says that one cannot take an extra-human point of view, which is at least implicitly presupposed by both scientific naturalism and an idealistic view of the world (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 132-136)^[9].

In this writer's opinion there are some other objections to the philosopher's reasoning to which he does not seem to respond in a particularly convincing way. For example, the place of non-rational animals in his syllogism is controversial. He tries to explain this thought in the selections of the sixth lecture. There he tries to explain that he cannot deprive animals of orientation in the world, something they share with humans, but that the difference lies in the self-activity of humans as a possibility of reflecting on their ideas and experiences, something that animals obviously lack (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 378-382)^[9].

At this point one can see at least two problematic points. On the one hand, of course, prima facie the possibility of reflection seems to exist in animals only as a learning possibility, but there are cases where some animals seem to understand the situation so well that they are able to use it to their advantage, they seem to reflect, in a broad sense, on their experiences. Of course, this does not invalidate McDowell's thinking, but it does pose some problems in terms of understanding self-activity as the ability to reflect on experience. On the other hand, it is not so clear how man achieves second nature, which, as already mentioned, differentiates him from other animals mainly because of self-activity. For example, people who suffer from Alzheimer's do not have the reflective capacity of self-activity, or at least they do not seem to possess it at all times. In this case there may be no way to distinguish between these people and non-rational animals. Perhaps these are questions that go beyond the aims of McDowell's text, and, of course, one should not forget that the philosopher is very careful in any attempt he makes to talk about humans as rational human beings (Μακντάουελ, 2013, pp. 228-229)^[9]. These objections are intended to show that the philosopher's thought on the separation of humans and non-human animals may not be beyond renegotiation.

A brief critique of McDowell's positions

Moving on to a negotiation of John McDowell's broader work and understanding the philosopher's remarkable ideas, one can say that it is his philosophical humility that really stands up to any criticism. In other words, he explains that he wants to schematically and not systematically present a position in which there is no gap between mind and world (Μακντάουελ, 2013, p. 372)^[9]. That is, he understands that sometimes his arguments are not so strong that they can be directly contrasted with those of other philosophers within the strict field of epistemology, understood here mainly as epistemology. He wants to escape the confines of this field. He does not want to answer the questions but attack them and attempt to disband them. One could say that he adopts a moderate position between idealism and scientism, but this would still not be correct as he does not accept to take part in this categorization. The point, however, where he does not seem to maintain this moderation is when he says that he wants to free philosophy from the shackles of epistemological questions and show that they are anything but urgent (McDowell, 2009b, pp. 243-245)^[4]. This is certainly not a humble request, nor does it demonstrate the philosopher's quietism. On the contrary, it is a very ambitious undertaking, the success of which is questionable to say the least. Nevertheless, one must give McDowell credit for his astute integration of Kantian, Aristotelian, and psychoanalytic concepts, as well as ideas from the wider analytic and continental tradition, into a masterly conception of the very interesting concept of second nature and what flows from it.

Epilogue - Conclusions

In conclusion, from what has been said so far it has become apparent how McDowell attempts to overcome the seemingly urgent and potentially dead-end questions of traditional philosophy, including contemporary empiricist philosophy and epistemology, by deconstructing their epistemological basis and turning them into manifestations of an underlying transcendentalist anxiety about the

possibility of experience. He even proceeds to abolish this, making it obsolete in the face of the ability of philosophical thought to understand man as a being in the world. In this way, he renounces any existence of a gap between the mind and the world. In this effort he ends up creating the concept of second nature, which has been discussed here. This concept is central to McDowell's philosophy because it carries his demand for a renewal of philosophy, and, especially, of thinking about the relation between the mind and the world, freeing reflection from the shackles of the urgency of the questions of traditional philosophy. Perhaps this notion is the epitome of McDowell's philosophy as he incorporates into it a wide range of his philosophical arsenal, from Aristotle and Kant to contemporary philosophical thought of which he is an active member. Finally, much more could be said of McDowell's philosophical thought, which moves with unparalleled skill from the methodology of analytic philosophical thought to the comprehensive consideration of continental thought and beyond.

References

1. Bourdeau M. Auguste Comte. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.). The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comte/>
2. Chalmers AF. Τι είναι αυτό που το λένε επιστήμη;. Ηράκλειο: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης, 2014.
3. McDowell J. Having the world in view: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009a.
4. McDowell J. The engaged intellect: Philosophical essays. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009b.
5. Shields C. Aristotle. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, n.d. Retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/>
6. Williams M. Exorcism and enchantment. The Philosophical Quarterly. 1996; 46(182):99-109. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2956312>
7. Αριστοτέλης Ηθικά Νικομάχεια, Βιβλίον Β. Αρχαία Ελληνική Γλώσσα και Γραμματεία, n.d. Retrieved from: http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/library/browse.html?text_id=78&page=14
8. Κάλφας Β. Επιστημονική πρόοδος και ορθολογικότητα: Προς μια ρεαλιστική ανασυγκρότηση της σύγχρονης επιστημολογίας. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Νήσος, 1997.
9. Μακντάουελ Τζ. Ο νους και ο κόσμος. (Θ. Σαμαρτζής, Trans.). Κρήτη: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης. (Original work published in 1994), 2013.
10. Χατζημουσής Α. Φιλοσοφικά πορτρέτα. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Πόλις, 2017.
11. Μπαλάς Α. Ο Μακντάουελ στην Ελλάδα. In: Μακντάουελ, Τζ. (2013). Ο νους και ο κόσμος. (Θ. Σαμαρτζής, Trans.). Κρήτη: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης. (Original work published in 1994), 2013.