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The Radical and the Sceptic

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Declaration

I confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own, and that the work of others is appropriately referenced.

Signed

Konstancja Mary Duff

Abstract

This thesis departs from the observation of a parallel between the situations of the radical sceptical, on the one hand, and the political radical, on the other, with respect to ‘ordinary’ or ‘commonsense’ standards of justification, dominant modes of inquiry, taken-for-granted beliefs, etc. This observation raises two questions, one methodological and one substantive. The methodological question asks: what is the significance of the fact that debates about scepticism tend to be proceed without acknowledging the political nature of actual epistemic practices, although their conclusions are supposed to apply to these practices? The more substantive question is: how might attentiveness to the political assumptions and consequences of anti-sceptical discourse affect our understanding of what the epistemologist should be trying to achieve?

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on these questions through close engagement with a particular strand in the scepticism literature: the attempt to undercut the sceptic by offering a *theoretical diagnosis* of the philosophical context which gives sceptical questions an appearance of urgency. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the debate between two competing theoretical diagnoses, offered by Michael Williams and John McDowell respectively; chapter 3 frames the political-philosophical issues which I argue are crucial to understanding the significance of their differences; chapters 4 and 5 revisit the Williams-McDowell debate in order to draw some more general conclusions regarding the attention due to the shadowy figure of the radical in confronting the problems of scepticism.

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Introduction

Radical scepticism raises seemingly irrefutable doubts about a large class of our putative knowledge claims – paradigmatically, ‘knowledge of the external world’. If sceptical arguments are successful, they show that our beliefs about the world (we think is) around us are no better than unjustified assumptions, albeit ones that we seem incapable of giving up. Anti-sceptical projects attempt to show that such arguments are flawed, that is, to show that we *are* entitled (for some sense of ‘entitled’) to our commonsense certainties about the world, and to trust in our practices of inquiry. We are, in our better moments at least, ‘open to the world’.

However, philosophical scepticism is not the only ‘radical’ challenge to the basic certainties of ‘commonsense’. Many of the most interesting *political* criticisms of ‘our practices’ possess a crucial epistemological dimension, for they suggest that so-called ‘ordinary standards’¹ for knowledge and justification are in many cases problematic. They argue, for example, that dominant conceptions of rationality, or respected modes of inquiry, or taken-for-granted-as-self-evident beliefs are in fact *ideological* phenomena in something like the Marxist sense: distorted forms of consciousness which occur because of their tendency to reinforce certain interests.² Generally, and not coincidentally, the interests reinforced are those of the socially powerful. To engage in *Ideologiekritik* – to identify and criticise these ideological phenomena – is to question the extent to which we really are ‘open to the world’³, even when we are not subject to those errors (such as hallucination, perceptual illusion, dreaming that we are awake, and so on) which have traditionally concerned epistemologists.⁴

This opens an avenue of inquiry into the question of how we should respond to scepticism. Anti-sceptical projects are supposed to give us the resources to see ‘how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore [sceptical questions], to treat them as

1 For a sense of the role played by the concept of ‘ordinary standards’ in the sceptical debate, see (Williamson 2002, p.165).

2 This characterisation of ideology draws on (Finlayson 2011, p.9).

3 This is not affected by the debate over whether ideological beliefs can be true. Even a true belief can conceal from us other, more important truths, and hence compromise our openness to the world.

4 Of course, there are obvious differences between the projects of radical scepticism, on the one hand, and the various forms of radical political critique, on the other. Not least, there is the fact that political critique has a more readily discernable practical goal – the transformation of society. Still, juxtaposing the two highlights a crucial point: we cannot distinguish between them by asking how fundamental or apparently self-evident the beliefs they challenge are. There is no general class of beliefs, specifiable in advance, such that it could be subject only to sceptical-philosophical, and not to political, doubts.

unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to' (McDowell 1996, p. 113). Yet the parallel between scepticism and *Ideologiekritik* suggests that there is a potential danger here of 'proving' too much, that is, of undermining the radical in the course of trying to undermine the sceptic. Motivating this worry is the thought that it is *not* 'intellectually respectable' to *ignore* radical political criticisms of 'commonsense' simply on the grounds that they are radical. On the other hand, attempts at *Ideologiekritik* themselves put forward claims to truth and justification on the basis of experience. Consequently, if the philosophical sceptic succeeds then it seems the political radical is no better off than her conservative counterpart; neither will be saying anything justifiable about the world. This raises the question: *what*, exactly, should anti-sceptical projects be trying to win back from the sceptic? Can the problems of scepticism be avoided, or dissolved, without undermining our ability to entertain the possibility that we perhaps *are* radically wrong in some of the ways that *Ideologiekritik* aims to show that we are?

Whether one finds the latter question urgent will itself depend on the extent to which one is sympathetic to various forms of *Ideologiekritik*, the extent to which one is content with dominant conceptions of rationality, modes of inquiry, and so on; this will in turn affect one's understanding of the anti-sceptical task. This raises a further, methodological, issue. Philosophers responding to scepticism tend to present their positions as *politically neutral* – as neither assuming nor generating any political commitments whatsoever. However, if there is something to this parallel between the radical and the sceptic – something that renders the somewhat theodicean project of salvaging 'commonsense' politically fraught – then this presentation may be misleading. Indeed, proceeding as though debates around scepticism had nothing to do with politics would simply serve to ensure that any political assumptions remained unexamined and any political consequences filtered into philosophical discourse by stealth.

Let me put this another way. Epistemology is supposed to shed light – whether of a legitimising, debunking or more nuanced variety – on human (claims to) knowledge, justification, rationality, and so forth. It is so banal as to be worth emphasising that the making, assessing, dismissing, accepting, doubting, and acting on claims to knowledge, justification, rationality (etc.) is a feature of the way that humans *actually* live. These activities take place in more or less formalised settings, from law courts to bedrooms, classrooms to pulpits, science labs to tabloids, solitary fireside meditations to boardrooms to prisons. I shall refer to these activities, including the (loose or strict, explicit or implicit, just or unjust) norms by which they are conducted,

as ‘*actual human epistemic practices*’.⁵ Epistemological concepts like knowledge, justification, rationality, truth, objectivity, and so on, are not merely *meta*-concepts, used to reflect on these practices, but are continually invoked and contested within them.⁶

Some epistemological theories make no reference to these actual practices, or refer only to some ‘paradigmatic’ or ‘exemplary’ practices (usually those located in science labs) and ignore the rest, but ultimately they take their epistemological reflections to apply to what I am calling actual human epistemic practices. The sceptic’s devastating conclusion is of no interest unless it applies to *what we actually take ourselves to know*, while the anti-sceptic’s victory would be hollow were she to vindicate, not any actual human practices, but only some purified, otherworldly surrogates. Some philosophers, in particular Michael Williams, reject traditional epistemology’s assumption that epistemic practices form a natural kind which can be either vindicated or debunked *en masse*, but the epistemological theories they advocate (in his case, contextualism) are nevertheless supposed to offer an interpretation of actual human practices of inquiry, in all their variety.

Now, these actual epistemic practices are social practices; they are developed, maintained, and challenged, by people who stand in social relations to one another. This is not to deny that individuals can quest for knowledge alone, can privately formulate justifications, or can ponder lonely upon a heath. Such quests and ponderings are still inexorably social to the extent that they are conducted in a language that the inquirer shares with and has learned from others, using resources (conceptual or otherwise) produced and distributed according to a particular system of social organisation, asking questions and deploying methods which have are encouraged, permitted, censured, or even censored by socially dominant paradigms of inquiry, et cetera. It follows that epistemic practices are also (to some, yet to be argued over, extent) political practices, in the broad sense of ‘political’ which simply means ‘to do with social power’⁷; for, ‘to conceive epistemic subjects as social subjects is – for the

5 The term ‘practices’ is not ideal here. The tendency of some philosophers to refer to ‘our practices’ in a way that ignores or masks the actual, concrete – and often problematic – nature of those practices, makes it slip off the tongue almost too easily. Another possible designation would be ‘actual human epistemic institutions’, but the term ‘institution’ has potentially misleading connotations of formality and legalism.

6 Of course, epistemology is itself an actual human epistemic practice, and therefore not as ‘meta-’ as some of its practitioners seem to believe. My point here, though, is that the use of epistemological concepts is in no way restricted to epistemology.

7 A useful working definition of social power, given by Fricker: ‘*a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally*’ (Fricker 2007, p.13). The capacity to control others’ actions is exercised passively when the controller’s *ability* to exercise control actively

socially non-myopic – to conceive them as placed in relations of power’ (Fricker 2000, p.162). Social power is not simply external to that which epistemology is supposedly concerned to shed light on.

So, epistemological concepts like knowledge, justification, objectivity, etc. are continually invoked and contested within actual epistemic practices which are themselves social and hence political. Therefore, if the way that an epistemological theory – or way of theorising – explicates and understands those concepts has any consequences at all, it will be to affect the way that those concepts are used in the context of these actual epistemic practices.⁸ Within these practices, the way epistemological concepts are used has political consequences; how justification is understood, for example, can affect who counts as justified – the police or the protesters, the Rawlsian or the Marxist, the slave-owner or the abolitionist – and even the significance of earning that title.

The methodological question can now be put as follows: what is the significance of the fact that debates about scepticism tend to be proceed without acknowledging the political nature of actual epistemic practices, although their conclusions are supposed to apply to these practices? More substantively, how might an attentiveness to the political assumptions and consequences of anti-sceptical discourse affect our understanding of what the epistemologist should be trying to achieve? The aim of this thesis is to shed light on these questions through close engagement with a particular strand in the scepticism literature: the attempt to undercut the sceptic by offering a *theoretical diagnosis* of the philosophical context which gives sceptical questions an appearance of urgency. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the debate between two competing theoretical diagnoses, offered by Michael Williams and John McDowell respectively; chapter 3 frames the political-philosophical issues which I argue are crucial to understanding the significance of their differences; chapters 4 and 5 revisit the Williams-McDowell debate in order to draw some more general conclusions regarding the attention due to the shadowy figure of the radical in confronting the problems of scepticism.

influences others’ actions, so to speak, pre-emptively. The control operates purely structurally in cases where ‘the power influencing [the behaviour of a person or group, for example, making them unlikely to vote] is so thoroughly dispersed through the social system that we should think of it as lacking a subject’ (Fricker 2007, pp.10-11).

⁸ It does, of course, count as affecting something to encourage it to remain the same.

Chapter 1

I. Radical scepticism

Scepticism takes many forms, but the two most commonly discussed in the literature⁹ are ‘Cartesian’, ‘dogmatic’ or ‘academic’ scepticism, on the one hand, and ‘Pyrrhonian’ scepticism on the other hand.¹⁰ The difference between them is that, while the dogmatic sceptic presents an argument to the effect that knowledge of a particular kind (e.g. knowledge of the ‘external world’) is impossible, the Pyrrhonian sceptic assents neither to the proposition that knowledge is possible nor to the proposition that it is not. In other words, while the dogmatic sceptic claims to know *something*, namely that it is impossible for us to have knowledge (in some broad area), the Pyrrhonian sceptic simply raises doubts about every knowledge claim in that area and then withholds judgement.

A particularly lucid and influential version of Cartesian scepticism is presented by Williamson, who characterises the sceptical challenge as follows:

‘The sceptic compares a good case with a bad one. In the good case, things appear generally as they ordinarily do, and are that way; one believes some proposition *p* (for example, that one has hands), and *p* is true; by ordinary standards, one knows *p*. In the bad case, things still appear generally as they ordinarily do, but are some other way; one still believes *p*, but *p* is false; by any standards, one fails to know *p*, for only true propositions are known. As far as [semantic] externalism permits, things appear to one in exactly the same way in the good and bad cases. The sceptic argues that because one believes *p* falsely in the bad case, one does not know *p* (even though *p* is true) in the good case.’
(Williamson 2002, p.165)

More precisely, the reasoning proceeds through the following premises:¹¹

- (1) For any empirical claim, *p*, which a subject, *S*, makes on the basis of her current perceptual experience (good case), it is possible to imagine a

9 For an up-to-date introduction to scepticism, see *The Oxford Handbook of Scepticism* (ed. Greco 2011) or for a slightly older but still relevant selection see *Scepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (ed. DeRose and Warfield 1999). The work of Barry Stroud is also illuminating and influential. See, for example, his classic *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Stroud 1984).

10 These names should be taken with a pinch of salt, as the views they refer to have drifted free of the historical positions adopted by Descartes, Pyrrho, and the philosophers of Plato’s Academy. I shall use the term ‘Cartesian’ simply because ‘dogmatic’ and ‘academic’ have the danger of sounding like prejudicial descriptions.

11 This is my reconstruction of Williamson’s argument, based in part on the reconstruction given by Marie McGinn (McGinn 2011).

sceptical scenario (bad case) in which an analogous judgement is made on the basis of experience which is phenomenally indistinguishable from *S*'s.

- (2) In the bad case, the subject does not know *p*, since *p* is false.
- (3) Since *S* seems to have no more to go on in the good case than in the bad case – since, that is, the *evidence* seems to be the same in both cases – then even in the good case *S* has no *reason* to believe that she is in the good case rather than the bad case.
- (4) Therefore, even in the good case, she has no *reason* to believe that *p* is the case rather than it being the case that she is trapped in some sceptical scenario where *p* is false.
- (5) Therefore, even in the good case, her belief in *p* is not justified, and cannot amount to knowledge.

The Cartesian sceptical conclusion is that *none* of our empirical beliefs are knowledgeable, or even justified, regardless of whether they happen to be true. This is because there is always a 'gap' between evidence – that is, experience – and reality. The Pyrrhonian sceptic, on the other hand, would point to the fact that the perceptual evidence does not distinguish between the good and the bad cases as a ground for doubting any claim by *S* to know that *p*, but equally would refuse to assent to the Cartesian sceptic's conclusion that we *S* definitely does *not* know that *p*.

Both Williams and McDowell attempt to diagnose scepticism as resting on non-compulsory commitments, but while McDowell primarily addresses Cartesian scepticism, Williams is more concerned with the Pyrrhonian variety. Nevertheless, I would argue that the considerations each raises apply to both forms of scepticism. McDowell finds a way to reject the assumption (no. 3 in my presentation of the Cartesian sceptic's argument) that the evidence is the same in the good case and in the bad case: in the good case, according to McDowell, 'subjects take in facts – elements of the world, in the sense determined by the opening remark of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: the world as everything that is the case' (McDowell 2009, p.134); in the bad case, the subject is presented with a *mere* appearance, not the world itself. Since it is the sameness of evidence which produces the Pyrrhonian sceptic's doubts and makes the suspension of judgement appear necessary, McDowell's attack on this premise equally confronts that form of scepticism. Williams, on the other hand, thinks that Pyrrhonian scepticism is more dangerous than Cartesian scepticism because it does not commit itself to any knowledge claims which could themselves be attacked. Again, however, his attempts to undermine Pyrrhonian scepticism, if successful, would equally apply to

other varieties of scepticism. He concedes that the suspension of judgement *is* rationally unavoidable in the context of epistemological reflection on the possibility of knowledge of the external world; however, he argues that this sceptical upshot does not transfer outside the specific context of debates about scepticism. The argument about non-transferability does not rely on the distinctively Pyrrhonian features of the scepticism he examines. Therefore, the fact that McDowell and Williams focus on Cartesian and Pyrrhonian scepticism respectively does not raise any serious difficulties in comparing their responses to scepticism. The fruitfulness of examining the points of contention between their responses will, I hope, be shown in later chapters when I use such an examination to explore the broader issue of how apparently abstract and apolitical epistemological positions can conceal political commitments. The task of the first two chapters, though, is simply to bring out what these points of contention are.

Since both Williams and McDowell are in the business of what Williams calls ‘theoretical diagnosis’, it may be helpful to begin by asking what a theoretical diagnostic approach to scepticism amounts to, and why it should seem promising.

II. Theoretical diagnosis and the epistemologist’s dilemma

The term ‘theoretical diagnosis’ is coined by Williams to locate his position within a taxonomy of approaches to scepticism. To begin with, he divides these approaches into two broad types: constructive and diagnostic. Constructive approaches are characterised as taking the sceptic’s questions at face value and trying to meet the sceptical challenge by arguing for a positive theory of knowledge. Such a theory is supposed to explain how, and to what extent, knowledge of the world is possible. The task of traditional epistemology might be described as the attempt – notoriously unsuccessful – to provide a constructive answer to the problem of scepticism. Diagnostic approaches, in contrast, do not seek directly to refute scepticism, but rather try to show that there is something problematic about the way sceptical questions are posed.

Diagnostic approaches, in turn, fall into two sub-categories: therapeutic and theoretical. The goal of therapeutic diagnosis is to show that the sceptic’s putative challenge is not really, or not fully, coherent. In other words, the therapeutic diagnostician challenges the *meaningfulness* of the sceptic’s attempt to formulate their doubts. Often, the charge is that the sceptic misuses the concepts of knowledge and/or justification. Therapeutic diagnoses are supposed to offer a definitive refutation of scepticism by showing that the sceptic and her traditional anti-sceptical opponent are not engaged in a meaningful debate, thus ‘dissolving’ the problem.

The goal of theoretical diagnosis, on the other hand, is not to offer a refutation, but to ‘shift the burden of theory’. The thought goes something like this: scepticism appears dangerous when it is taken to be a ‘natural’ or ‘intuitive’ problem, requiring no particular theoretical framework to get off the ground. Its conclusions appear shocking and unsettling only if we think that they arise from ‘commonsense’ truisms that we are all pre-theoretically committed to. Therefore, the theoretical diagnostician argues, if we can challenge the claim that scepticism is an ‘intuitive’ problem, and show that it depends upon potentially questionable theoretical commitments, we can reveal sceptical arguments as less than compelling. Theoretical and therapeutic diagnoses are, according to Williams, mutually exclusive because the former requires that we make sense of the sceptic’s doubts, while the latter denies that they are ‘fully’ meaningful.

As I have said, Williams characterises his approach as a form of theoretical diagnosis, and McDowell’s approach falls into the same category. Neither is attempting a *direct* – constructive – answer to the sceptic, and neither takes the sceptic’s questions to be incoherent. Rather, both take scepticism to depend upon non-compulsory theoretical commitments, although they give rather different accounts of what those commitments are. Before exploring their positions in detail, though, it is worth asking why the strategy of theoretical diagnosis should seem promising.¹²

Williams argues that a theoretical-diagnostic approach is the only way to avoid what he calls the ‘epistemologist’s dilemma’. This dilemma arises once the would-be anti-sceptic has conceded that sceptical doubts are *natural* doubts, relying on no contentious theoretical assumptions, i.e. once the possibility of theoretical diagnosis has been ruled out (or, more often, overlooked). This concession leaves us in need of a *definitive refutation* of scepticism, either through a constructive or a therapeutic approach, and this is what generates the dilemma.

The first horn of the dilemma is *dogmatic assertion*. We are driven into claiming that some beliefs are simply beyond the remit of inquiry and so do not require justification, or that we do not stand in an ‘epistemic relation’ to them, although they are genuinely factual, or more simply that we *do* know them because they are self-evident. The problem is, once we have conceded that our intuitive understanding of what knowledge/justification requires leads to scepticism, any theory of knowledge which claims to show that we *do* know, in the face of sceptical doubts, will not appear to be a

¹² Whether Williams’s taxonomy of sceptical responses, with its sharp distinction between therapeutic and theoretical diagnosis, is ultimately sustainable is not at issue here, since my purpose is primarily exegetical. The category of ‘theoretical diagnosis’ also turns out to be useful in explicating McDowell’s position, but my presentation does not crucially depend upon it.

genuine theory of *knowledge* or *justification*, but rather of some conveniently adopted *ersatz*.

To avoid dogmatism, the epistemologist is forced onto the dilemma's second horn, which is to offer such a deeply revisionary 'solution' to scepticism that one seems to end up agreeing with the sceptic. Barry Stroud, for example, criticises verificationist and transcendental idealist responses to scepticism on precisely this point (Stroud 2002). As Williams explains:

'So whereas the sceptic tells us that we cannot have knowledge of real things, but only of appearances, the transcendental idealist, like his descendant the phenomenalist, tells us that we *can* have such knowledge, since talk about real things *is* just elaborate appearance-talk.' (Williams 1996, p.20)

I can argue that my beliefs are justified by positing some *a priori* link between how things appear to me and how they are. To posit such a link, however, is to deny the world an objectivity which many think of as pre-theoretical and intuitive. If this is a victory against scepticism, it is at most a pyrrhic one.

In fact, even grasping the second horn of the epistemologist's dilemma does not ensure that one avoids the first. For instance, suppose that I maintain the incoherence of sceptical doubts on the basis of some kind of verificationist theory of meaning. This has revisionary consequences in terms of what counts as 'factual discourse', and therefore grasps the second horn. However, there is also a danger of dogmatism lurking here. This is because, on the one hand, our position asserts that the sceptic's utterances are meaningless (or do not mean what the sceptic wants them to mean), while on the other hand, we seem perfectly able to understand what she is saying. We can understand them well enough, at least, to see that various counter-arguments do not work. On what grounds, then, do we cling to our theory of meaning? As Nagel puts it, 'the evident intelligibility of what the sceptic says will invariably call in question whatever arcane theory of language underwrites the charge of incoherence' (cited (Williams 1996, p.15).

The strategy of theoretical diagnosis, then, is attractive because it seems able to avoid the epistemologist's dilemma entirely, by refusing to concede the *naturalness* of sceptical doubts: 'sceptical arguments derive their force, not from commonsensical intuitions about knowledge, but from theoretical ideas that we are by no means bound to accept' (Williams 1996, p.xvii). Williams argues that this removes the need for a definitive refutation of scepticism. Once the non-compulsory theoretical underpinnings of sceptical arguments stand revealed, we can find their reasoning simply 'less than compelling'.

Williams and McDowell agree that the sceptic is making an assumption which, if not refutable, is at least non-obligatory. However, they diverge on the question of just *what* that problematic and non-compulsory assumption is. Indeed, it is striking that each retains some element which the other diagnoses as leading to scepticism.

III. The sceptic as epistemological realist

On Williams's analysis, it is crucial to the paradoxical nature of scepticism that, although it arises in the (rather peculiar) context of epistemological inquiry – otherwise known as 'the study' – it is supposed to have implications for our knowledge claims more generally. This generates a deep sense of paradox because sceptical conclusions, despite being perfectly general, seem unable to command our conviction once we step outside the distinctively philosophical context.¹³ Conversely, scepticism will not reveal any deep, unsettling truths about the possibility of human knowledge in general unless we take it that 'philosophical reflection is a searchlight that brings into view what was always hidden in the darker recesses of our conceptual landscape' (Williams 1996, p.17). It is this understanding of philosophical reflection and its relation to other contexts of belief and inquiry that Williams challenges. Scepticism may triumph in the study, a definitive – constructive or therapeutic-diagnostic – refutation being impossible. However, Williams argues that the move from this to the *further* claim that scepticism's triumph-in-the-study undermines the possibility of knowledge or justified belief about the world in *all other contexts* requires an additional premise.

The essence of Williams's diagnosis lies in the thought that this additional premise – which he terms '*epistemological realism*' – embodies a theoretical position which is far from intuitive. In order to earn her conclusion, the sceptic must justify her commitment to epistemological realism. This, Williams argues, is what sceptical arguments have thus far failed to do.

To understand this claim, it is necessary to get clear about what epistemological realism amounts to. Williams characterises it as realism with respect to the objects of epistemological reflection: 'our knowledge of the world', 'our epistemic position', 'our view of reality', 'human knowledge', and so on. The realist claim is that these phrases

¹³ As Hume famously put it: 'Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's [sic] amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther' (Hume 1978, p.269).

refer to the kind of things that might be expected to be susceptible to uniform theoretical analysis, so that failure to yield to such an analysis would reveal a serious gap in our understanding (Williams 1996, p.102). So, for example, epistemological realism takes it that the phrase ‘our beliefs about the external world’ picks out a class with a certain theoretical integrity, rather like a *natural kind* term – a class exhibiting an essential unity, which adds up to a *surveyable whole*. Furthermore, epistemological realism is committed to there being general, fixed, and underlying relations of *epistemological priority* that hold between different classes of propositions, thus specified, independently of the circumstances in which those propositions are advanced.

Epistemological realism, according to Williams’s diagnosis, is closely tied to *foundationalism* about justification.¹⁴ Strictly speaking, what he calls ‘substantive’ (as opposed to merely ‘formal’) foundationalism *presupposes* epistemological realism (Williams 1996, p.115). This claim requires some explanation. According to Williams, formal foundationalism is the view that:

‘... justification depends on the availability of terminating beliefs or judgments, beliefs or judgments which amount to knowledge, or which are at least in some way reasonably held to, without needing support from further empirical beliefs.’
(Williams 1996, p.114)

Williams characterises this as a view about the *concept* of knowledge/justification, namely that it comes to an end somewhere; it need not imply that the terminating judgments are of any particular, or naturally unified, kind. For example, it would be consistent with formal foundationalism if a judgment which was ‘terminating’ in one context was up for question in another context.

Substantive foundationalism, on the other hand, is supposed to be a theory of knowledge/justification – the actual items, or relations – not just our concepts of them (Williams 1996, p.112).¹⁵ It adds to formal foundationalism a distinctive account of the kinds of beliefs that are capable of functioning as terminating judgments. The terminating status of these judgements is subject to no contextual variation:

14 For a classic discussion of foundationalism, see ‘The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge’ (Sosa, 1980).

15 Clearly, this is a slippery distinction. A putative theory of knowledge which cannot claim even to be articulating demands or standards *implicit* in ‘our ordinary concept’ of knowledge will be unconvincing as a theory of *knowledge*. On the flip side of this, a putative theory of the *concept* of knowledge which merely articulated ‘what we count as knowledge’ would fail to capture the *normative* character of the concept – we may not really *know* all that we think or say or assume that we know. Although Williams invokes this distinction, his own contextualist theory tends to collapse it, as we shall see.

‘[F]or the (substantive) foundationalist beliefs have an *intrinsic epistemological status* that accounts for their ability to play one or other of the formal roles the theory allows’. (Williams 1996, p.115)

Williams calls this the idea that ‘*content determines status*’: the semantic content of a proposition entirely determines what kinds of evidence could justify it. Furthermore, on the substantive foundationalist view, it is not the *details* of the content that matter, but ‘certain rather abstract features, for example that a belief is about “external objects” or “experience”’ (Williams 1996, p.116). It claims that beliefs *arrange themselves* into broad, theoretically coherent classes, according to certain *natural* relations of epistemological priority. On this account, some kinds of beliefs are essentially such that they require evidential backing from other kinds of beliefs. For example, the fact that a proposition is about the external world means that the ‘ultimate’ justification for believing it *must* be a proposition about experience. This presupposes epistemological realism in that it presupposes the theoretical integrity of such classes of beliefs as ‘beliefs about the external world’ and ‘beliefs about experience’, and the existence of fixed relations of epistemological priority between them.

To return to the question of diagnosis, Williams’s claim is that scepticism’s triumph-in-the-study does not reveal any deep, unsettling truth about ‘our epistemic position’ unless we assume epistemological realism. Without this assumption, the very claim that we have *an* ‘epistemic position’ which remains constant across all contexts, and susceptible to being undermined, will not be self-evident. Indeed, Williams wants to suggest that this claim is not merely controversial but false. As he puts it, ‘The deep truth about our epistemic position is that we do not have one’ (Williams 1996, p.357). Of course, to establish this requires more than identifying epistemological realism as a prerequisite of scepticism. It requires an argument to show that we have reason to doubt that epistemological realism captures the facts of the matter when it comes to how knowledge and justification work.

The argument Williams puts forward has two strands. On the one hand, he tries to show that sceptical arguments, as they have historically been presented, offer no grounds for believing in epistemological realism, but merely take it for granted. On the other hand, he tries to construct a rival – and, he suggests, superior – account of how knowledge/justification works: *contextualism*. Williams describes the result of this two-stranded argument as shifting the burden of theory towards the sceptic. The sceptic must explain why she is entitled to assume epistemological realism, and until she

succeeds in doing so, we are under no obligation to accept her pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of knowledge of the world in general.

It is important to be clear about how these two strands in Williams's argument are supposed to interact. In particular, we should ask: does his theory of epistemological contextualism have to be *correct* in order for his diagnosis of scepticism to be an effective anti-sceptical strategy? In characterising his project as aiming to 'shift the burden of theory', Williams implies that it does not depend upon the truth of contextualism. In principle, the first strand of his argument – which is supposed to show that epistemological realism is not self-evidently correct, and that no non-circular justification of it has so far been presented – would be enough to effect this burden-shift. The claim that contextualism offers a *prima facie* viable alternative would then function only to make this demand for a justification of epistemological realism more acute.

However, this characterisation of Williams's aim is incomplete. Certainly, it would cast doubt on scepticism's self-description as an *intuitive* problem if epistemological realism were revealed to be less than self-evident. Furthermore, it would cast doubt on the sceptic's conclusions if she had no argument for a key theoretical premise. However, 'shifting the burden of theory' can offer at most a *temporary reprieve* from scepticism, unless we also have reason to believe that the burden is one that the sceptic ultimately cannot shoulder. In other words, we must have reason to believe that epistemological realism will prove indefensible. Whether this leaves Williams's strategy reliant on the correctness of *contextualism* will depend on the extent to which contextualism is implied simply by the denial of epistemological realism.

IV. Williams's contextualist alternative

Williams presents various claims as characteristic of contextualism.¹⁶ Firstly, whereas epistemological realism takes categories such as 'our knowledge of the external world' to be analogous to natural kinds, contextualism takes them to be essentially theoretical. Secondly, contextualism rejects the realist claim that 'content determines status', i.e. that there is a context-independent *fact of the matter* about what kind of evidence can be brought to bear on a given proposition. What counts as appropriate

¹⁶ It should be noted that Williams's contextualism differs in significant ways from other prominent versions suggested by Keith DeRose and David Lewis. For discussion of the differences see (Williams 2001). Henceforth when I refer to contextualism I mean Williams's version.

back-up for a given claim is not determined simply by the concept of knowledge or justification plus the semantic content of the claim:

‘On the contextualist view of knowledge and justification, which is the real alternative to epistemological realism, constraints on justification... are determined by... considerations that are always external to the content of whatever is to be justified.’ (Williams 1996, p.199)

So far, this appears to be no more than the denial of epistemological realism. Notice, however, that the rejection of the ‘content determines status’ thesis can come in stronger or weaker forms. The weaker form rejects the full-blown substantive foundationalist thesis that certain *general, abstract* features of content – paradigmatically, a claim’s being about ‘external objects’ – determine what *kind* of evidence could support the claim, where ‘kind’ is understood as referring to the putative natural kinds assumed by epistemological realism. Rejecting this does not entail the stronger claim that the content of a claim cannot, or at least does not tend to, place context-independent constraints on what could count as a justification.

Williams does not make this distinction, but his exposition suggests that contextualism is committed to something like the stronger claim. As he puts it, ‘the plurality of constraints that inform the various special disciplines, and ordinary, unsystematic factual discourse, [is] genuinely *irreducible*’ (Williams 1996, p.106). Furthermore:

‘To adopt contextualism...is not just to hold that the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors: it is to hold that, independently of all such influences, a proposition has no epistemic status whatsoever. There is no *fact of the matter* as to what kind of justification it either admits of or requires.’ (Williams 1996, p.119)

According to the contextualist, justification is like explanation in being *interest-relative*, hence *context-sensitive*. It depends upon a multitude of contextual factors, such as the ‘direction of inquiry’, ‘our interests’¹⁷, ‘collateral knowledge’, the ‘dialectical situation’, and the ‘worldly situation’. That is to say, aspects of ‘nonsemantical practice’ (Williams 1996, p.199) are always relevant to ‘determining’ the constraints on justification.

¹⁷ Williams does not appear to find anything problematic in the notion of ‘us’ – *who?* – having (presumably the same) interests, nor in speaking of *the* ‘direction of inquiry’ without asking who or what determines this direction. Nor does he specify which of the two rather different senses of ‘interests’ he intends. In my exposition, I will adopt his language.

Williams argues that these constraints shift with context in ways that are probably impossible to reduce to any rule (Williams 1996, p.117).

Williams is explicit about the fact that contextualism includes an *externalist* element. In saying that the ‘worldly situation’ may determine constraints on justification, he makes it clear that we need not know whether the relevant situation obtains. Removing the requirement that everything relevant to justification must be accessible to the agent is characteristic of externalism.¹⁸ However, he is equally clear that externalism cannot *by itself* offer a satisfactory way of avoiding scepticism. It is only in the context of a theoretical diagnosis of scepticism as relying on the undefended doctrine of epistemological realism that an appeal to externalism can avoid begging the question.

It is worth exploring why this is the case. Traditional epistemological inquiry – of which scepticism is a consequence – demands that we explain, or vindicate, *all* of our knowledge of the world (or some specified large class of it, e.g. ‘knowledge of the past’) *at once*. Williams describes this move as imposing ‘the *totality condition*’. Once this condition is imposed, we can only appeal to claims which do not presuppose *any* such knowledge, and what we are left with is claims about experience. The totality condition is therefore what takes us from epistemological realism to the priority of experiential data in justifying claims about the world. It rules out *externalist* accounts of knowledge because it forbids us from taking any worldly situation for granted. The totality condition presupposes epistemological realism because it assumes that there is such a thing as (e.g.) ‘our knowledge of the world’, which possesses the kind of theoretical integrity that would make the project of *assessing it all at once* in principle possible.

Having accepted the legitimacy of inquiring into the epistemological status of the totality of our beliefs about the world, it would be question-begging to appeal to externalism to escape the sceptical trap. Williams’s theoretical-diagnostic strategy is therefore intended to challenge the sceptic at an earlier stage in the dialectic. He asks *why* the sceptic is entitled to assume epistemological realism, and to impose the totality condition on epistemological reflection.

In an attempt to meet this challenge, the sceptic can claim that the need for the totality condition arises simply from setting aside ‘practical concerns’ and adopting a purely reflective stance, in which the costs and benefits of decision-making are of no

¹⁸ It is also what, according to McDowell, makes it impossible to incorporate externalist elements into a picture of rationality, as Williams wants to. This point will be developed in chapter 4.

concern. Hume describes this as ‘reason act[ing] alone’, without the influence of the ‘passions’. However, Williams argues that merely setting aside practical concerns about the costs and benefits of decision-making, the need for action, and so on, will not yield the form of epistemological enquiry that the sceptic wants. This is because there are some propositions which must be held fast as a matter of *methodological necessity* for particular disciplines of inquiry. ‘Holding fast’ these ‘framework propositions’ is a precondition for our engaging in that form of inquiry.¹⁹ His primary example is the following:

‘Not entertaining radical doubts about the age of the Earth or the reliability of documentary evidence is a precondition of doing history *at all*. There are many things that, as historians, we may be dubious about, but not these.’ (Williams 1996, p.117)

If we doubt such things as these, Williams claims, then we are no longer doing history, but rather traditional epistemology.²⁰ Simply setting aside practical concerns might yield a particularly rigorous or contemplative form of historical investigation, but it could not *by itself* destroy history as a distinctive discipline.

Of course, the sceptic can say that this does not mean such ‘framework’ propositions are *true*. To claim that methodological necessity implies truth is to grasp the second horn of the epistemologist’s dilemma, weakening our sense of the objectivity of the world by making it dependent on the necessities of *our* practices of inquiry. However, Williams turns this point around to work against the sceptic. To insist on setting aside not only practical concerns, but all discipline-specific constraints on justification, the sceptic must appeal to epistemological realism/foundationalism – i.e. must impose the *totality condition*. Williams admits that these theoretical commitments are preconditions for the specific type of inquiry the sceptic wants to conduct and are therefore *methodologically necessary* in the context of such an inquiry. However, the sceptic herself has blocked the inference from methodological necessity to truth:

19 Williams describes ‘disciplinary constraints’ – which includes whatever methodological necessities characterise a particular discipline – as ‘fix[ing] ranges of admissible questions’ (Williams 1996, p.117). What form of inquiry we are engaged in at a particular moment, and hence what methodological necessities are in play, is determined by ‘our interests’. Questions about this notion have already been raised (p. 12, note 5).

20 What counts as a ‘radical’ – hence methodologically inadmissible – doubt about the reliability of documentary evidence is not explained. I take it that some widespread doubts about the reliability of documentary evidence might be well motivated (e.g. if literacy and access to document-producing resources were confined to a ruling elite, who might be expected to have a biased take on the realities of their society); presumably what Williams has in mind, though, is something like doubting whether the letters on the page stay the same when you’re not looking, or suspecting that all documentary evidence was planted by a supernatural deceiver. It is interesting that he does not feel the need to specify this.

epistemological realism may still be false. The sceptic needs to claim more than methodological necessity for her commitments, since unless epistemological realism truly describes the constraints imposed by the concept of justification, we cannot move from the conclusion that, once the totality condition is imposed, we cannot justify our beliefs, to the claim that we know none of the things we take ourselves to know when, for example, we are doing history.²¹

Williams concludes that, although in the context of traditional epistemological enquiry – where sceptical hypotheses are ‘live’ and foundationalist constraints on justification are in play – we cannot give an account of our knowledge of the world which meets the totality condition, the inference from this to the unjustifiability of our beliefs more generally requires that we accept epistemological realism. If, as Williams claims, contextualism captures more accurately the requirements imposed by the concept of justification, then we have a principled reason for refusing to do so, and therefore for resisting scepticism.

V. The two faces of contextualism

However, questions remain about how contextualism is to be understood. First of all, what does it mean to say, as Williams does, that a context *determines* certain constraints on (what counts as) justification (Williams 1996, p.199)? I think it would be contrary to the spirit of the kind of contextualism that Williams is presenting to try to specify *rules* by which context determines the contextually varying item, whether that be meaning, justification, goodness, or whatever.²² Still, it is legitimate to ask how this talk of contexts ‘determining’ constraints on justification is to be fleshed out, and what role ‘our interests’ and ‘the direction of inquiry’ are supposed to play in this determining.

21 In response, the sceptic can argue that not all routes to scepticism go via the totality condition and its epistemologically realist presuppositions. In particular, ‘paradigm case’ arguments seem able to by-pass such theoretical commitments. These arguments take ‘best’ or ‘paradigm’ cases of knowing about the world – e.g. seeing my own hands in normal lighting conditions, not under the influence of drugs, and so on – and show that sceptical doubts can be raised even here. Since, the argument goes, if we don’t have knowledge (or justification) *here*, then we don’t have it anywhere, the conclusion follows that all our knowledge of the external world is undermined. Williams, however, argues that the use of paradigm case arguments actually presupposes epistemological realism. Appealing to the idea of a paradigm case in order to prove something about a whole class of things involves treating the class as having a certain theoretical integrity, like a natural kind, and so in this case would presuppose epistemological realism (Williams 1996, p.163).

22 Of course, there are many contextualists who *do* think that such rules could be formulated. For example, see (Lewis, 1996). However, I think it would be uncharitable to commit Williams to such a project, as I think his contextualism is all the more plausible for his emphasis on the variety and irreducibility – hence, quite possibility, uncodifiability (at least by us) – of justificatory constraints.

A parallel with Charles Travis's contextualism about meaning may be helpful here. His semantic contextualism (or commitment to 'occasion-sensitivity') denies the possibility of codifying in rules everything that a *competent speaker* is sensitive to (or 'has a nose for') vis-à-vis the relevance of a particular context to the meaning of a particular utterance.²³ In learning a language, I acquire the ability to discern the multifarious and often subtle ways in which context affects meaning; this ability – this sensibility, or sensitivity, that I have as a competent speaker – is in a sense the final arbiter of what something, on a particular occasion of utterance and in a particular context, means. As an individual, of course, I am fallible, and may on occasion misunderstand. But, for the semantic contextualist, it is impossible to say what a given sentence *really* means, independently of its use on particular occasions by speakers to mean something, that is, something which is determined only in the context of utterance. What a sentence means, on a given occasion of utterance, is something that is determined, in the context, by competent speakers of the language.²⁴

Now, a question about epistemological contextualism can be formulated as follows: is there a comparable role for something like 'the' *competent judger or justifier* in explicating what it means to say that context determines constraints on justification? Are these constraints such that we can expect, most of the time, relevantly competent people to be sensitive to them, in the sense discussed above?²⁵ Williams's contextualism takes on radically different characters, depending upon how we answer this question. At one end of the spectrum, we can imagine a contextualist view according to which a large role is accorded to the know-how of competent justifiers. Generally speaking, or in the 'normal' case, the constraints that a context places on justification will be recognised as such, implicitly or explicitly, by those involved in the inquiry. If you want to know what the constraints on justification are in a given context, you can – *ceteris paribus*, where it is assumed that other things usually *are* equal – look at what the people in that context are treating as appropriate constraints. At the other

23 See (Travis, 2008). Again, there are other semantic contextualists who believe such sensitivities *can* be codified into rules (e.g. by extension of semantic analyses of indexicality), but since I am using Travis's position only for the purposes of analogy, this does not affect my argument.

24 These are, of course, two distinct claims. One can hold that a speaker's understanding is not codifiable into rules without holding that the community of competent speakers is the final arbiter of meaning. Since the notion of a position which conjoins these claims is being used for purely illustrative purposes, the question of is not significant.

25 Let us leave aside for the moment the question of who would count as a 'relevantly competent justifier', although the issue would seem (even) more fraught than in the language case. I presume that a 'competent judger' theory would hold that the answer could be settled by 'ordinary standards' implicit or explicit in the epistemic practice in question.

end of the spectrum would be the view that contexts determine constraints on justification in ways that are generally not accessible to people in those contexts. The constraints that really *are* in play in a particular context may routinely be radically different from those that we (whoever 'we' are) *suppose* are in play.

Williams's account contains elements which appear to pull in each of these directions. On the one hand, he draws support for contextualism from the fact that it seems to offer a better description, or interpretation, of the variety of 'our practices' of justification than its realist rival. For example:

'It is not easy to imagine what a convincing argument for epistemological realism would even look like, or what evidence it could appeal to. This is where the clash between scepticism and our ordinary attitudes really does work to the sceptic's disadvantage. It does so because our ordinary practices of justification not only tolerate but invite a contextualist construction.' (Williams 1996, p.134)

'The way that justification and inquiry proceed in common life, or for that matter theoretical science, is far from evidently favourable to the foundationalist conception of epistemological relations. In both science and ordinary life, constraints on justification are many and various.' (Williams 1996, p.117)

This suggests that Williams imagines contextually specific constraints on justification generally to be recognised as such. Otherwise, why would our *acting as though* justification is context-sensitive suggest that it *is* context-sensitive?

On the other hand, he embraces the externalist thought that facts relevant to the question of whether someone knows, or is justified in believing, something, need not themselves be known, or even believed:

'Rejecting epistemological realism, I see constraints on knowledge and justification as subject to contextual variation: whether I count as knowing something or other depends on the kind of investigation or discipline my putative knowledge belongs to, my worldly circumstances, and so on. But though the relevant contextual constraints must *be* met, they need not always be *known* to be met. Thus... my contextual view of knowledge and justification involves a substantial element of externalism.' (Williams 1996, pp.317-8)

Certainly, then, Williams takes it that justification-constraining facts about the 'worldly situation' may be inaccessible to the putative knower, while at the same time he gives no indication that 'our interests' and 'the direction of inquiry' might be other than transparent to 'us'. The problem is, to say that contextual constraints 'need not always

be known to be met' is not to say to what extent one envisages that they *are* known to be met.

In a sense, though, the extent to which Williams himself envisages constraints on justification as accessible to suitably situated inquirers may be beside the point. Rather, there seems to be a tension between (a) what we might call the 'sociological' aspects of contextualism (e.g. its appeal to how actual practices of inquiry are conducted, the notion of 'disciplinary' constraints being determined by 'our interests', etc.) which suggest that whether *S* is justified in asserting *P* is largely a question of whether the assertion conforms to standards accepted by *S*'s peers, and (b) its externalist aspects, which suggest that context may determine constraints on justification in ways that are outside the ken of the inquirers themselves. To ask how much weight Williams intends to give to each aspect is not to address the more important question of whether, and if so how, these apparently competing aspects can be reconciled.

I will argue in what follows that the sociological and the externalist aspect *cannot* be combined into a stable account of knowledge/justification. A key premise in that argument will be a McDowellian one: that empirical thought must be *answerable to the world* if it is to count as world-directed at all. I will argue that the sociological aspect of contextualism destroys this notion of answerability, and that its externalist aspect, rather than resolving the problem, simply renders contextualism an unstable 'hybrid' position, in which reliabilist elements are tacked onto a fundamentally 'interiorized' conception of the space of reasons. In order to make sense of this argument, though, it is necessary to explore McDowell's own response to scepticism, and to see how it differs from Williams's. This is the task of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

I. Introducing McDowell on scepticism

McDowell's anti-sceptical project has much in common with Williams's. He explicitly describes his approach as 'diagnostic', and is aiming for a theoretical rather than a therapeutic diagnosis. This is reflected in the fact that he does not see himself as offering a definitive refutation of scepticism. Rather, he aims to expose the sceptic as relying on theoretical commitments which are not so intuitive as the sceptic pretends. Such a diagnosis is not intended to *reply* to scepticism so much as to 'remove a prop on which sceptical doubt depends' (McDowell 2008, p.385).

However, while Williams diagnoses scepticism as resting on an undefended commitment to epistemological realism, McDowell locates the problem in the sceptic's conception of *experience*:²⁶

'The diagnosis is that this scepticism [about perceptually acquired knowledge of the external world] expresses an inability to make sense of the idea of direct perceptual access to objective facts about the environment. What shapes this scepticism is the thought that even in the best possible case, the most that perceptual experience can yield falls short of a subject's having an environmental state of affairs directly available to her.' (McDowell 2008, p.378)

That is to say, McDowell does not exploit the idea of context-sensitive constraints on knowledge and justification to resist the sceptic, but rather puts forward a rival conception of experience, the mere *intelligibility* of which he argues is enough to blunt the sceptic's challenge:

'If the idea [of experience as 'openness to the world'] is intelligible, the sceptical questions lack a kind of urgency that is essential to their troubling us, an urgency that derives from their seeming to point up an unnerving fact: that however good a subject's cognitive position is, it *cannot* constitute her having a state of affairs directly manifest to her. There is no such fact. The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to.' (McDowell 1996, p.113)

²⁶ Williams, too, thinks that the sceptic's conception of experience is problematic, but he diagnoses this conception as emerging in the context of an attempt to think about knowledge 'in its entirety', so that only 'experience' can be evidence for it. He therefore focuses his attention on the epistemological realism which, he argues, underpins this attempt. McDowell, in contrast, explicitly offers an alternative conception of experience as part of his response to scepticism, although he ultimately diagnoses the problematic conception as rooted in deeper assumptions about reason and nature, as we shall see.

In other words, McDowell diagnoses scepticism as proceeding from a conception of experience which makes ‘openness to the world’ unintelligible.

However, the roots of scepticism, on McDowell’s story, go still deeper, back to the assumptions which make that conception of experience appear compulsory; that is why the mere *intelligibility* of his alternative conception is supposed to break the spell of these assumptions. Indeed, he describes it as a ‘misunderstanding’ to think that scepticism – an epistemological predicament – is the only, or even the primary, problem that these assumptions give rise to:

‘In the misunderstanding, it seems that one needs a secure foundation for knowledge – as if one could take the contentfulness of one’s empirical thinking for granted, and merely had to reassure oneself as to its credentials. Thus what would be revealed as a transcendental anxiety, if it came into clearer focus, can, through an intelligible unclarity attaching to a merely incipient form of it, underlie the concern with, so to speak, mere scepticism that shapes much modern philosophy.’ (McDowell 2009, p.244)

It is an inability to make sense of experience or thought’s having *empirical content* – of ‘the capacity of our mental activity to be about reality at all, whether knowledgeably or not’ (McDowell 2009, p.243) – that is the primary symptom of this ‘transcendental anxiety’. McDowell characterises this as an ‘anxiety about how our intellectual activity can make us answerable to reality for whether we are thinking correctly or not – something that is surely required if the activity is to be recognizable as thinking at all.’ (McDowell 2009, p.243). To put it another way, the ‘transcendental anxiety’ – or, more precisely, the assumptions underlying it – make a certain problematic conception of experience seem compulsory. This conception in turn results *both* in a problem about the possibility of empirical knowledge *and*, more fundamentally, in a problem about the possibility of empirical thought, full stop.²⁷

Before examining those underlying assumptions, it is worth sketching the conception of experience from which the problems about scepticism and empirical content immediately proceed. According to the problematic conception, our experience is a ‘veil of ideas’ which prevents any direct contact with the world. The world must be *inferred* from experience, and scepticism gets a grip by pointing out that such an inference could never be warranted. It comes to seem that reality can exert no *rational*

27 ‘[P]hilosophical concerns about the possibility of knowledge express at root the same anxiety as philosophical concerns about how content is possible, an anxiety about a felt distance between mind and world’ (McDowell 1996, p.147).

influence on our beliefs, raising the disturbing possibility of our beliefs floating wildly free of it.

‘The familiar sceptical scenarios – Descartes’s demon, the scientist with our brains in his vat, the suggestion that all our apparent experiences might be a dream – are only ways to make this supposed predicament vivid.’ (McDowell 2008, pp.378-9)

How does McDowell’s understanding of this ‘supposed predicament’ compare with Williams’s? Well, his characterisation of traditional epistemological inquiry, and the scepticism it leads to, shares with Williams’s an attentiveness to the fact that it is a substantive *foundationalist* project, which takes ‘judgements about experience’ to be the only permissible terminating judgements:

‘The predicament of traditional philosophy [is that]... in which we are supposed to start from some anyway available data of consciousness, and work up to certifying that they actually yield knowledge of the world.’ (McDowell 1996, p.112)

However, whereas Williams encourages us to see this foundationalist requirement as arising from the imposition of a totality condition which, he argues, is no more than a methodological necessity for a specific form of philosophical inquiry, rather than a pre-condition for rigorous or reflective inquiry in general, McDowell *accepts* that experience provides the ultimate grounds for our beliefs about the world, regardless of context. Like the traditional epistemologist, he wants to tell a story about how justification can go ‘all the way down’. What he rejects is the traditional epistemologist’s characterisation of those terminating judgements. In particular, he rejects the dichotomy between ‘judgements about experience’ and ‘judgements about the world’. As he puts it:

‘we can resist [this predicament] if we can so much as comprehend the idea of a direct hold on the facts, the sort of position that the image of openness conveys.’ (McDowell 1996, p.113)

All our beliefs may ultimately rest on experience, but for McDowell, this is equivalent to saying that our beliefs are *rationally (and not merely causally) constrained* by the world. The challenge is to construct an understanding of experience which makes sense of this equivalence.

II. McDowell’s conception of experience

The conception of experience which McDowell argues can meet this challenge is comprised of two interrelated components. Firstly, it sees experience as simultaneously *receptive* and *conceptual*; McDowell rejects *both* the traditional empiricist notion of experience as a non-conceptual Given, and the coherentist notion of experience as a merely causal constraint on belief-formation. Secondly, it is a *disjunctive* conception which rejects what he calls the ‘highest common factor’ view, according to which the content of experience is individuated by something like ‘subjective indistinguishability’.²⁸ These two aspects of McDowell’s conception of experience respond to two different ways in which sceptical challenges can appear to undermine the conceivability of experience providing an ultimate justification for belief.²⁹

On McDowell’s diagnosis, two philosophical ‘pictures’ threaten the possibility of conceiving experience as ‘openness to the world’: (1) the image of experience as a ‘veil of ideas’ – an experiential interface mediating our perceptual access to the world; (2) the image of ‘a boundary that encloses thought and sets it off from the world’ (McDowell 1996, p.138). This second image gives ‘pictorial expression to the idea that there are philosophical problems about the relation between thought as such and its objects’:

‘Rejecting the image is refusing to let our “unmediated touch” with the familiar world be threatened by a set of philosophical assumptions that give only the illusory appearance of being compulsory.’ (McDowell 1996, p.138)

These philosophical assumptions – which I earlier described as the source of the ‘transcendental anxiety’ which threatens the possibility of empirical thought – produce a perpetual oscillation between a pair of unsatisfying positions:

‘...on the one side a coherentism that threatens to disconnect thought from reality, and on the other side a vain appeal to the Given, in the sense of bare presences that are supposed to constitute the ultimate grounds of empirical judgements’. (McDowell 1996, p.24)

28 McDowell’s conception of experience has been criticised from many sides, perhaps most interestingly and prominently by Crispin Wright. See (Wright 2008). A good collection of criticisms is to be found in *Reading McDowell On Mind and World* (Smith, ed. 2002). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of my thesis to deal with all the important issues raised, as I want to focus on the debate with Williams in particular.

29 Since the possibility of such ultimate justification is, on McDowell’s account, a condition for empirical thought’s being ‘answerable to the world’, and since he furthermore holds that such answerability is necessary for thought’s being world-directed at all, these sceptical challenges also threaten to render empirical content unintelligible.

Neither position can make sense of justification going ‘all the way down’. Consequently, however, neither can make sense of thought’s being world directed. This means that the sceptic, who takes the world-directedness of thought for granted, but questions whether it can ever be knowledgeable, is failing to recognise the depth of the malaise.

The first question to ask, then, is what these transcendental-anxiety-inducing assumptions are. The short answer is: an assumed dichotomy between *reason* and *nature* which makes it inconceivable that something natural should also be capable of standing in ‘the space of reasons’: the space of ‘justifying and being able to justify what one says’ (Sellars 1997, p.160). According to the problematic conception, nature is thought of as a ‘realm of (natural-scientific) law’, in which merely *causal* relations obtain. Rationality (‘the space of reasons’), in contrast, is a realm of *freedom* or spontaneity. This is a Kantian thought. To the extent that reasoning is constrained by brute causal forces, or by worldly authority, it is not really *reasoning*. If I believe something because of the influence of a drug, or through subliminal indoctrination, then I might be *excused* for believing it – the causal facts might offer an ‘exculpation’ for my belief – but I will not be *justified* in doing so.³⁰

McDowell argues that this reason/nature dualism creates a serious difficulty when it comes to understanding perception as openness to the world. For on the one hand, perception is clearly a *natural* relation, involving optic nerves, light rays, vibrating ear-bones and so on, and as such is governed by natural laws. Furthermore, perceptual capacities are something we share with other animals who are not reasoners, and with very young children who are not yet reasoners. On the other hand, perceptual experience is supposed to be our ultimate source of knowledge of the world; it is supposed to provide a worldly constraint on the beliefs we form, and stand in rational relations to those beliefs. Yet if perception is situated in the realm of law, how can it impact other than causally on the space of reasons? This seems to present a dilemma: either perception is a relation between conceptual items, with its place in nature – hence its relation to the world – rendered inexplicable; or perception is the brute impact of the world giving rise to non-conceptual contents, which can offer merely *exculpations* and not justifications for our beliefs (McDowell 1996, p.20):

‘The idea of spontaneity is an idea of freedom, and that threatens to make what was meant to be empirical thinking degenerate, in our picture, into a frictionless

30 This thought under-writes McDowell’s commitment to internalism, discussed below.

spinning in a void. Recoiling from that, we are tempted to suppose that we can reinstate friction between thought and the world by making out that justifications of empirical judgements stop at objects of pure ostension, uncontaminated by conceptualization. But when we think this alternative through, we realize that these supposed stopping points for justification cannot intelligibly serve as a subject's reasons for her judgements. Now we are tempted to recoil back into renouncing the need for friction.' (McDowell 1996, p.67)

McDowell argues that his account of experience as receptive *and* conceptual allows us to dismount this see-saw, and reclaim the idea of openness to the world. According to the story he wants to tell:

'Experiences are indeed receptivity in operation; so they can satisfy the need for an external control on our freedom in empirical thinking. But conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity, are already at work in experiences themselves, not just in judgements based on them; so experiences can intelligibly stand in rational relations to our exercises of the freedom that is implicit in the idea of spontaneity.' (McDowell 1996, p.24)

With this view of experience in place, the notion of justification going 'all the way down' no longer seems fantastic:

'When we trace justifications back, the last thing we come to is still a thinkable content; not something more ultimate than that, a bare pointing to a bit of the Given... The thinkable contents that are ultimate in the order of justification are contents of experiences, and in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts, facts that obtain anyway and impress themselves on one's sensibility.' (McDowell 1996, p.29)

'Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. *That things are thus and so* is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, *that things are thus and so*, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world.' (McDowell 1996, p.26)

However, this conception of experience as openness to 'manifest facts... impress[ing] themselves on one's sensibility' seems to be threatened by the sceptical argument presented at the outset. Recall how that argument began by presenting two cases:

- (1) The 'good' case: I veridically perceive an apple in front of me, and form a belief that there is an apple.
- (2) The 'bad' case: I hallucinate an apple in front of me, and form a belief that there is an apple.

We were then asked to suppose that these two cases are 'subjectively indistinguishable', i.e. I cannot tell, simply from how things seem to me, which case I am in. Now, the sceptical argument goes, since I have no more to go on in the good case than in the bad case (because my experience is indistinguishable), and since in the bad case my experience clearly falls short of the facts, then even in the good case my experience must fall short of the facts. This seems to rule out the possibility of construing experience, even in the good case, as openness to the world.

McDowell argues, however, that the sceptical argument has force only if we are already in the grip of the picture of experience as a 'veil of ideas' – what he calls the 'highest common factor' view – which makes it seem that my experience *must* be the same in the good and the bad cases. On this view, the difference between the cases lies only in how that experience was caused, e.g. whether it was caused by an apple in front of me, or by hunger-induced wishful thinking, or by an evil demon. My relation to the world is seen as external to the content of my experience. In adopting a *disjunctive* conception, however, McDowell rejects the highest common factor view, and along with it a crucial premise in the sceptical argument.

Disjunctivism rejects the Highest Common Factor view by endorsing a version of *externalism* about the content of experience. This is the idea that the content of my experience depends (at least in part) on the relation that obtains between me, the experiencing subject, and the world. In the good case, what I perceive – i.e. the content of my experience – *is* a fact-in-the-world, which 'makes itself manifest' to me in experience. In the bad case, I am aware of a mere appearance, not a fact. McDowell makes the point as follows:

'But suppose we say – not at all unnaturally – that an appearance that such-and-such is the case can be *either* a mere appearance *or* the fact that such-and-such is the case making itself perceptually manifest to someone. As before, the object of experience in the deceptive cases is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive cases too the object of experience is a mere appearance, and hence something that falls short of the fact itself. On the contrary, we are to insist that the appearance that is presented to one in those

cases is a matter of the fact itself being disclosed to the experiencer.’ (McDowell 1998a, pp.386-7)

Consequently, while the highest common factor view holds that the *reason* or *warrant* for my belief that there is an apple must be the same in the good case as in the bad case – namely, its merely appearing to me that things are thus and so – McDowell rejects this. In the good case, a fact is making itself manifest in experience and my warrant consists in my perceiving that fact; in the bad case, it merely appears to me that things are thus and so, which does not provide a warrant for a judgement that they are. In the good case, then, my experiential *state* – my directly perceiving how things are – can provide me with an *indefeasible* warrant for my belief,³¹ which is not destroyed by its subjective indistinguishability from the bad case.³²

III. Second Nature and Naturalized Platonism

In order for this conception of experience to be available to us, however, we must overcome the dichotomy between reason and nature which underlies the original oscillation between coherentism and the myth of the Given, and makes such ‘openness to the world’ inconceivable.³³ McDowell proposes to effect this overcoming through the concept of *second nature*. ‘Second nature’ is an Aristotelian notion³⁴ with a Hegelian historicist twist. Drawn from Aristotle is the idea that a decent human

31 This means that my possession of the warrant rules out the possibility of the belief’s being false.

32 It is worth noting McDowell’s commitment to the classic *internalist* thesis that the justification – or, what amounts to the same thing, the warrant – for my judgement must be *reflectively accessible* to me if they are to count as warrant at all. On McDowell’s account, my warrant (in the good case) is my directly perceiving how the world is, in other words, my *experience*. My experience is reflectively accessible to me, and so, therefore, is my warrant. This espousal of (a form of) internalism is not merely incidental to McDowell’s view. Rather, he argues that the idea of a justifying reason (or warrant) which is *not* reflectively accessible to the perceiver is a misuse of the term ‘justification’. Such ‘reasons’ as the externalist invokes could perhaps offer an *exculpation* for my belief, but no justification.

33 Elsewhere, McDowell characterises the transcendental anxiety as arising from ‘...the spell is cast by the attractions of a pair of thoughts: first, that empirical content depends on answerability to impressions, and, second, that impressions could not be the kind of thing to which something could be answerable, because the idea of an impression is the idea of a natural phenomenon’ (McDowell 2009, p.246). Together, these two thoughts render empirical content impossible. Since McDowell takes the first of these thoughts – that empirical thought must be answerable to experience – as correct, his aim is to find a way of rejecting the second.

34 ‘The notion [of second nature] is all but explicit in Aristotle’s account of how ethical character is formed’ (McDowell 1996, p.84)

upbringing³⁵ initiates us into, opens our eyes to, an ethical space of reasons which is genuinely objective:

‘The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons.’ (McDowell 1996, p.82)

‘The point is clearly not restricted to ethics. Moulding ethical character, which includes imposing a specific shape on the practical intellect, is a particular case of a general phenomenon: initiation into conceptual capacities, which include responsiveness to other rational demands besides those of ethics.’ (McDowell 1996, p.84)

‘The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature.’ (McDowell 1996, p.84)

What we end up with is a rational receptivity – perception which is both receptive and conceptual – but there is no stepping outside the natural world into what McDowell calls ‘rampant platonism’. This is because the *potential* to become rational animals – to become minded – through a process of *Bildung* is part of what it is to be human:

‘Second nature could not float free of potentialities that belong to a normal human organism. This gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science’. (McDowell 1996, p.84)

McDowell argues that this opens up a way to respect the Kantian view of rationality as operating freely in its own sphere without it thereby losing its foothold in nature. He calls his alternative ‘naturalized platonism’:

‘In rampant platonism, the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical. Naturalized platonism is platonistic in that the structure of the space of reasons has a sort of autonomy; it is not derivative from, or reflective of, truths about human beings that are capturable independently of having that structure in view. But this platonism is not rampant: the structure of the space of reasons is not constituted in splendid

35 What counts as a ‘decent upbringing’ is, as McDowell (unlike Aristotle) acknowledges, itself a potentially contentious issue.

isolation from anything merely human. The demands of reason are essentially such that a human upbringing can open a human being's eyes to them.' (McDowell 1996, p.92)

The idea of second nature, then, is supposed to break down the reason/nature dualism which confronts us with a choice between two unpalatable alternatives: either (1) a 'empiricistic naturalism' (McDowell 1998b, p.186), which demands a natural-scientific story to vindicate the structure of the space of reasons, or (2) a 'supernaturalist rationalism' (McDowell 1998b, p.167), which conceives reason 'as a foreign power, ordering our animal nature from outside the natural world' (McDowell 1998b, p.177).³⁶

It is important to be clear that, in invoking second nature, McDowell is aiming to undermine the dualism which leads to this dilemma, and *not* to combine the two horns of the dilemma into a hybrid position. It is not, for example, that he uses the term 'second nature' to describe a rampantly platonistic conceptual add-on to some base level of animal functionality, empiricistically construed.³⁷ Rather, in acquiring a second nature, a human being *becomes* a minded animal whose 'orientation towards the world is permeated with a conceptual rationality' (McDowell 2009, p.321).

Still, this picture can easily be misunderstood. For example, Dreyfus criticises McDowell for, as he sees it, focusing exclusively on 'the conceptual upper floors of the

36 There is a clear parallel here with the issues raised in McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein on rule-following. In both cases, a non-compulsory assumption (that understanding always involves interpretation; that nature is exhausted by the subject-matter of natural science) is diagnosed as leading to an apparent dilemma between: (a) the (ultimately futile) project of trying to give an account of the phenomenon in question (rule-following; reason) explicable entirely from outside the realm of conceptual connections, and (b) resorting to a 'rampant platonism' about the rational connections in question: picturing rules, or the demands of reason, as 'the operation of a super-rigid yet (or perhaps we should say "hence") ethereal machine' (McDowell 1998b, p.230). The problem with the latter is that it degenerates into empty mythology, giving us no sense of how the ethereal machinery is supposed to connect with human practice. The problem with the former is that it obliterates normativity, offering a picture 'at the basic level' which cannot make sense of what we do as *saying* things – agreeing, disagreeing – 'rather than a mere brute meaningless sounding off' (McDowell 1998b, p.235). In both cases, McDowell's proposed therapy is to undermine the assumption which leads to the dilemma, thus allowing for an innocent rehabilitation of those turns of speech which, in the context of the dilemma, have to take on a supernaturalist aura, such as the idea that a rule determines its applications, or that some things are justified whether or not anyone thinks they are. This is the essence of his 'naturalized platonism'. ('Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression "in a queer way". The rest is all right...') (Wittgenstein 2001, sec.195.)

37 That would still be to picture 'our lives [as] mysteriously split, somehow taking place both in nature and in some alien realm in which reason operates' (McDowell 1998b, p.177). This would decisively retain, rather than dissolve, the dualism between reason and nature that the concept of second nature is intended to overcome. The role which McDowell envisages for the notion of 'first nature' is, rather, that which he reads Wittgenstein as giving to 'very general facts of nature': 'The concepts would not be the same if the facts of (first) nature were different, and the facts help to make it intelligible that the concepts are as they are, but that does not mean that correctness and incorrectness in the application of the concepts can be captured by requirements spelled out at the level of the underlying facts' ((McDowell 1998b, p.193).

edifice of knowledge' (McDowell 2009, p.308), and simply ignoring 'the embodied coping going on on the ground floor'; he criticises this as an over-intellectualization of our lives as embodied subjects, labelling it 'the Myth of the Mental'. McDowell's response to Dreyfus helps to clarify the extent to which this is a misreading. He argues that Dreyfus assumes a conception of rationality which he himself repudiates, according to which reason is dualistically opposed to embodiment; this assumption, which he in turn labels 'the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect' (McDowell 2009, p.322), renders his own conception – that 'in mature human beings, embodied coping is permeated with mindedness' (McDowell 2009, p.309) – unavailable.³⁸

'We should not start from the assumption that mindedness, the characteristic in virtue of which I am the thinking thing I am, is alien to unreflective immersion in bodily life. If we let our conception of mindedness be controlled by the thought that mindedness is operative even in our unreflective perceiving and acting, we can regain an integrated conception of ourselves, as animals, and – what comes with that – beings whose life is pervasively bodily, but of a distinctively rational kind.' (McDowell 2009, p.328)

The conception that McDowell recommends is one which rejects the assumption that rationality is at work only in reflective deliberation, and that it must 'relate to particular situations only by subsuming them under content determinately expressible in abstraction from any situation' (McDowell 2009, p.309):

'Dreyfus reads me as holding that "there must be a maxim behind every action"... If rationality is as such situation-independent, this is the only possible reading of the claim that rationality permeates action. But it does not fit my thinking at all. In my picture rationality is *in* action, and just as situation-dependent as action is – not *behind* action, in the guise of a "maxim".' (McDowell 2009, p.312)

Again, the thought here is Aristotelian: whether reason (or virtue) is at work depends on the *kind of thing* that one is, or more specifically, the kind of thing that one has *become* through *Bildung*, namely a rational animal (perhaps even a virtuous one).

38 'I have urged that the claim that conceptual rationality is everywhere in our lives, in so far as our lives are distinctively human, cannot be unmasked as a myth on the grounds that it commits us to ignoring embodied coping skills. The real myth in this neighbourhood is the thought that makes it look as if affirming the pervasiveness of conceptual rationality will not cohere with giving proper weight to the bodily character of our lives. This myth figures in Dreyfus's argument, in the shape of the idea that conceptual rationality is detached from bodily life, characterizable in abstraction from the specifics of the situation in which embodied coping is called for. This is – to give it a label – the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect.' (McDowell 2009, p.322)

Indeed, McDowell suggests that the conception of rationality which he unmasks as the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect is not ultimately an intelligible picture of rationality at all, for it fails to recognise ‘the basic importance of agency for making self-consciousness intelligible’ (McDowell 2009, p.210):

‘Surely this [understanding of bodily agency] cannot be less fundamental, in our understanding of self-consciousness, than providing for a distinction between how things are and how things are experienced as being.’ (McDowell 2009, p.202)

Just as empirical content goes missing in the absence of the world’s exerting some rational constraint on our thinking, so it goes missing in the absence of the subject’s embodied rationality – that is, engagement with that world:

‘[W]e cannot make sense of a creature’s acquiring reason unless it has genuinely alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play. We cannot intelligibly restrict the exercise of conceptual powers to merely theoretical thinking, on the part of something whose behaviour, if any, flows from a brutally natural aspect of its total make-up, uncontaminated by its conceptual powers – so that it might conceive “its own” behaviour as just another phenomenon in the world it conceptualizes... A possessor of *logos* cannot be just a knower, but must be an agent too; and we cannot make sense of *logos* as manifesting itself in agency without seeing it as selecting between options, rather than simply going along with what is going to happen anyway.

This is to represent freedom of action as inextricably connected with a freedom that is essential to conceptual thought.’ (McDowell 1998b, pp.170-1)

Consequently, ‘openness to the world, which is rationality at work, is intelligible only in a context that includes embodied coping skills’ (McDowell 2009, p.316).³⁹

The notion of second nature, then, is supposed to show how the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect (which is but a manifestation of the reason/nature dichotomy) can be overcome: acquiring a second nature – coming to inhabit the space of reasons – is a process *both* of becoming a minded animal, capable of openness to the world, and to become an embodied agent, capable of acting in the world. This avoids the

39 ‘A subject to whom the world is disclosed is an agent... Openness to the world is enjoyed by subjects who are essentially agents. What they are open to is not restricted to objects of disinterested contemplation. When Gadamer talks of a “free, distanced” orientation, he is not talking about an attitude that is contemplative as opposed to practically engaged.’ (McDowell 2009, pp.327-8)

supernaturalist mystifications of rampant platonism because the demands of reason are not conceived as somehow ‘outside’ the progress of our lives as rational animals:

‘The practical intellect’s coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities: a process that takes place in nature. The practical intellect does not dictate to one’s formed character – one’s nature as it has become – from outside. One’s formed practical intellect – which is operative in one’s character-revealing behaviour – just is an aspect of one’s nature as it has become.’ (McDowell 1998b, p.185)

However, a serious worry might remain about the Aristotelian notion of a ‘decent upbringing’ as the way of acquiring the second nature which constitutes a human animal as a minded – and potentially virtuous – actor. The worry concerns the ease with which Aristotle simply assumes that his own ethical outlook is correct, never considering the possibility that it might be ideological precisely in the sense of reflecting and perpetuating the power-structures of the society of which he was a (rather privileged) member. McDowell is alive to this concern, but wants to resist the ‘tempting thought’⁴⁰ that it vitiates the view that *Bildung* can open one’s eyes to real demands of reason.⁴¹ Rather, he argues that we should retain Aristotle’s notion of the space of reasons as a natural part of the lives of human animals, while emphasising the historically *dynamic* character of the way we inhabit that space.

This point can be approached via the notion of ‘tradition’ – that ‘historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what’(McDowell 1996, p.126) – which according to McDowell designates the continually contested yet indispensable starting point for reflection. What the concept of ‘tradition’ does is show how becoming a human animal capable of thought is a historically, geographically, socially, *situated* affair. Yet, according to McDowell, this does not mean that the notion of the ‘space of reasons’ as a realm of *freedom* is rendered senseless. Reasoning is not *just*, or not *ultimately*, an appeal to tradition, which after all might be a store of historically accumulated ignorance, injustice and ideological mystification, as well as wisdom. Rather:

40 ‘The tempting thought is that one could not achieve a justified conviction that a set of views about anything is objectively correct, by reflecting from within something as historically contingent as an inherited way of thinking; except perhaps by sheer accident, objective correctness would require breaking out of a specific cultural inheritance into an undistorted contact with the real.’ (McDowell 2009, p.37)

41 ‘[O]rganizing our metaphysics around the idea of transcending historicity is profoundly suspect. Its true effect is to undermine the very idea of getting things right.’ (McDowell 2009, p.37)

‘The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance. But if an individual human being is to realize her potential of taking her place in that succession, which is the same thing as acquiring a mind, the capacity to think and act intentionally at all, the first thing that needs to happen is for her to be initiated into a tradition as it stands.’ (McDowell 1996, p.126)

‘Active empirical thinking takes place under a standing obligation to reflect about the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that govern it. There must be a standing willingness to refashion concepts and conceptions if that is what reflection recommends.’ (McDowell 1996, p.13)

To put it another way, a tradition may be simply wrong about many things (and probably complexly wrong about many more), but that wrongness cannot be got at from some place outside the conceptual. Criticism, however radical, is always immanent, in the truistic sense that ‘we have only our own lights to go on, in trying to ensure that the considerations that we are responsible to are really reasons for thinking one thing rather than another... , and [those lights] are formed by our particular position in the history of inquiry’ (McDowell 2009, pp.38-9). But, McDowell argues, this should not be misconstrued as a metaphysical limitation;⁴² for it is only in the space of reasons that rational connections exist, and that one’s sense of what those connections are can be transformed in light of reflection and experience.

IV. Two diagnoses of scepticism

As we have seen, both Williams and McDowell purport to offer a theoretical diagnosis of scepticism, and both present their theories as opening up a previously overlooked path which allows us to circumvent the traditional debate about sceptical hypotheses. However, each seems to retain something that the other has diagnosed as the malign ‘prop on which scepticism depends’. While Williams argues that epistemological realism is the prop to be removed, McDowell is committed to the notion of experience as the ultimate justification for our beliefs, regardless of context, hence to some form of epistemological realism.⁴³ Indeed, McDowell argues that the

42 It may, of course, still be a very real limitation, if that particular position is one in which the (material or conceptual) resources for a non-ideological consciousness are unavailable, or only partially available. The solution to those limitations, however, would be political, not metaphysical.

43 The question what form of epistemological realism McDowell is committed to will be raised in chapter 5.

possibility of such ultimate justification, which constitutes what he calls ‘answerability to the world’ – the requirement that empirical thinking be subject to ‘the tribunal of experience’ (McDowell 2009, p.244) – is a necessary condition of not only knowledge, but empirical content.

This point of contention is reflected in the fact that, although both Williams and McDowell have an externalist element to their proposals, these operate in very different ways. McDowell’s is an externalism about the *content* of experience: when I see the world aright, what I experience just *is* the world. Williams, however, has no place in his account for the idea of worldly facts directly making themselves manifest to the perceiver, and so placing a rational constraint on belief. Conversely, McDowell would reject Williams’s externalist notion of ‘worldly’ constraints on justification which are not reflectively accessible to the perceiver. Since such putative constraints would be entirely disjoint from the ‘space of reasons’, they could not constitute genuine constraints on *justification*, for McDowell argues that justification is essentially an internalist notion.

This dispute is not merely terminological; it derives from McDowell’s commitment to the Kantian conception of rationality as a realm of spontaneity, which cannot be explained from ‘outside’ in merely causal or natural-scientific terms. Consequently, he would hold that Williams’s externalist justifications amount to no more than ‘fraudulent labelling: in effect, labelling a mere exculpation a justification, in the vain hope that that could make it be one’ (McDowell 1996, p.20). This fundamental dispute between McDowell and Williams on the nature of rationality will be taken up in chapters 4 and 5, where I will argue that it has an important *political* dimension.

Chapter 3

I. The concept of ideology

Ideology – in the pejorative sense (Geuss 1981, pp.12-22), which is how I am using it – is a distortion of thought⁴⁴ that stems from, and conceals, social contradictions. The concept of a ‘social contradiction’ is a complex one, but core examples involve a radical antagonism between the interests of one social group or class and the interests of another, plus a social arrangement which systematically serves the interests of one group or class at the expense of the interests of the other.⁴⁵ By concealing contradictions – for example, by presenting the interests of one class as the interests of all, by presenting hierarchical social arrangements as ‘natural’ or a result of ‘free choice’, or simply by distracting attention from them – the ideological distortion contributes to the reproduction of those contradictions and therefore serves the interests of the ruling group or class.⁴⁶

Ideologiekritik is a project of identifying these ideological distortions, diagnosing their origins in existing social conditions, and revealing their conservative function in reproducing those conditions. Since ideology is a reflection of existing conditions rather than a free-standing edifice, it can ultimately be dissolved ‘only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug’ (Marx 2000, pp.188-9). However, since the overthrow of those relations requires a conscious, theoretically informed revolutionary practice (Larrain 1979, p.60) – what Marx, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, calls ‘practical-critical activity’ (Marx 2000, pp.171-3) – *Ideologiekritik* may make an important contribution to that overthrow.⁴⁷

Philosophy has a complex relation to ideology. On the one hand, philosophy (like everything) is practised in a concrete social context, and the types of questions that

44 Ideology goes beyond ‘cognitive’ beliefs, and can include attitudes, desires, etc, i.e. whatever falls into the broad category of a ‘form of consciousness’.

45 ‘Thus society has hitherto always developed within the framework of a contradiction – in antiquity the contradiction between free men and slaves, in the Middle Ages that between nobility and serfs, in modern times that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.’ (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, cited Larrain 1979, p.45). Intersecting axes of oppression mean that at any given time there will be many different contradictions.

46 Of course, the concept of ideology is itself controversial. Michael Rosen, for example, has argued on political grounds against using it (Rosen 1996). However, I find his reservations to be clearly and decisively addressed by Lorna Finlayson (Finlayson, forthcoming).

47 ‘Revolutionary practice is a conscious, a theoretically informed practice. Even more, the theoretical critique in itself has an important bearing on the undermining of ideology. “Once the interconnection is grasped, all theoretical belief in the permanent necessity of existing conditions collapses before their collapse in practice.” (Karl Marx, *Letter to Kugelmann*, 11th July 1868)’ (Larrain 1979, p.60).

are asked or overlooked, the answers that are countenanced, the claims that seem ‘reasonable’ or ‘intuitive’, the metaphors and analogies which are drawn upon, etc. will be partly symptomatic of that context.⁴⁸ It therefore has the potential to generate and perpetuate ideology – to amount to no more or less than an ‘ideological overgrowth’ of the prevailing social conditions (Finlayson 2011, p.6). Professional philosophers being, on the whole, privileged along various axes of social power, it is even less surprising if their thought tends to reflect and reinforce that privilege. On the other hand, philosophy has the potential to challenge the ideological *status quo* through *Ideologiekritik*. It can reflect on its own assumptions, origins, and effects, can diagnose and confront ideological tendencies, both within and beyond its disciplinary boundaries.⁴⁹

This chapter explores one way in which philosophy – and, in particular, epistemology – can become an ideological, rather than a critical enterprise, namely by undermining the distinction between ‘authoritarian’ and ‘authoritative’ uses of reason. This terminology may require some explanation. An authoritarian use of reason takes place when the language of knowledge, rationality, justification, and so on, is used *ideologically* to portray dominant standpoints as having a monopoly on reasonableness, or subordinated groups as irrational. For example, when the ideal of rationality is conceptualised as dichotomously opposed to emotion or intuition, and when women, colonized people, people of colour, or the proletariat are depicted as intrinsically emotional or intuitive beings, we are dealing with an authoritarian use of reason. The idea of ‘reason’ is being used to portray dissent as hysterical, childish, insolent – in short, irrational – in such a way as to prop up a particular power-structure.⁵⁰ An authoritative use of reason, by contrast, is a legitimate use; it is reason, properly so called.

Since an ‘authoritarian’ use of reason just *is* an ideological one, i.e. a use of reason that functions to maintain existing power relations, undermining this distinction amounts to denying the possibility of *Ideologiekritik*. It amounts to denying or masking the difference between ideological and non-ideological forms of consciousness.

48 Both Williams and McDowell would agree with this.

49 It can also criticise those disciplinary boundaries as themselves ideological.

50 Likewise, when ‘rational man’ is contrasted with ‘brute nature’, and rationality is figured as attainable only through transcendence of embodiment, with those same subordinated groups associated with the body and with ‘animal’ nature. Equally, when ‘objectivity’ is contrasted with particularity and situatedness, and then through a sleight of hand the perspective of the privileged or powerful is deemed neither particular nor situated, leaving the disparaged subjectivity to the subordinated. And so on. Uncovering more authoritarian uses of reason is the task of *Ideologiekritik*.

Consequently, to the extent that an epistemological theory or approach undermines this distinction, it will itself serve a conservative – hence an ideological – function. This means that the project of identifying certain philosophical tendencies as hostile to the possibility of *Ideologiekritik*, and diagnosing those tendencies as ideological, is itself an exercise (however limited) in *Ideologiekritik*.

I will consider two approaches to epistemology which appear diametrically opposed, but which share a propensity to undermine the authoritarian/authoritative distinction. In each case, I will suggest that this propensity renders the approach congenial to conservatism, hence ideological.

II. Two approaches to epistemology

These two opposing approaches to epistemology are distinguished by the answer they give to the following question: what is the relation between politics (in the broad sense of social power relations) and epistemology? Fricker argues that answers to this question tend to cluster around two opposing poles, which she terms the ‘traditionalist’ and the ‘reductivist’⁵¹ respectively:

‘Whereas on the traditionalist view social power is seen as wholly *irrelevant* to the rational, on the postmodernist [i.e. reductivist] view reason tends to be *reduced* to social power.’ (Fricker 1998, p.160)

The traditionalist ‘think[s] of all things socio-political as mere external interferences in epistemic practice’ (Fricker 1998, p.176) – at most they are *details* to be tidied up later (in ‘application’), with no place in shaping the fundamentals of an epistemological theory. For the purposes of epistemology, it can be safely assumed that the political aspects of actual epistemic practices have negligible impact on the base-layer of knowledge with which the epistemologist is concerned; politics (it is implicitly assumed) enters only at the higher level of controversial ‘ideology’⁵², not at the ‘ground level’ of observational judgements.

The reductivist, at the other extreme, ‘tell[s] us to abandon reason and truth as universal norms on the grounds that they are mere functions of power as it is played out in the drama of epistemic practice’ (Fricker 1998, p.160). Social power, on this view,

51 Fricker’s criticisms are primarily directed against reductivists in the ‘postmodernist’ tradition, for example, Jean-François Lyotard; she therefore often uses the terms interchangeably. I prefer the term ‘reductivist’ because I am concerned to show that the problem Fricker identifies extends beyond that tradition.

52 I use inverted commas because the term ‘ideology’ is not being used here to refer to the ideological phenomena discussed earlier, namely distorted forms of consciousness which serve the interests of the ruling class. Rather it is being used to refer to any set of obviously political opinions, this being the way a traditionalist might use it.

goes ‘all the way down’: practices of inquiry are *nothing but* political. This is supposed to debunk the very idea of objectivity, rationality, or being true to the facts; such formulations, on the reductionist view, are merely ‘honorifics’ which serve to mask the thoroughly political nature of the interests they advance.

The traditionalist approach is too familiar (indeed, traditional) to require illustration. Moreover, it is difficult to find a *defence* of traditionalism, precisely because it manifests itself as a tendency to *ignore* issues of social power; it must therefore proceed at the level of assumption. The reductionist approach, on the other hand, has been vigorously defended, in particular by the pragmatist Richard Rorty. Focusing on his account has a certain advantage, in that he is in direct dialogue with my key figures, McDowell and Williams.

Rorty argues that labels such as ‘rational’ and ‘justified’ make sense only relative to local standards of rationality or justification, which themselves reflect (no more than, but no less than) the usefulness of those modes of belief-ratification in a particular socio-historical context. What counts as ‘useful’ is itself settled by ‘Darwinian’ struggle between competing visions of human happiness, and between different interest groups.⁵³ As he puts it:

‘I view warrant as a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of *S*’s statement by his peers’. (Rorty 1998, p.50)⁵⁴

‘Pragmatists like me can’t figure out how to tell whether we are understanding a justification as just a “justification for us” or as a “justification, *period*”. This strikes me as like trying to ask whether I think of my scalpel or my computer as “a good tool for this task” or as “a good tool, *period*”.’ (Rorty 2000, p.10)

Rorty therefore denies that there is any ‘fact of the matter’ about whether *S* was warranted in asserting *P* which amounts to ‘something *more* than our ability to figure out whether *S* was in a good position, given the interests and values of himself and his peers’ (Rorty 1998, p.50).

Given this reductionist account of justification, Rorty argues that it makes no sense to think of inquiry as aiming at truth, conceived as correspondence to an objective

53 Because he is a mainstream American liberal, Rorty has a narrow understanding of the ‘political’, which involves little beyond the official organs of the state. He would therefore *not* say that politics is all there is to epistemology. However, what he calls ‘sociological issues’ are all political on my definition, because they involve social power relations, and he is committed to the view that key epistemological concepts like knowledge, justification, etc. should be given a ‘historicosociological’ interpretation.

54 The term ‘peers’ should perhaps not be taken totally at face value, given that it masks any inequalities in power that might exist between *S* and those he must convince.

world. The aim of inquiry is not to produce true representations of the world, but to justify ourselves to our peers according to local standards, and in doing so to come up with useful ways of speaking – or ‘gimmicks’ (Rorty 1998, p.144) – which enable us to ‘cope’ with the difficulties and opportunities of human existence:

‘[G]reat scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which any of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself.’ (Rorty 1989, p.4)

Consequently, Rorty directly opposes McDowell’s view that the world must exert a *rational* constraint on anything worthy of the name ‘empirical thinking’. He characterises McDowell’s view as a hangover of religious awe, which envisions reality as a God-like authority before whom humans must humble themselves.⁵⁵ On Rorty’s view, practices of justification are no more than *causally* constrained by the way the world is:

‘I think that if we do our best with our peers, we need not worry about answering to any other norms [such as truth], nor to the world. For, as Davidson teaches us, you and your peers and the world are always bouncing off each other in causal ways. That causal interaction – that perceptual triangulation – is as intimate as connection with either world or peers can get.’ (Rorty 2000, p.127)

To ask for more is, on Rorty’s view, to hanker after a mirage.

So far I have tried to sketch the important features of the traditionalist and the reductivist approaches. The aim of the next section is to begin to uncover an important *similarity* between these apparently opposing approaches, namely that both serve a politically conservative function by undermining the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason.

III.Reductivism as ideology

Let us begin with the reductivist. Fricker argues that reductivism aids and abets conservatism by depriving radicals of the resources to criticise the epistemic *status quo*. She formulates the charge as follows:

‘The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism [i.e. reductivism] incapable of sustaining ordinary critical

55 ‘...for McDowell the idea that the world is a sort of conversational partner is all-important’ (Rorty 1998, p.147); ‘I regard the need for world-directedness as a relic of the need for authoritative guidance, the need against which Nietzsche and his fellow pragmatists revolted.’ (Rorty 1998, p.143)

judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false... At an aesthetic level, postmodernism may be a champion of creativity, playfulness and perpetual movement, but this should not conceal the fact that at the level of critical thought, it replaces the progressive dynamic of reason with a lugubrious critical stasis.’ (Fricker 2000, p.150)

To paraphrase: in order to criticise the *status quo* one must be able to make ‘ordinary critical judgements’ to the effect that accepted beliefs are false and/or unjustified, that accepted modes of inquiry are biased, and so on; the reductivist’s philosophical framework is ‘incapable of sustaining’ such judgements; therefore, reductivism undermines attempts to criticise the *status quo*.

The reductivist might retort that the rejection of context-independent norms of rationality and justification still leaves space for ‘situated criticism’, or *local* challenges to the *status quo*. For instance, Rorty urges feminists to drop the claim that their analyses of patriarchy are *accurate* descriptions of the world, and that patriarchal beliefs about women’s nature are *unjustified*; instead, he argues, they should ‘appeal to a still only dimly imagined future practice’ (Rorty 1998, p.217) to inspire adherence to their cause.⁵⁶ This would be a form of local criticism because it would attempt to change people’s beliefs and aspirations without claiming for its arguments any ‘objective’ or ‘universal’ validity beyond the (social) power to convince the particular audience to which they were addressed.

Fricker, however, questions whether such ‘local’ judgements as the reductivist view permits would amount to genuine critical judgements *at all*:

‘Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism [i.e. reductivism] is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate, for who is to say which 'language game' the authorities may provisionally have 'agreed' to play?’ (Fricker 2000, p.150)

‘[T]he very possibility of bringing a political perspective to bear on epistemic practice presupposes the distinction between rational authority and the power merely to seem rationally authoritative.’ (Fricker 1998, p.176)

⁵⁶ ‘... one will praise movements of liberation not for the accuracy of their diagnoses but for the imagination and courage of their proposals’ (Rorty 1998, p.214).

To say that putative critical judgements advanced in the absence of a commitment to the authoritative/authoritarian distinction would not be *genuine* is, I think, to say that the person making them could not consistently portray herself as *judging that* such-and-such a practice is biased, or oppressive, or whatever, as distinct from simply expressing a (subjective) preference for things to be otherwise and using whatever social power she has to bring it about that her audience comes to share that preference.⁵⁷ Of course, in rejecting the view that inquiry even *should* be aiming at true representations of the world, Rorty wants to question whether there is any difference in practice between a projected desire and a ‘genuine judgement’. Fricker’s point, though, is that giving up on genuine critical judgement *does* have an impact on political practice: a conservative impact. In other words, it is an ideological move.

Rorty is aware that his positions is subject to this kind of criticism, and offers (numerous variations on) the following response:

‘We pragmatists are often told that we reduce moral disagreement to a mere struggle for power by denying the existence of reason or human nature, conceived of as something that provides a neutral court of appeal. We often rejoin that the need for such a court, the need for something ahistorical that will ratify one’s claims, is itself a symptom of power worship – of the conviction that unless something large and powerful is on one’s side, one shouldn’t bother trying.’ (Rorty 1998, p.211)

This response is illuminating in several ways. Firstly, Rorty seems correctly to identify the driving concern behind Fricker’s attack on reductivism, namely the fear that the reductivist’s ‘debunking’ of the authoritative/authoritarian distinction deprives the radical critic of a powerful potential ally, namely Reason itself; she says as much when she criticises the reductivist for ‘robbing the powerless of the right to regard their own counter-claims as grounded in something which is of itself authoritative, something whose authority is not diminished by the cynical insouciance of others’ (Fricker 2000, p.151).

⁵⁷ Fricker is not the only one to make this point. Conant, for example, argues that ‘Rorty’s conception [of objectivity]... deprives us of the resources for being able to understand those who engage in the practices Rorty describes as even so much as making claims’ (Conant 2000, p.338). Similarly, McDowell suggests that Rorty’s account gives ‘no ground for conceiving one’s activity as making claims... as opposed to achieving unison with one’s fellows in some perhaps purely decorative activity on a level with a kind of dancing’ (McDowell 2009, p.219). The significance of this issue will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

However, Rorty's charge of power-worship has bite only if there is no important distinction between power-as-*rational*-authority and power-as-*social*-authority, that is, between an authoritarian and an authoritative use of reason. Yet recognising such a distinction is just what Fricker insists is a prerequisite for genuine criticism of epistemic practices. That Rorty's response *presupposes* rather than demonstrates the bogus nature of this distinction reveals the depth of their dispute on this point but does nothing to resolve it.

So far, we have seen that reductivism undermines the distinction between authoritative and authoritarian uses of reason. Fricker argues that this makes reductivism politically conservative, because it reserves terms such as 'justified', 'rational', and so on, for beliefs and practices which are socially dominant in a given context. The radical, by definition, is contesting what is socially dominant, and therefore can have no recourse to these concepts. Rorty admits that his perspective does not allow radicals to (sincerely, non-ironically) use the language of reason, justice, truth, facts, etc.⁵⁸:

'The claim that this good [advocated by feminism] is greater [than the enslavement of human females to human males] is like the claim that mammals are preferable to reptiles, or Aryans to Jews; it is an ethnocentric claim made from the point of view of a given cluster of genes or memes. There is no larger entity which stands behind that cluster and makes its claim true.' (Rorty 1998, p.207)

Still, Rorty disputes the charge of conservatism by suggesting that, for everything he (as a reductivist) *can't* say, there is something at least equally effective that he *can* say. As he puts it, although he cannot be a 'radical' (who offers an *analysis* of what is *wrong* with the existing state of things, and criticises the *ideological distortions* which bestow upon it an *illusion* of legitimacy or inevitability), he can still be a 'utopian' (who imagines a different future and inspires people to fight for it⁵⁹).

58 This point is underscored by Weaver, who castigates left-wing legal theorists for trying to appropriate Rortian pragmatism for their own ends. Weaver argues that Rorty's framework is inapt for criticising the injustices of the American legal system precisely because it denies a non-ironic use to the claim that a current practice is unjust or unjustified. As he puts it, 'Injustice is not bad molding of language around reality, it is a collective name for ways of speaking and acting generally condemned by powerful voices urging on one cause or another' (Weaver 1992, p.746). Using Fricker's terminology, we can say that these left-wing legal theorists want to deploy the authoritative/authoritarian distinction in their critique of injustice, making their project incompatible, not only with Rorty's own political views (a fact they recognise), but more importantly with his reductivism.

59 Though presumably he would only endorse 'fighting' for it in a 'wet liberal' way. See (Rorty 1998, p.52) for a definition of 'us' as 'educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals'.

‘[According to Rorty,] Martin Luther King, Jr., did not convince us we had gotten reality wrong, but rather forced us into viewing our own actions in shame by offering a powerful alternative vision of social life.’ (Weaver 1992, p.746)

‘[t]he trouble with the oppressors is that they are causing unnecessary pain, not that they have gotten things wrong.’⁶⁰ (Rorty 1991, p.73)

‘the good new language [reducing oppression] will be neither more rigorous nor less “ideological”... than the bad old one. It will just be a more useful tool for changing things so as to decrease pain.’ (Rorty 1991, p.73)

However, there is a problem with this response. To begin with, it is clearly not incompatible to hold *both* that the civil rights movement cast contemporary practices in a different light through visionary action, *and* that it convinced (many) people that segregation was based on a(n objectively) false ideology of racial supremacy. Indeed, it is difficult to see how one could become convinced that an alternative social life was *possible* unless one also came to believe that theories of racial supremacy, which hold that there are *necessary* differences in the status of black and white people, are false descriptions of reality. Therefore, it is unclear why we should think that Rorty’s preferred tools for political intervention are not merely an impoverished subset of those available to the non-reductivist; for the latter can condemn the (authoritarian) claims to knowledge made by race ‘science’ and the ‘common sense’ of the time, taking themselves to be presenting insightful (authoritative) critiques of racist ideology, while still recognising that singing ‘We Shall Overcome’ or facing down the police dogs can in some contexts be more politically significant than any ‘reasonable debate’.⁶¹

60 Even this claim cannot be fully ‘non-ironic’, since the oppressors might deny that the pain was unnecessary, or even that it was pain (‘but they enjoy being treated like that!’; ‘they don’t feel it like we do’). Indeed, it is difficult not to read Rorty as simply inconsistent, for example, on the status of modal claims. On the one hand, he gives no suggestion that modal claims – e.g. that such-and-such a form of society is possible – have any more claim to ‘objectivity’ than categorical claims. On the other hand, he invokes modal claims, e.g. about the thwarted ‘potentiality’ of women under patriarchy, apparently non-ironically (Rorty 1998, p.219). Similarly, on Rorty’s account, claims about the wrongness of causing ‘unnecessary pain’ presumably are no more ‘reality-mirroring’ than claims about the wrongness of white supremacy, but this does not prevent him from using his favoured quasi-utilitarian formulations as though they *cut beneath* claims about, for example, the falsity of racist ideology. Rorty’s response to the charge of inconsistency would probably be to invoke the thoroughgoing nature of pragmatist ironism; he describes ‘ironists’ as never being ‘quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves’ (cited in Fricker 2000, p.151).

61 Indeed, often the claim that engaging in ‘sensible discussion’, or making one’s point through ‘official channels’ is the only legitimate way to, as McDowell would say, open people’s eyes to the shape of the space of reasons, is itself an authoritarian use of reason.

So far I have argued that reductivism tends to conservatism by undermining the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason. Does this mean that we should revert to a traditionalist view which excludes political considerations from epistemology altogether? On the contrary, I argue that this tendency towards conservatism is *shared* by traditionalism; this is because the traditionalist, too, undermines the authoritarian/authoritative distinction, but from the opposite direction. Whereas the reductivist refuses to recognise any genuinely authoritative use of reason, the traditionalist approach of effectively ignoring the existence of authoritarian uses, or assuming that they are a fringe issue, creates a framework in which ideology can flourish.

IV. Traditionalism as ideology

The defining characteristic of traditionalism is that it ignores, or downplays, the phenomenon of ideology. In order to appreciate how this can be problematic, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which our epistemic lives are permeated by injustice. Consider the argument to this effect put forward by Fricker. Drawing on Edward Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge, she locates the 'norm of credibility' – i.e. the standards which govern who is picked out as a credible testifier, hence a knower – at the core of epistemology. She argues that the pervasive and systematic phenomenon of *testimonial injustice* – where a speaker receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer⁶² (Fricker 2007, p.28) – shows that the operations of the 'norm of credibility' are incredibly vulnerable to being shaped by unjust power structures. (Rational Authority). A negative identity-prejudicial stereotype is 'a widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment' (Fricker 2007, p.35).

To give just one example, consider the way that young working class people – particularly young *black* working class people – have, in the aftermath of the riots of August 2011, been portrayed by politicians, the media, and what passes for 'common

62 Because she is concerned with an ethical wrong done to a (potential) testifier, Fricker focuses on the case of credibility deficit. For the purposes of demonstrating how what she calls the 'credibility economy' is *skewed* by social power, however, the excess credibility awarded to members of powerful social groups is equally significant.

sense’, as ‘mindless jobs’.⁶³ This is a derogatory epithet with a specifically epistemic character. Literally, it says that a person does not think or know, does not respond to reasons, is an epistemic nobody. If someone can be cast as ‘mindless’ then what they say can be dismissed as mere mouthing-off; no attempt need be made to understand them as potentially making legitimate points, or expressing a perspective worth hearing. This is an ideological move because it allows the ruling class to exclude from discussion those who might undermine their view of the world.⁶⁴

We can bolster this point by reflecting on another form of epistemic injustice that Fricker identifies: *hermeneutical injustice*. This arises from the power of dominant social groups to disproportionately influence collective forms of social understanding (Fricker 2007, p.148):

‘... relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible.’⁶⁵ (Fricker 2007, p.148)

Charles Mills is describing the same phenomenon when he argues that:

‘... it will often be the case that dominant concepts will obscure certain crucial realities, blocking them from sight, or naturalizing them, while on the other hand, concepts necessary for accurately mapping these realities will be absent.’ (Mills 2005, p.175)

Furthermore, these two forms of epistemic injustice, testimonial and hermeneutic, will tend to be most systematically suffered by the same socially disadvantaged groups,

63 One of innumerable articles illustrating this trend is (Alleyne & Ford Rojas 2011).

64 Indeed, the intimate relation between rationality and the capacity for agency – for human action, as something more than mere bodily movement or ‘brute’ animal impulse – makes this a deeply dehumanising move. If someone is ‘mindless’, they are incapable of morality – for that presupposes mindedness – and therefore cannot be reasoned with; they can be dealt with only through brute physical force: a good excuse to lock them up, or shoot them with rubber (or other) bullets. The mutual dependence of rationality and agency is brought to the fore by McDowell, allowing us to see how any view which undermines the former leaves us with no understanding of the latter.

65 A classic example of this, detailed by Fricker, is that of people suffering sexual harassment before the concept was articulated by the women’s movement.

compounding the epistemological distortion; this distortion will then radiate through the variety of intellectual disciplines which claim to describe and explain human social experience, such as history, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, economics, and so on. The underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups in these disciplines is going to be both symptomatic of, and causally responsible for perpetuating, epistemic injustice, and the broader web of social injustices with which it is interwoven.

In insisting on a depoliticised epistemology, then, the traditionalist is shielding from view a pervasive and significant feature of our epistemic lives. Consequently, as with their reductivist counterpart, there is a danger of concealed conservatism in their account.⁶⁶ In order to make a case for this, it is necessary to get clear about what is meant by conservatism. There is one sense of ‘conservative’ (often called ‘small c’ conservatism) which indicates simply an attachment to the *status quo*, a resistance to change. There is another sense of ‘conservative’, however, which indicates a commitment to the rightness or naturalness of certain forms of social hierarchy based on class, race, sex, sexuality, and so on. Thus, the conservative in a bourgeois revolution backs the claims of the aristocracy to hereditary privileges, or of the monarch to rule by divine right. The conservative in 1960s America backs the claims of whites to maintain racial privileges, and of heterosexual men to retain power over those who are not heterosexual men. The two senses of ‘conservative’ will coincide to the extent that the *status quo* is characterised by those forms of social hierarchy.⁶⁷

It follows from this understanding of conservatism that a move to *depoliticise* – to portray as apolitical or pre-political – a practice or area of life that is, at least arguably, influenced by the operations of social power, is a move which tends to support conservatism. This is because conservatism (in the second sense) is committed to the

66 This is the same charge as was levelled against Rorty, who claims that his theory is neutral between Nazism and liberalism (no other political options being mentioned). Other reductivists may admit that their position is a political one, but claim that its allegiance is with the radicals.

67 Of course, these are not the only meanings of ‘conservative’. For example, G.A. Cohen argues that there is an important sense in which socialists should be conservative. He suggests that there is reason to reject the (in his view, distinctively capitalist) assumption that everything is exchangeable, and to maintain a conservative commitment to preserving things that have value, rather than endorsing a value-calculus according to which value should simply be maximised no matter what is destroyed in the process (Cohen 2008). The term ‘conservative’ might also signal a rejection of rampant platonism, i.e. of the thesis that there is an *Archimedean* point outside all linguistic and cultural traditions from which what is just, rational, or correct can be determined. In this sense, McDowell – and, I will later argue, Marx – would be a conservative. However, I shall use the term in the more restrictive sense defined above.

naturalness of hierarchical social power relations, and to be natural is to be a- or pre-political. To depoliticise a practice is to naturalise it, and thus to support the conservative view of it. To the extent that the practice is part of the *status quo*, depoliticising it will also support conservatism in the first sense, by portraying this element of the *status quo* as politically neutral or uncontroversial, undercutting or ignoring demands for change. An example will illustrate this point. Feminists have argued that the patriarchal family is a key locus of women's oppression, hence a *political* institution, characterised by unjust social power relations. Conservative opponents of feminism, on the other hand, portray the family as a site of purely natural and pre-political relations, a 'private sphere' lying outside the concerns of politics or, as Rawls would say, the sphere of justice (Rawls 2009). Depoliticising the family is a conservative move.

How does this apply to epistemology? Well, if Fricker and Mills are right in arguing that social power *is* a core feature of our lives as knowers – i.e. that the epistemological is political – then proceeding as though this were not the case would be analogous to proceeding as though the family were not political. In other words, it would be a conservative move. More than that, though, its conservatism would be *concealed*. It would not be acknowledging a debate and coming down on one side of it; rather, it would be *taking for granted* that questions about social power – its role in determining who counts as credible, who is treated as a knower, how 'our' practices of inquiry operate and who takes part in them – are simply irrelevant to questions about what counts as knowledge and justification. It would be naturalising the epistemological *status quo*.

In doing so it would undermine the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason. Of course, no traditionalist would deny that authoritarian uses of reason are not genuinely authoritative. It is just that they think of the phenomenon as effectively marginal in intellectual communities of the 'liberal West'. Authoritarian uses of reason are associated with Stalinist propaganda and the Spanish inquisition; the traditionalist feels no need to interrogate their own understanding of what a rational subject, or a good justification, looks like, nor to avoid naturalising currently dominant epistemic practices. As an intellectual *modus operandi*, traditionalism dulls our sense of the authoritarian/authoritative distinction, encouraging complacency about 'our' access to facts of the matter about knowledge and justification,

and risks passing the authoritarian off as authoritative. Traditionalism, then, is ideological because it ignores ideology, thereby naturalising the dominant discourse.

So far we have seen that there is a conservative tendency concealed in both reductionist and traditionalist approaches to epistemology. In the first case, the conservatism is concealed by an apparent radicalism, an attentiveness to the power-struggles masked by the language of reason, an attentiveness often associated with anti-conservatism. In the second case, it is concealed by a depoliticising move which ignores the possibility that social power is relevant to how we understand epistemic concepts like knowledge and justification. I have also suggested that these conservative tendencies can be understood in terms of the concept of ideology. The next chapter asks how this relates to the debate between Williams and McDowell about how we should respond to radical scepticism.

Chapter 4

I. Between traditionalism and reductivism

This chapter explores Williams's contextualism in light of the conclusions of the previous chapter. I suggest that contextualism – which seems to combine elements of both reductivism and traditionalism – has trouble maintaining the distinction between authoritarian (ideological) and authoritative (non-ideological) uses of reason, and therefore promotes a politically conservative stance towards actual epistemic practices. Furthermore, I suggest that McDowell gives us the resources to see how this conservative tendency is symptomatic of the fact that Williams shares with the traditional epistemologist and the sceptic an 'interiorized' conception of reason. Consequently, Williams's epistemological framework cannot support (or even make sense of) genuine critical engagement with the world.

In one sense, Williams looks like a classic traditionalist. Power relations are never discussed, or even mentioned, in his account. He speaks of 'our interests' in a way that gives no sense that this is a problematic notion, or that the interests of some class, race, sex, or whatever, might *in fact* play a disproportionate role in determining the 'direction of inquiry', or that these interests might be antagonistic with others.⁶⁸ On the other hand, his contextualism invites a *social* reading. He speaks of intellectual disciplines, such as history or theoretical science, as operating with distinctive standards of justification, which can be read as invoking the idea of an intellectual community, whose members are united by a shared understanding of the aims and methods of their discipline. In favour of this reading we can note that the essence of contextualism is that it is an epistemological theory which is supposed to be sensitive to the *actual contexts* in which knowledge claims are made, disputed, backed-up, tested, and so on. Williams's account is thus explicitly opposed to the traditional epistemologist's view of the solitary, asocial, apolitical inquirer with only his [sic] own experience to go on.

In fact, Williams's characterisation of contextualism seems to share crucial features with the *reductivist* view proposed by 'anti-epistemologists' such as Rorty. Most strikingly, both deny that there are trans-local or context-independent constraints

⁶⁸ This perhaps implies that Williams does not himself have a radical political consciousness, i.e. it may be a symptom of his own ideological framework. However, scrutinizing his motivations is not by primary concern.

on justification. What counts as an appropriate question, or an appropriate form of evidence, or an acceptable proof, or a 'live' hypothesis, is determined by each individual context; further, according to both the contextualist and the reductivist we cannot simply assume that these contexts are isomorphic, that is, that a standard it is reasonable to apply in one context is also reasonable to apply in another context, where accepted constraints on justification may be very different. To do so is, according to Rorty, a failure to recognise the historicosociological nature of rationality, and according to the contextualist, a fallacious assumption of epistemological realism.

Of course, there are important differences between Williams and the reductivist. Firstly, contextualism about justification is supposed to be entirely compatible with *realism* about the world, whereas Rorty attacks the authority of 'reason' and 'truth' equally. Secondly, the fact that Williams's account explicitly includes an *externalist* constraint on justification – what he calls 'the worldly situation' – seems to militate against a collapse of the question 'is X justified' into the question 'is X justified according to the standards which prevail in this particular context'. These differences are significant and will be returned to later. For the moment, however, I want to get the full measure of the similarities between contextualism and reductivism.

The reductivist aims to debunk the notion of context-independent constraints on justification by showing how profoundly social power affects which constraints are accepted as authoritative. In response, Fricker argues that accepting the profound effect of social power on our lives as (potential) knowers should not lead to the conclusion that *all* invocations of reason are masks for social power. Rather, it should motivate a strong commitment to *distinguishing* illegitimate, authoritarian uses of reason from genuinely authoritative uses (Fricker 2000, p.161).⁶⁹

Another way of putting this is to say that she urges a distinction between a *descriptive* and a *normative* use of the idea of 'constraints on justification'. We might indicate the first usage by prefacing it with the word 'accepted'. 'Accepted constraints on justification' are those constraints according to which, *as a matter of fact*, a given practice of inquiry operates. To say they are accepted is not to imply that *everyone* accepts them, although in a particular time/place everyone or nearly everyone may do, but to signal that inquiry proceeds *as though* those constraints were legitimate. Maybe everyone agrees, or maybe those who might not agree are excluded from the inquiry,

⁶⁹ This is not to say that we are always in the epistemically fortunate position of being *able* to distinguish the two in a particular case. 'Making the distinction' involves an ongoing process of intellectual and practical political struggle. This issue will be returned to in the final chapter.

silenced, or brought into line in any number of ways. Now, the politically radical epistemologist would say that it is possible that *accepted* constraints on justification are incorrect, but this doesn't mean that there are *no* correct constraints on justification. 'Constraints on justification' can also have a normative use, referring to how a practice of inquiry *should* operate. To be justified according to accepted constraints (descriptive) is not *really* to be justified (normative), if those constraints embody illegitimate operations of social power.

It is striking that Williams often does not draw this distinction between descriptive and normative uses of the notion of rational constraint. Consider, for example, the following:

'The way that justification and inquiry proceed in common life, or for that matter theoretical science, is far from evidently favourable to the foundationalist conception of epistemological relations. In both science and ordinary life, constraints on justification are many and various.' (Williams 1996, p.117)

Here he seems to be using the term in a descriptive sense to mean 'accepted constraints': the way that inquiry does as a matter of fact proceed. However, he also takes the variety of these accepted constraints to tell against the foundationalist, and they will only do so if they are constraints in the normative as well as the descriptive sense.⁷⁰ Of course, Williams recognises that the *radical sceptic* wants to distinguish between descriptive and normative uses of the term, since she wants to argue that accepted constraints – such as not doubting that the Earth has existed for a long time – amount to unjustified assumptions, and that the totality condition *should* apply across the board. It is not exactly that Williams *denies* this distinction could be important to anyone other than the radical sceptic; it is rather that the possibility is not even considered.

So, the reductivist argues against the notion of a genuinely authoritative use of reason, thereby collapsing the distinction between descriptive and normative senses of 'constraints on justification'; Williams, though his traditionalist silence on the politically shaped context of accepted constraints, seems tacitly to break down that same

70 Paying attention to the dialectical structure of Williams's argument is important in order not to misuse this point. In the section quoted, he is concerned primarily to 'shift the burden of theory' to the sceptic. If contextualism is *descriptively* accurate vis-à-vis 'our ordinary practices of inquiry' then this will at least undermine the sense that the sceptic's doubts *naturally* arise from 'our ordinary concepts' of knowledge and justification. However, as I argued in chapter 1, shifting the burden of theory will only be a fruitful strategy if epistemological realism is ultimately indefensible. Williams is therefore also trying to accrue plausibility for contextualism as an account of what knowledge/justification really *is*, not just what 'we' in 'our practices' take it to be. Or, more accurately, to collapse the distinction between the two.

distinction. We note, however, that he does so from the opposite direction, that is, from the traditionalist, not the reductivist, direction. Whereas the reductivist impugns the universality claimed for accepted standards of reason and concludes that all uses of reason are authoritarian (i.e. masks for social power), Williams seems to assume that accepted (context-specific) standards of reason are generally authoritative, so there is no need to distinguish them from standards which would be *genuinely* authoritative.⁷¹ That distinction is left to the sceptic, and contextualism is supposed to undermine her use of it.

This relates back to an interpretative questions I raised in chapter 1. There I asked whether Williams's contextualism, like Travis's semantic contextualism, must ultimately turn on the idea of a competent judge, with a 'nose' for the relevance of context to justification. If it did, this would imply that, generally speaking, or in the 'normal' case, the constraints that a context places on justification would be recognised as such, implicitly or explicitly, by those involved in the inquiry. In other words, it would imply that constraints on justification (in the normative sense), in general, just *are* those accepted by competent practitioners. This would make the question 'is *S* justified in asserting *P*?', as Rorty would say, a 'historicosociological' question, to be answered by observing the reaction of *S*'s peers. This in turn would break down the authoritative/authoritarian distinction in just the way that Rortian reductivism does.

However, I also indicated that the *externalist* element of Williams's account seems to pull against such a reading. In the context of our discussion of reductivism, this makes a lot of sense. It is definitive of the reductivist to collapse the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason, and Williams differs from the reductivist precisely in that his theory of knowledge/justification is supposed to be consistent with *realism* about the world, and furthermore that his account of context-specific constraints on justification has an *externalist* element. These are the aspects of his view that pull against reductivism, and consequently they are those which pull against a 'competent judge' interpretation which would follow reductivists in collapsing the descriptive/normative distinction with respect to constraints on justification. How successfully they pull against it will be discussed later. For now, though, let us return to the charge of concealed conservatism levelled against the reductivist.

71 Later I will suggest that, even if Williams *were* concerned to make this distinction, his account would not contain the resources to do so.

II. The worst of both worlds?

The feature of reductivism that opened it to the charge of concealed conservatism was its refusal to recognise the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason; social power, according to the postmodernist, is *all* there is to so-called epistemology. *If* Williams's contextualism also effects a breakdown of this distinction, then his position might be opened to a similar charge. Of course, Williams would never say that social power is all there is to epistemology, since he, like the traditionalist, presents his epistemology as entirely apolitical. He does, however, often seem to be saying that 'our contextually specific practices of justification' are all there is to epistemology.

An example may help to clarify what the charge of conservatism does and does not amount to. Consider Mills's characterisation of radical political critique as it applies to epistemology:

'The crucial common claim – whether couched in terms of ideology and fetishism, or androcentrism, or white normativity – is that all theorizing, both moral and nonmoral, takes place in an intellectual realm dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives that reflect the experience and group interests of the privileged group (whether the bourgeoisie, or men, or whites).' (Mills 2005, p.175)

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that what Mills calls the 'crucial common claim' is correct with respect to discipline *D* as practised at time *t*.⁷² The inquiry proceeds according to accepted constraints on justification which are determined by bourgeois interests (in both senses of 'interests') and the direction of inquiry is decided by a small minority of the general population – middle-to-upper-class white males, say – who are hugely over-represented in the professional population of discipline *D*. Now, suppose that some radical practitioners of *D* come along, who challenge the accepted concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives of the discipline. We might say that they put forward a *politically radical* sceptical hypothesis, which threatens to undermine the knowledge/justification claims of the other practitioners.

What would the contextualist have to say about this? Well, I am not claiming that contextualism commits them to wading in to silence the dissenting voices. It is perfectly compatible with contextualism that constraints on justification can change. At

⁷² What I say about intellectual disciplines in the narrower sense equally applies to those contexts which Williams would describe as belonging to 'common life' (Williams 1996, p.117).

time t the old-school practitioners may have been justified, but now it is $t + 1$; a sceptical hypothesis is ‘live’ and the constraints on justification have changed. Or at least, the contextualist *can* say this, although if none of the old-school practitioners have any stock with the radicals, and no new school of D is born, then the contextualist might also say that the radicals are ‘no longer doing D , but have switched to doing radical political epistemology’. Which response is correct, from a contextualist perspective, will depend upon the details of how the context determines the constraints. This is not something that the contextualist theory itself is supposed to settle, although the current example suggests that it will at least sometimes be a *political* question, a fact which Williams seems not to be concerned with. Nevertheless, if the contextualist is also a *realist*, then it seems she can say that the old-school practitioners never really *knew* what they claimed to know, for in order to count as knowledge, a belief must at least be true. *Ex hypothesi*, though, the sceptical hypothesis is correct, so the beliefs it undermines are false.

So far, there seems to be nothing particularly conservative about the contextualist response. The problem, however, comes into focus when we ask what happens in the case where there are *no* radical practitioners of D . The disciplinary constraints on justification in operation are, we are assuming, systematically biased towards bourgeois interests. They are, however, the *accepted* constraints; they are the constraints that anyone in the vicinity with a claim to be called a competent practitioner accepts. Would the beliefs of these practitioners therefore be *justified*, since they count as such according to the accepted constraints? It is difficult to see how the contextualist can deny that they are. She can say that the beliefs don’t amount to *knowledge*, if they are false. But this hardly seems enough; it does not show that the beliefs lack *rational authority*, i.e. that they are unjustified.⁷³ To state the problem very generally, the fear is that, by effectively silencing dissent, power can (on the contextualist story) *make it the case* that something counts as justified, simply because the sceptical hypothesis that might undermine it is never ‘live’.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the political case casts a different light on Williams’s strictures concerning the ‘fallacy’ of transferring a sceptical conclusion from the particular

73 This is not to say that the practitioners are necessarily responsible for their errors – they may be subject to epistemic bad luck. This does not affect the point, which is that there is something wrong with what they take to be the justification for their beliefs.

74 Williams might respond that the externalist elements of his view guard against this disturbing possibility. In the next section, I will argue that this response is unsuccessful.

context in which it is reached to vastly different contexts in which different constraints on justification are accepted. It starts to seem that radical criticisms of the *status quo* worked out in the context of a consciousness-raising group, say, or in the experience of those on the sharp end of oppression, might not legitimately be transferable to the context of the complacent bourgeois *D*-practitioners, *even if the criticisms were correct*. The concern that I have presented here exactly parallels the concern that Fricker puts to the reductivist vis-à-vis the (in)adequacy of ‘situated criticism’. The proviso she adds there is also relevant in clarifying the issue in Williams’s case, namely, that the problem is not the inability of the reductivist’s theory to ensure epistemological ‘fair play’, as if any theory could do such a thing:

‘Of course, no other epistemological view can guarantee that dissenting voices are given their due: the practical prospect of discursive injustice spans the gamut of theoretical positions. What is at issue is the authority of the critical thoughts we may voice and of others’ responses to them.’ (Fricker 2000, p.150)

Williams’s contextualism seems in danger of lending authority to merely authoritarian uses of reason, as epitomised in the constraints on justification accepted by the old-school practitioners of my schematic example. In doing so, it threatens to rob radical political scepticism of the potential to undermine disciplines or discourses which have no truck with its radicalism. To the extent that a criticism is not *in fact* and *in situ* articulated (and accepted?), its mere *correctness* can lend it no power to deprive accepted constraints on justification of rational authority.

At this stage, Williams could object that I have been downplaying a crucial aspect of his contextualism, which renders such concerns misdirected, namely its *externalism*. He might concede that realism alone will not blunt the criticism because it does not touch on the question of whether a belief has rational authority. However, since the ‘worldly situation’ is supposed to provide an externalist constraint not merely on knowledge but on *justification*, he could argue that any concerns about adverse political conditions can be dealt with by such constraints. Authoritarian uses of reason will be unjustified on the contextualist story because the way the world is places constraints on justification of which those complacent old-school practitioners are not aware. The aim of the next section is to consider this objection.

III. An externalist solution?

In adopting a form of externalism, Williams shows his commitment to precisely what Rorty rejects: the idea of truth as the aim of inquiry. That is, he seems to conceive the ‘worldly constraint’ as requiring that a given justification procedure should *in fact* reliably generate true beliefs, if the beliefs acquired according to that procedure are to count as justified-according-to-the-contextualist.⁷⁵ Truth, *contra* Rorty, is the goal. However, Williams resists the sceptic’s demand that he show why this worldly constraint – conceived as the requirement that methods of inquiry be ‘truth-inducive’ if they are to yield justified beliefs – might not pull against or float free of the topical, disciplinary, and other ‘sociological’ constraints. Since epistemological realism has been rejected, such worries cannot be addressed on a global scale.⁷⁶ Rather, ‘questions about the truth-induciveness of justification procedures will have to be asked case by case and, when they are so asked, they will have to be answered empirically’ (Williams 1996, pp.265-6).

However, there are reasons to worry that such a position, which attempts to annex a realist/externalist element onto an otherwise reductivist account, is inherently unstable. Indeed, this worry provides a rare point of agreement between the otherwise opposing perspectives of Rortian pragmatism and McDowellian naturalised platonism.

Let us begin with Rorty. He cites Williams’s rejection of epistemological realism approvingly (Rorty 1998, pp.50, 19). However, he argues that the realist/externalist element of contextualism – which he describes as a flirtation with reliabilism – is a spare wheel that cannot be made to do any work. Once a fundamentally historicosociological understanding of justification is in place, there is simply no role for a commitment to truth as a norm of inquiry to play. That commitment becomes, as Rorty puts it, ‘a high-minded platitude’ which ‘is absolutely barren of consequences, either for our standards of warranted assertion or for any other aspect of our practices’ (Rorty 1998, p.60):

75 Williams does very little to spell out what the ‘worldly situation’ constraint involves, presumably because he takes it to be straight-forward, non-controversial, or already understood. He distinguishes his position from reliabilism in two ways: (1) by incorporating externalism into an account of *justification*, not just knowledge, thus rejecting ‘pure reliabilism’ which proposes to eliminate justification from accounts of knowledge; (2) by emphasising how his externalism is situated within (and can only work against the sceptic in the context of) a broader project of theoretical diagnosis. This implies that the externalist element in his account of justification itself bears a reliabilist interpretation. See (Williams 1996, pp.94-6, 318-25).

76 Williams would say that they cannot even arise, but whether this is so is precisely what is at issue.

‘I think that after one gives up this notion [that human knowledge is a natural kind], one should say that the only question anywhere in the area is the historicosociological question of how and why patterns of justification change. This is *not* a question about the truth-induciveness of justification procedures.’ (Rorty 1998, p.163)

Rorty argues that William’s ‘tolerance for [Philip] Kitcher-like questions about which of our procedures of justification are truth-inducing’ (Rorty 1998, p.163) reinstates an unbridgeable gulf between justification as acceptability-to-one’s-peers (that is, as conforming to accepted disciplinary and situational constraints) and justification as reliably-aiming-at-truth (that is, as conforming to worldly constraints). This dichotomy mirrors the form of what Rorty calls the ‘scheme-content picture’:

‘On this picture, truth is over there, where the object is, and justification over here, where we are. So there seems to be a question about whether we are managing to cross the gap.’ (Rorty 1998, p.163)

In the context of this picture, Williams’s answer – that the gap can be crossed ‘empirically’ on a case by case basis – seems evasive. If I have no reason to believe that my justification procedures are truth-inducive, how can I gain a reason to believe that they are simply by applying *more* justification procedures? And what can case by case empirical testing involve apart from applying more justification procedures (which, on the contextualist picture, are construed sociologically) to the claim that a particular procedure is reliable? Once the gap has been allowed to open, Williams’s piecemeal solution cannot close it. This is because the way he construes disciplinary, topical, and situational constraints – which are supposed to be determined by such factors as ‘our interests’ and ‘the direction of inquiry’ – gives no clue as to why these constraints should chime with anything in reality. As he emphasises, methodological necessity does not guarantee truth.

However, Williams could retort that, since Rorty thinks the problematic picture is generated simply by the commitment to truth as a norm of inquiry, he has derived the claim that Williams falls into the problematic dualism simply from the fact that Williams is a realist. If one wants to maintain a form of realism – as both McDowell and Fricker do – then obviously one will not think that realist commitments *per se* generate unbridgeable gulfs between appearance and reality. In that case, is there any

reason to think that Williams's contextualism in *particular* generates such a gulf, where other realist accounts do not?

This is where McDowell's argument against what he calls 'hybrid' positions comes in. The argument begins with the notion of an 'interiorization' of the space of reasons. Such an interiorization takes place when satisfactory standing in the space of reasons is taken to be achievable without the world 'doing us any favours'. This renders relations of direct perception – e.g. 'seeing that such-and-such' where 'see' is factive – alien to the space of reasons, because the obtaining of such relations relies on things being as they appear, and hence on the 'good will' of the world. One's standing in the space of reasons, on the interiorized conception, must be a matter of correctly discharging one's epistemic obligations (whatever those are), where doing so impeccably is no guarantee of being in touch with reality.

As we saw in chapter 2, McDowell argues that such an interiorized space of reasons is no space of reasons at all; so conceiving our epistemic position makes the very notion of empirical content – of thought being directed at the world – unintelligible. It is because it makes a mystery of thought's relation to the world that 'we can see the interiorization of the space of reasons as a form of a familiar tendency in philosophy: the tendency to picture the objective world as set over against a "conceptual scheme" that has withdrawn into a kind of self-sufficiency.'⁷⁷ As McDowell puts it:

'When the dualism [of world and scheme] becomes full-fledged, it defeats itself. If we conceive what we want to think of as the space of concepts, the realm of thought, in a way that alienates it so radically from the merely material that we seem to be faced with those familiar modern problems of reconciling the subjective with the objective, we undermine our right to think of it as the realm of thought at all. When we set it off so radically from the objective world, we lose our right to think of moves within the space we are picturing as content-involving. So we stop being able to picture it as the space of concepts. Everything goes dark in the interior as we picture it.' (McDowell 1995, p.890)

Now, McDowell characterises 'hybrid' positions as those which try to save this interiorized conception of the space of reasons from destruction – to 'set off the inner

⁷⁷ Interestingly, this is precisely the point that Rorty urges against Williams. Whether McDowell's argument gives us the resources to make Rorty's point stick is still at issue.

from the outer, but in a way that stops short of that disastrous extinguishing of content' (McDowell 1995, p.890) – by adding truth and reliability as further constraints on knowledge.⁷⁸ In order for my belief to count as knowledge, on the hybrid view, I must not only be epistemically blameless in the way that, on the pure interiorized conception, would have fully constituted my standing in the space of reasons; the belief must also be true, and it must have been arrived at by a process which is *in fact* reliable.

McDowell notes how the reliability requirement operates very differently in a hybrid view than it does in the pure externalist views for which the requirement was first formulated. In pure externalism, the aim is to do away with the notion of a space of reasons altogether: knowledge, for the externalist, is a relation between perceiver and fact in which the former is a reliable gauge of the latter (McDowell 1995, p.882). The requirement that a belief must be *justified* to count as knowledge is scrapped by pure externalism, and replaced with a requirement that the belief be generated by a reliable process. In the context of a hybrid view, by contrast, the reliability requirement is supposed to spell out *part of what it is to be justified*. That is, the reliability requirement is conceived as *internal* to the space of reasons, as part of what determines one's standing therein.

McDowell argues that it is precisely for this reason that hybrid views are inherently unstable. In such views, the reliability requirement features as internal to the space of reasons. The truth requirement, however, must be external to it. This is because my standing in the *interiorized* space of reasons cannot 'consist simply in a cognitive purchase on an objective fact, for instance something that one perceives to be so, or remembers to be so' (McDowell 1995, p.883). This is definitive of the space's being interiorized. But then, McDowell asks, how can the space of reasons contain the resources to evaluate the reliability of belief-forming methods (McDowell 1995, p.883)?⁷⁹

78 McDowell also calls views which just adds the truth requirement, and not the reliability requirement, 'hybrid' view. I consider only the form of hybrid view which adds both, since that is closest to Williams's position.

79 McDowell raises a further objection to the hybrid view, which can be put as follows: if all is the same from the point of view of (internalized) justification, whether or not what is thereby justified counts as knowledge, then it is hard to see how the mere addition of truth could constituted the case as one of knowing something. The truth looks like a mere accident or add on, and knowledge – so the thought goes – cannot be merely accidentally true. See (McDowell 1995). I do not pursue this point because the issues raised are less relevant to my overall argument.

The pure externalist need have no truck with this question, for her conception of knowledge does not require reason to do any distinctive work, except insofar as it features *in* processes of reliable belief formation; it need not be able to reflect *upon* those processes and rationally vindicate or revise them (again, except insofar as this reflection/revision is itself part of a reliable process, and so on). For the hybrid theorist, such insouciance is not an option. On her view, the space of reasons is not supposed to be *replaced* by the reliability requirement, and therefore satisfactory standing in the space of reasons cannot *just* be a matter of reliability.⁸⁰ The problem, however, is that:

‘if a purported picture of the space of reasons makes no room for the critical function of reason in raising questions about the reliability of this or that policy or habit of belief-formation, the picture cannot be what it purports to be.’
(McDowell 1995, p.882)

If the picture cannot make sense of the rationality of subjecting our practices to scrutiny, then it is simply a misnomer to call what it depicts the ‘space of reasons’. Without a conception of experience as openness to the world, the notion of a reliability constraint cannot be imported into the space of reasons, for such an interiorized space would not allow us even to begin to rationally assess whether our practices were reliable. The facts would remain external and could exert no rational influence. As McDowell puts it:

‘If moves in the space of reasons are not allowed to start from facts, riskily accepted as such on the basis of such direct modes of cognitive contact with them as perception and memory, then it becomes unintelligible how our picture can be a picture of a space whose positions are connected by relations that reason can exploit, such as that one of them is a reliable ground for moving by inference to another.’ (McDowell 1995, pp.889-90)

In this case, there are no grounds for calling it a conceptual realm either, for empirical content goes missing.⁸¹

Having laid out McDowell’s argument against the attempt to use externalist elements to plug the gap between an interiorized space of reasons and an objective

80 If it were, we would not be dealing with a hybrid view, but with a pure externalist view that simply retained the terminology of ‘justification’ and ‘reasons’ while stripping it of its internalist associations.

81 This brings out the close connection between McDowell’s argument against the hybrid view and his argument against the attempt to avoid the ‘frictionless spinning’ of coherentism by invoking the fact that the world has a *causal* impact on belief formation.

world, the question is whether Williams's position is a proper object of this criticism. Well, clearly there are parallels between Williams and the hybrid theorist. In particular, Williams introduces truth as an external requirement (a constraint on knowledge but not on justification), and reliability as an internal requirement (a constraint on justification and, derivatively, on knowledge). The crucial issue, then, is whether Williams is operating with an *interiorized* conception of the space of reasons. If he is, then he fits the profile of a hybridist and is subject to McDowell's criticisms.

I suggest that Williams's conception of the space of reasons *is* interiorized in the relevant sense. This is because, minus the worldly constraint, it presents constraints on justification as entirely internal to 'our practices' – as determined by 'our interests', by what 'we' count as a justification. That is, it bears all the hall-marks of Rorty's reductivist conception of justification as a purely 'historicosociological' phenomenon.⁸² He then departs from the Rortian script by calling truth the goal of inquiry and adding a 'worldly constraint' on justification. But these requirements are merely 'tagged on to a picture of reason as self-sufficient within its own proper province' (McDowell 1995, p.886). That 'proper province', on Williams's account, encompasses all the contextually specific practices of inquiry in which 'our' interests, disciplinary predilections, and so on, reign supreme.

If this characterisation is accurate then Williams does not present us with anything worthy of the name 'space of reasons'. Of course, he would retort that he does not intend to; the very idea of a 'space of reasons' – an autonomous order of justification to which our eyes may be opened – after all embodies a commitment to epistemological realism, which Williams rejects. Still, he wants to retain the concepts of justification and knowledge, stripped of their epistemologically realist trappings. This is what McDowell's argument suggests that he cannot do; he cannot go just so far with Rorty but no further. Tacking some realist and externalist commitments onto a fundamentally reductivist conception still yields a picture which cannot make sense of the world-directedness of thought.

⁸² This is, of course, not the paradigmatic case of interiorization exhibited by the sceptic and the traditional epistemologist who make the space of reasons internal to the Cartesian mind. Nevertheless, it is interiorized in the sense that the world provides no *rational* constraint.

Chapter 5

I. The world as rational constraint

The argument so far has depended on the McDowellian premise that the world's providing a rational constraint on empirical thought is a precondition of that thought's being about the world. However, Williams contests this premise, labelling it 'a very peculiar demand' (Williams 1996b, p.106), and arguing that it undermines McDowell's therapeutic intentions by pushing him towards a version of the myth of the Given:

'Now although McDowell thinks of this conception of experience as offering an exit from philosophy, it looks to me like standard-issue philosophical reassurance. In fact, it looks like foundationalism, albeit with the foundations set higher up than 'highest common factor' theories of experience typically set them... [In *Mind and World*] we find the essential idea behind all foundational conceptions of knowledge, that there is such a thing as 'the order of justification' (as opposed to the various turns that arguments take in contingent contexts of enquiry) and that some specifiable items of knowledge occupy the 'ultimate' position in that order.

Now since, as Sellars says, the point of our 'takings' of the Given is that they are 'the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge', the cognitive episodes that come last in the order of justification, this talk of 'ultimate contents' and 'manifest facts' [*M & W*, p. 29] shows that McDowell has not fully broken with the Myth of the Given.' (Williams 1996b, pp.105-6)

On Williams's diagnosis, the 'peculiar demand' which keeps McDowell trapped on his own see-saw between coherentism and the Given can be traced back to an 'unexamined commitment to epistemological realism' (Williams 1996b, p.109).

Furthermore, Williams argues that this demand makes McDowell's account unstable. As he puts it:

'McDowell's two moves, his conception of experience offering rational control by the world and his naturalizing account of the status of the space of reasons, are in profound tension with one another.' (Williams 1996b, p.109)

On the one hand, McDowell is concerned to avoid the supernaturalism of rampant platonism – where ‘the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical’ (McDowell 1996, p.92) – and offers a ‘naturalizing’ account, invoking the concept of second nature. On the other hand, his conception of experience is underpinned by a committed to epistemological realism which, according to Williams, ‘just is a rampant Platonism about justificational relations’ (Williams 1996b, pp.108-9), and is therefore thoroughly de-naturalizing. Williams’s recommendation, of course, is that McDowell drop the epistemological realism, and consequently the demand that the world, through experience, exert a rational constraint on empirical thought.

However, McDowell disputes the claim that his conception of experience involves a mythical Given. While Williams thinks it a mere ‘proviso’⁸³ that McDowell’s ‘manifest facts’ are conceptual (‘thinkable contents’) rather than something like ‘bare presences’ or sense-data, McDowell argues that this renders Williams’s characterisation of them as ‘unmoved movers of empirical knowledge’ – that is, bits of the Given – out of place. As he explains:

‘Sellars himself has a nuanced attitude to the image of foundations. He does not object to the idea of a stratum of knowledge that “constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims...about the world”. The knowledge expressed in reports of observation plays just that role for him. Sellars’s objection...is not to that idea on its own, but to combining it with something else: the idea that the knowledge that constitutes the ultimate court of appeal is knowledge one could have all by itself, even without having a world view built on it. Thus Sellars says: “the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.”’ (McDowell 2009, p.253)

83 ‘Rather, he adds the proviso that what is given has to be infused with meaning, if it is to exert rational control over our beliefs. ‘Thinkable contents’ are what must be given, and if we want to avoid a collapse into idealism we must allow such contents to belong to the world. Thus the world comes to be populated with quasi-linguistic objects. They have to be there or we could not be ‘open’ to them. This is re-enchantment with a vengeance.’ (Williams 1996b, p.106)

The experiential ‘foundations’ of empirical knowledge, on McDowell’s account, are integrated into a conceptual space which is tied together by rational connections; having those ‘foundational’ experiences depends on one’s openness to the layout of that much more extensive conceptual realm:

‘Experiences, in my picture, have conceptual content, and that means I have just the machinery Sellars does – a holism about the conceptual – to ensure that the other dimension of dependence [of judgements of experience on other empirical propositions] is not lost. So I am not a foundationalist in Williams’s sense.’ (McDowell 2009, p.254)

McDowellian experiences are not, therefore, the ‘unmoved movers’ of the myth of the Given, since they do not constitute a potentially extricable and self-supporting basis for the space of reasons.⁸⁴

Still, the question remains whether, as Williams claims, McDowell’s insistence that the world provide a rational constraint is simply a ‘peculiar’ upshot of an ‘unexamined commitment to epistemological realism’. In response to McDowell’s view, Williams argues that:

‘...recognizing the world’s causal influence on our beliefs places no restrictions on our Kantian freedom. True, much (perhaps most) of what we believe just comes to us, one way or another. But because reflective revision is always possible, we remain responsible for what we think.’ (Williams 1996b, pp.106-7)

In support of this claim, he notes that McDowell’s notion of *Bildung* itself provides a model of causal influence which does not restrict, but rather enables, the exercise of spontaneity, i.e. rational freedom. As he puts it:

‘In this respect there is no difference between the way we are influenced by the world and the way we are influenced by *bildung* [sic]. Education, as Wittgenstein reminds us, is founded on training, not rational persuasion, though its goal is to produce autonomous practitioners, capable of reflective self-criticism.’ (Williams 1996b, pp.106-7)

⁸⁴ McDowell prefers to characterise the myth of the Given as portraying something as available to us without the capacities which are required for it to be available, i.e. imagining that we can get something for nothing: ‘the main form of the Myth [Sellars] discusses is precisely the attempt to give merely natural phenomena a position in the order of justification.’ (McDowell 2009, p.249); ‘... the hopeless attempt that characterizes the Myth of the Given, to credit something with supplying rational or warranting force into the realm of the conceptually contentful from outside.’ (McDowell 2009, p.250)

However, this argument seems underdeveloped. To begin with, McDowell does not claim that restrictions are placed on our ‘Kantian freedom’ simply by ‘recognizing the world’s causal influence on our beliefs’. As he says:

‘My objection to Davidson’s picture is not that it takes the impact of sensibility on our thinking, and thereby the impact of the world on our thinking, to be causal, but that it takes the impact to be *brutely* causal – causal to the exclusion of being rational.’ (McDowell 2009, p.139)

It is the claim that the world *does not* – and need not – exert a *rational* influence on belief that Williams needs to defend, not the claim that it *does* exert a causal one (since that is not in dispute). Consequently, the point about *Bildung* misses the mark. Of course, McDowell would say, *Bildung* is not – or at least, not always, or not primarily – a process of rational persuasion, whether by facts or people; rather, it is a precondition of rational persuasion. This is obvious in the central case of learning a first language, but one can have one’s eyes opened at any point through processes which fall outside the category of ‘rationally revising one’s beliefs in light of the evidence’. However, the point about *Bildung* is that it makes it possible to be influenced by the world in a way that is *not* merely causal, but also rational. *Bildung* does not simply pave the way for more *Bildung*; it makes a relation of openness to the world, in McDowell’s sense, possible.

An example may make this clearer. McDowell and Williams would agree that one doesn’t come by the concepts ‘police’, ‘truncheon’, and ‘being hit on the head’ by a process of rational persuasion. Given that my upbringing has equipped me with these concepts, however, the experience of being hit on the head by a police truncheon may rationally influence my views on a number of issues.⁸⁵ In fact, I may be rationally compelled to change my views in light of the manifest facts that were impressed on me in that experience. McDowell would say that I am influenced by the world in an importantly different way from when I acquired the concepts in the first place. Williams, in the passage I quoted, seems to want to deny this.

However, McDowell would argue that this renders Williams’s casual invocation of the reflective revisability of beliefs question-begging. Whether a picture according to

⁸⁵ Of course, the incident may also exert a *brutely* causal influence on my mental states, if they hit me hard enough.

which the world exerts a merely causal influence on our thinking can make sense of our being under any *rational* obligation to revise our beliefs, is precisely what is at issue. Williams's claim that 'reflective revision is always possible' simply skirts over this point of contention. First of all, the language of 'reflective' revision avoids the key issue of whether his view can make sense of this revision being *rationally* motivated, a reflective stance being neither necessary nor sufficient for rationality. A belief which has been revised on reflection may be no more justified than the original belief; equally, a belief may be rationally held without having been reflected upon. McDowell's point is that, if the world exerted no rational control on our beliefs, all our reflections would amount to no more than 'frictionless spinning in a void'. We would be left with the Rortian picture according to which 'the only question anywhere in the area is the historicosociological question of how and why patterns of justification change' (Rorty 1998, p.163).

Consequently, McDowell would maintain that, far from being an 'unexamined commitment' amounting to a form of 'rampant Platonism', his rejection of Williams-style contextualism is motivated by a recognition that its depiction of the space of reasons is ultimately a reductionist one, which complacently invokes, but cannot make sense of, the notion of a rational responsibility to subject our beliefs to critical scrutiny. Williams is perfectly correct to say that recognising that the world exerts a causal influence on belief formation does not, in and of itself, yield a problematically reductionist picture. However, this does not address the question of whether seeing the world as *only* exerting a causal influence yields such a picture.

McDowell's suggestion, then, is that some kind of epistemological realism is a precondition for anything that could be properly understood as inquiry, or even assertion. Still, we can ask, *what* kind of epistemological realism? In chapter 1 I posed the question of whether contextualism was *simply* the rejection of epistemological realism, or whether it went beyond that to assert positive theses of its own. I suggested there that, given Williams's characterisation of epistemological realism, its rejection could come in stronger or weaker forms. The weaker form of rejection would discard the 'full-blown substantive foundationalist thesis' that propositions come in 'natural kinds', and abstract features of their content – e.g. being 'about the external world' – determine what kinds of evidence can be invoked to support them. Paradigmatically, the substantive foundationalist holds that beliefs 'about the external world' have to be supported by 'beliefs about how things appear to one in experience'. A stronger

rejection of epistemological realism would go on to claim that there are no context-independent constraints on what can justify what.⁸⁶

We saw that the conservative tendencies of contextualism arise from its *strong* rejection of epistemological realism; the question is whether a *weaker* rejection, which abandons ‘full-blown substantive foundationalism’ but maintains the notion of context-independent constraints on justification, might avoid the problems of contextualism. One way of approaching this is to ask what form of epistemological realism McDowell is committed to. As we saw, Williams argues that McDowell’s conception of experience as, in a sense, ‘ultimate’ in the order of empirical justification, makes him a full-blown substantive foundationalist.

However, this does not acknowledge just how different McDowell’s conception of experience is from that of the traditional epistemologist or sceptic. In the traditional debate, experience figures as access to ‘mere appearances’, to ‘how things seem to me’, and not to the way things are in the world; therefore, it makes sense to speak of ‘beliefs about experience’ as an isolable class of beliefs, distinguished by their subject matter. These beliefs are also taken to have certain special features, such as indubitability and being such that the subject is infallible concerning them. On McDowell’s view, however, we do not have a separate ‘class of beliefs’ which are *about* experience *as opposed to* about the world itself, and which underlie a structure of (putative) empirical knowledge. Consequently, he does not think that there is a special class of beliefs which are indubitable or concerning which we are infallible. Rather, experience itself – not beliefs about experience – provides the ultimate justification (if, in a particular case, there *is* a justification) for empirical claims; this is just to say that the world exerts a rational constraint on thinking. Of course, McDowell thinks there is something relatively unified to be said about *experience in general* but that is because he diagnoses a surveyable set of motivations underlying the sense that the conception of experience shared by the traditional epistemologist and the sceptic is compulsory. It doesn’t mean that ‘propositions about experience’ form a natural kind.

⁸⁶ It is important to be careful with the term ‘context-independence’ here. To say that there are context-independent constraints on justification is not to commit oneself to the notion of rationality as something like the application of general rules; McDowell, as much as Williams, thinks that the demands of reason are un-codifiable, as his response to Dreyfus makes clear. Rather, it is to insist that, for one’s beliefs to be justified, they must be rationally answerable, not just to one’s ‘peers’ or ‘the way we do history’, but to the way the world is.

Indeed, McDowell's naturalized platonism is precisely an attempt to avoid the kind of sublimated⁸⁷ conception of rationality, on which 'the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical' (McDowell 1996, p.92). Williams is extremely persuasive in showing that full-blown foundationalism is committed to just such a sublimated picture. However, in extending this verdict to the whole notion of a non-interiorized space of reasons – to the very thought that experience can, when things go well, consist in a relation of openness to the world – he distorts this insight. By placing his rejection of rampant platonism in the context of a fundamentally reductivist view, Williams perpetuates the dualism which forces a choice between the empty mythology of supernaturalism and a (reductivist) naturalism on which norms are obliterated, on which, that is to say, we lose the idea of human beings as rational animals, engaging in anything worthy of the name 'inquiry'.⁸⁸ In grasping the second horn, he misses an opportunity to diagnose the dilemma.

II. The politics of naturalized platonism

'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness [*Sinnlichkeit*], is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical [sic] manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of "revolutionary", of "practical-critical", activity.' (Marx 2000, p.171)

87 I do not intend the psychoanalytic sense of the word; I simply mean envisaging reason as sublimely transcending anything 'merely' human.

88 The following remark of Wittgenstein's may have a parallel in this case: 'Finitism and behaviourism are quite similar trends. Both say, but surely, all we have here is... Both deny the existence of something, both with a view to escaping from a confusion' (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, II-61, cited (McDowell 1998b, p.256)). In order to avoid the confusions of rampant platonism – and the scepticism which results from the subsequent realisation that such transcendent standards escape the grasp of merely human inquiry – contextualism says: surely, all we have here is 'the various turns that arguments take in contingent contexts of inquiry' (Williams 1996b, p.106). In doing so, however, it ends up denying the normativity required even to make sense of those contexts *as* contexts of inquiry.

Let me put this in more McDowellian terms. In this passage, Marx is diagnosing a dilemma, neither side of which can make sense of human beings (individually or collectively) as potential agents of history. The first horn is a ‘vulgar’ materialism, which sees the material conditions of human existence as Givens of ‘disenchanted’ nature, exerting brutally causal force on passive human consciousness. Because this conception denies any Kantian spontaneity to the space of reasons, it ultimately cannot make room for the notion of ‘sensuous human activity, practice’: for humans as embodied agents. Furthermore, it cannot conceive material conditions ‘subjectively’, that is, as constituted – for better or worse – by the activities of minded actors; it therefore cannot conceive of those actors taking revolutionary action informed by their perception of manifest facts about the current state of things.⁸⁹ The second horn is idealism, which gives free reign to Kantian spontaneity but in doing so renounces any understanding of ‘real, sensuous activity as such’, rendering mental activity a mere ‘frictionless spinning in the void’. The material conditions fall out of the picture, along with the notion of human activity in an objective world.

Marx sees the overcoming of this dichotomy between the rational (space of reasons) and the real (the material world, including its concrete, embodied human inhabitants) as a precondition of what he calls ‘practical-critical’ activity. This is activity which is imbued with mindedness, revolutionary practice which both constitutes and flows from a critical engagement with the existing material and ideological state of things; it is human agents consciously, collectively, making history. The fact that revolutionary activity, as Marx understands it, must be *critical* as well as – indeed, in order to be – practical, makes the task of rendering the possibility of such activity philosophically intelligible of more than merely academic interest.

There is a clear parallel between ‘practical-critical activity’ and that which McDowell, with his conception of experience as an embodied actor’s openness to the world, is attempting to reclaim from the sceptic.⁹⁰ Earlier I argued that maintaining a

⁸⁹ The most it can make room for is a notion of humans quasi-mechanically pursuing what they perceive to be in their interests: a picture of humans as calculating animals, with a ‘first natural’ (Given) motivation to maximise the satisfaction of their own desires. For a diagnosis of the way that the search for a *grounding* of the demands of reason in ‘disenchanted’ nature can lead to the sense that self-interest is the only rational motivation, see (McDowell 1998b, p.172).

⁹⁰ This becomes even less surprising when we consider the fact that both Marx and McDowell’s are fundamentally engaging with the philosophical tradition running through Hegel. On the other hand, it is also the case that Marx had a serious critique of Hegel’s idealism for thinking that consciousness was now in a position to resolve contradictions which, for Marx, still have their origin in a contradictory social reality and can only be overcome by completely transforming that reality. It would be an interesting and

distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason is a prerequisite for *Ideologiekritik*, and hence for radical politics. Introducing the notion of ‘practical-critical’ activity allows us to identify a further McDowellian theme as being of deep political importance: namely, the unintelligibility of a conception of the human subject as a ‘merely theoretical’ reasoner, without the capacity for practical engagement with the world.⁹¹

Now, practical-critical activity aims at a non-ideological understanding and a practical transformation of the world. Clearly, it is fraught with epistemic (amongst other) challenges. After all, a thoroughly non-ideological understanding would only be possible *after* the practical transformation has been achieved, so the struggle must be conducted with the often problematic resources available at a given moment in history; this includes the struggle to see the world aright. It is in this sense, and – *contra* Rorty and Williams – only in this sense, that criticism must be ‘local’. As McDowell puts it:

‘What we must insist is that there is no addressing the question [of whether the space of reasons really is laid out as it seems to be from the viewpoint of a particular shaping of practical *logos*] in a way that holds that apparent layout in suspense, and aims to reconstruct its correctness from a vantage-point outside the ways of thinking one acquired in ethical upbringing.’ (McDowell 1998b, p.189)

This is just another way of explicating his rejection of rampant platonism, which imagines that we can assume a perspective on mind and world, and the connections between them, as it were, ‘from side-ways on’, from outside our own concrete mindedness and historicity.

In the context of a reductivist view, pointing to the immanence, the situatedness, of critique deprives us of the resources to understand it as meaningful criticism *at all*.⁹² However, in the context of a naturalism of second nature, which allows for a historical dynamism in our relation to the demands of reason, while still making sense of the world’s exerting a rational constraint on our thinking, the claim of immanence makes

important project to consider whether Marx’s critique of Hegel also undermines McDowell’s Hegelian account, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the issue further here.

91 This follows from the discussion of ‘Second Nature and Naturalized Platonism’ in chapter 2.

92 Simply ‘attitudinizing’ in a particular area does not count as situated critique. See (McDowell 1998b, p.185): ‘the very idea of thought – the exercise of intellect – presupposes a notion of objectivity between being right and seeming right.. [It] could not be thought, as opposed to, say, attitudinizing, if it did not’.

sense of, rather than undermines, the task of *Ideologiekritik*. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the relation between McDowell's conception of rationality and the methodology of critical theory. Still, the following passage from Horkheimer is suggestive:

'Again and again in history, ideas have cast off their swaddling clothes and struck out against the social systems that bore them. The cause, in large degree, is that spirit, language, and all the realms of the mind necessarily stake universal claims. Even ruling groups, intent above all upon defending their particular interests, must stress universal motifs in religion, morality and science. Thus originates the contradiction between the existent and ideology, a contradiction that spurs all historical progress. While conformism presupposes the basic harmony of the two and includes the minor discrepancies in the ideology itself, philosophy makes men conscious of the contradiction between them. On the one hand it appraises society by the light of the very ideas that it recognizes as its highest values; on the other, it is aware that these ideas reflect the taints of reality.' (Horkheimer 1974, p.178)⁹³

To be clear, I am not claiming that McDowell's response to scepticism commits one to a particular, radical, politics. Rather, he makes *possible* a politics of critical engagement in a way that Williams's ultimately reductivist response to scepticism does not.⁹⁴

III. Conclusions: 'the point is to change it'

I began with two questions: one methodological, one substantive, and both political. The methodological question was: what is the significance of the fact that debates about scepticism tend to proceed without acknowledging the political nature of the actual epistemic practices which they are supposed to shed light on? The substantive question was: how might an attentiveness to the political assumptions and

93 For a clear introductory discussion of the method of immanent critique, see (Antonio 1981). It is interesting, and not coincidental, that McDowell also shares with critical theory a rejection of the dualism of 'fact' and 'value', and of the idea that only 'value-neutral' investigation can achieve objectivity: 'But it is one thing to recognize that the impersonal stance of scientific investigation is a methodological necessity for the achievement of a valuable mode of understanding reality; it is quite another thing to take the dawning grasp of this, in the modern era, for a metaphysical insight into the notion of objectivity as such, so that objective correctness in any mode of thought must be anchored in this kind of access to the real' (McDowell 1998b, p.182).

94 Likewise, it is not as though Williams demonstrates the superiority of non-critical, or conservative politics. His account equally fails to make sense of, for example, the practice of science as critical inquiry aimed at truth.

consequences of anti-sceptical discourse affect our understanding of what the epistemologist should be trying to achieve?

Tracing the dispute between McDowell and Williams through the lens of a concern with the (often unspoken) politics inherent in their positions suggests an answer to the second of these questions. It suggests, to begin with, that a minimal – though not a ‘full-blown foundationalist’ – epistemological realism is necessary to make sense of there being any rational obligation to revise our beliefs in light of experience. This thought adds depth to Fricker’s original charge against the reductivist, that in rejecting the distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason, they stultify ‘genuine critical judgements’. McDowell would say that this is because the world’s constituting a *rational* – and not merely causal – constraint on our beliefs is ‘a requirement for us to have the world in view at all, for moves within the relevant practices to be expressive of a world view, as opposed to merely aspiring to vocalize in step with one another.’ (McDowell 2000, p. 119)

Like Rorty’s reductivist picture, Williams’s contextualist variant cannot make sense of us even aspiring to develop practices which chime with reality:⁹⁵

‘To insist on this distinction [between the question whether *X* is the case and the question whether saying *X* will pass muster in the current practice] is not to try to think and speak from outside our practices; it is simply to take it seriously that we can really mean what we think and say from within them’ (McDowell 2000, p. 118)

We can see the political *conservatism* which Fricker argues is inherent in such positions as symptomatic of what happens when these questions are elided. The reductivist/contextualist picture cannot support genuine critical judgements because it ultimately cannot make sense of judgement at all.

What we need to preserve in the face of sceptical challenge, then, is a distinction between authoritarian and authoritative uses of reason – between ideology and rationality – and McDowell’s diagnosis of scepticism gives us the resources to see that this distinction cannot be maintained unless we establish the *conceivability* of experience as a relation of openness to the world. This in turn requires an overcoming

95 Of course, Rorty takes a dim view of that aspiration, but Williams does not. Williams therefore cannot resort to pragmatist ironism as a defence.

of the dualism between the rational and the real (reason and nature) which makes not only human thought but also – indeed, consequently – human *action* unintelligible.⁹⁶ This suggests an alternative way of formulating the substantive conclusion of this thesis: what we have to win back from the sceptic is the conceivability of practical-critical activity.

That this is a politically significant conclusion is underscored by the importance that Marx places on reclaiming critical thought from the idealists and concrete conditions from the ‘vulgar’ materialists. This takes us back to the issue of actual human epistemic practices with which we began. An epistemology that cannot make sense of the possibility of experience as openness to the world, and equally of the fact that openness to the world – which is not restricted to objects of disinterested contemplation – is enjoyed by subjects who are essentially agents (McDowell 2009, pp.327-8), cannot make sense of practical-critical activity. The consequence of this inability, I have argued, is to hand exclusive rights over the concepts which epistemology attempts to elucidate – justification, reason, knowledge – to those with the power to define what is accepted as ‘reasonable’ or ‘common sense’. To the extent that such an epistemology impacts upon actual epistemic practices, therefore, its influence cannot but be ideological.

What, then, are we to make of the apolitical tone in which most discussions of scepticism are conducted? I have suggested that it can operate ideologically by concealing the political nature of what is at stake. That may be taken as a reason for doing things differently. However, *Ideologiekritik* is not just a matter of showing certain forms of consciousness to be ideological in their effects, i.e. showing how they contribute to the perpetuation of existing power relations. Ideology reflects the contradictions of the society which generates it. Consequently, diagnosing, for example, a way of doing philosophy, as ideological is supposed to reveal something about the nature of the society which gave rise to that form of consciousness. It is not my aim here to pronounce on what conclusions should be drawn. I simply ask: what does it say about the actual epistemic practices that constitute philosophy, that so many

96 Marx, of course, would emphasise that this ‘overcoming’ cannot be achieved ‘in thought alone’ and must involve the practical transformation of the world.

philosophers fail to see anything political in their *continuing* to interpret the world so as to make it unintelligible that we might now be rationally required to change it?⁹⁷

⁹⁷ 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' (Marx 2000, p.173)

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