

Idealism and the Explanatory Turn*

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I

A familiar theme in the history of ideas is the appearance, in different periods, of identical claims with their theoretical titles reversed. I wish to examine an important instance of this phenomenon, and to analyse its implications for contemporary metaphysics.

Realism and idealism are among the main competitors in the field of metaphysics, each providing a different account of how, if at all, the world is related to the human mind. With regard to a domain of objects, realism affirms, while idealism denies, that the inhabitants of that domain exist independently of the human mind.

In the late 19th cent., idealists such as Thomas Hill Green offered an elaborate critique of theories which attempt to do away with human experience and the conceptual structure reflected in its objects. Green argued that nothing is part of the world unless it is related to a subject, which endows it with its objective character. For Green, "the existence of a real world beyond consciousness" is an "essentially unmeaning phrase". Accordingly, Green rejected realism and its concomitant view of experience, in favour of "the only valid idealism - that idealism which trusts, not to a guess about what is beyond experience, but to an analysis of what is within it."

In recent years, John McDowell has made a strong case for his version of realism. At the heart of his project lies the conviction that reality is in principle open to human perception. A sound metaphysics of the objects of experience need not aspire to a transcendence of the human standpoint. On the contrary, it should be premised on the twin claims that human experience is thoroughly conceptual, and that while "reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere." The puzzle that arises from a brief encounter with the main claims of Green and McDowell is that they premise their conflicting worldviews on - what appears to be - a similar view of human experience. In what follows, I shall try to solve the puzzle of drawing two incompatible metaphysical systems on nearly identical premises. My strategy is simple. First, I shall identify the crucial similarities in the metaphysical approaches of Green and McDowell. Then I shall address McDowell's reasons for resisting idealism. Next, I shall argue that none of those reasons suffice to reject Green's version of idealism.

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Finally, I will suggest Green's approach bears a philosophical gift of considerable value.

II

In order to appreciate the similarity of the two systems, we may consider the commonality of the overall aim and methodology of these programmes. The main philosophical enemy in both systems is dualism in its various manifestations. Both philosophers articulate their theory in explicitly Kantian terms. However, they both resist the Kantian list of sharp distinctions between sensibility and understanding, intuition and concepts, receptivity and spontaneity, the world and the mind. Moreover, they both bluntly reject the notion of the "thing-in-itself", as they urge for a Hegelian correction of Kant's mistakes.

No less impressive is the similarity of their attempts to provide a critique of any reductivist program in the philosophy of mind. Green attempts to show that any theory that purports to explain consciousness in terms of natural phenomena involves a "hysteron proteron", since the very possibility of the appearance of such phenomena is based upon the operations of a "self-distinguishing" and "unifying" mind. McDowell, in his turn, argues that all "strong" naturalistic programs are doomed to failure since they deprive consciousness of its primordial role in permeating human experience so that the world appears an intelligible whole. However, both philosophers warn against the opposite mistake of regarding consciousness as supposedly creating the material universe.

More generally, for both philosophers the world of nature is in principle accessible to the human mind. "Reality" itself is seen as a characteristic of the intentional objects of experience and, hence, it is contrasted not with "appearances" but with "illusions." Indeed, both philosophers shift the debate over realism from an ontological to an epistemological level of discussion. This move enables them to support their metaphysical theories by showing how these theories can accommodate our epistemic claims to truth and objectivity.

Having outlined the main points of agreement in the metaphysical approaches of Green and McDowell, I shall try to analyse why the latter perceives idealism as his philosophical foe.

III

Sometimes, idealism gets a bad press for reasons that have to do less with the theories of idealists themselves, and more with various counter-intuitive claims to which they are *supposedly* committed. McDowell's critique of idealism is a case in

point. He takes great care to dissociate himself from the idealist tradition, and he explicitly warns against any idealist reading of his corpus. What is the ground of McDowell's aversion towards idealism? His belief that idealism has an unwanted implication, namely that it portrays the world as dependent on the human mind.

McDowell understands idealism as the metaphysical foil of a coherentist view of human knowledge. According to this view, the epistemic status of a judgement is determined by the relations of that judgement to the rest of one's doxastic attitudes. Severing the link between truth and reality is unavoidable if we accept that our thoughts cannot be constrained by a reality outside our own minds - especially since, as the idealist seems to assert, there is no such reality outside our own minds. However, as McDowell rightly insists, the world, as we experience it, is not a toy of our whims or imagination. Hence, McDowell concludes, idealism gives a totally inaccurate account of the phenomena of our experience. More precisely, McDowell makes the following claims:

idealism describes the world "as made of some mental stuff"
 it "equates facts in general with exercises of conceptual capacities"; and, in a
 nutshell,
 idealism "does not genuinely acknowledge how reality is independent of our
 thinking".

I wish to show that none of the above claims can be attributed to Green's version of idealism.

First of all, Green nowhere implies that the world's material is other than material. On the contrary, he invariably attacks any attempt to analyse objects as allegedly constituted by some mental stuff, be it feelings, impressions or ideas. What he does affirm is that no sense can be made of natural phenomena in the absence of a mind that could synthesise the series of unconnected appearances into an intelligible whole.

Secondly, Green does not equate exercises of intellectual faculties with facts of the world; such an equation would be, indeed, highly problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, it would involve the category mistake of identifying an activity with its object. And on the other, it would violate a fundamental distinction in Green's metaphysics, namely the distinction between the relations among the objects of our experience and the "unifying" or "synthesising principle" which renders these relations possible in the first place.

We thus reach the most important problem that McDowell detects in idealist metaphysics, namely that it cannot genuinely acknowledge how reality is independent of our thinking. There are two ways to understand McDowell's assertion. The first, and not very exciting way, is to see it as the complaint that idealists are not realists but idealists.

The second, and more interesting, way is to interpret it as the combination of two claims. First, of the phenomenological claim that in ordinary human experience the world appears to be in a certain way, namely it appears to exist independently of us; and secondly of the descriptive claim that as a matter of course, idealists have failed to recognise the truth of that phenomenological claim.

In response to the above, I would suggest that Green strongly upheld the phenomenological claim which according to McDowell is the exclusive property of realists. Green repeatedly stated his "conviction of there being a world of abiding realities, other than, and determining, the endless flow of our feelings" or sensations. Far from presenting the world as a "shadow of our thinking" Green claimed that "stubborn things" form the "world to which we have to adapt ourselves".

In fact, Green's account of how external objects figure in the content of our experience is carefully deployed as an illumination of the pre-reflective attitude towards reality, that is characteristic of common-sense. Given that the common-sense picture of the world is thoroughly - if naively - realistic, so is Green's description of ordinary human experience.

Contrary to McDowell's assertion, the starting point of idealism is not the denial of the world as we experience it. The source of the differences between the idealist and the realist view of the world "lies in the [former's] being less easily satisfied in its analysis of what the existence of such a world implies." Green's undertaking to provide a satisfactory explanation of the phenomena under discussion is what demarcates his idealism from McDowell's version of realism. In order to appreciate the significance of this point, we need to address briefly McDowell's methodological views about the role of philosophical inquiry.

IV

McDowell's general approach to philosophy is a version of Wittgensteinian quietism. According to this approach, the traditional philosophical problems require not a direct solution but a diagnosis that would meet several goals. First it would reveal why certain metaphysical worries seem so pressing. Secondly, it would show why

each of the standard answers offered by the various metaphysical schools are actually unsatisfactory. Thirdly it would explicate why these worries should never have arisen, since they spring out of a problematic stance towards reality, a stance that generates a distorted picture of ordinary human experience.

McDowell's main concern is to show that we need not engage in grand metaphysical debates in order to convince ourselves that the human mind is open to the facts of the world. If he does enter into the details of these debates, his aim is mainly therapeutic: not to solve a particular problem, but to show that if our intellectual motivations were in tune with the world, the problem should never have arisen. The upshot of this approach is that when he makes various important claims about how mind bears on reality (e.g. that what we think, and what is the case might be one and the same thing) his intention is not to construct a metaphysical system, but simply to remind us of what is "trivial, and ... cannot embody something metaphysically contentious, like slighting the independence of reality".

Accordingly, McDowell defends 'realism', not as an ontological doctrine, but as a byword for the common-sense attitude toward reality in all its experiential and conceptual richness. A description of this attitude and of the phenomenology of ordinary experience is perhaps the best antidote to the "craving" after metaphysical system-building.

Green, on the other hand, thinks that philosophy can and should do more than that. At a minimum it should be able to offer an account of how the mind is related to the world, in a way that is truthful to human experience. I believe that a dissatisfaction with a mere description of the phenomena of our experience is at the root of Green's ingenious critique of the inadequacies of traditional empiricism, and of his attempt to provide a systematic explanation of the objects of human knowledge, in terms of the operations of human mind.

One might say that Green's idealism gets under sail at the point where McDowell's realism drops its anchor. Whereas the latter rests content with the narration of our acquaintance with an objective world, the former endeavours to explain why and how we may come to have knowledge of such a world. This move from the phenomenological to the explanatory level of discussion seems to mark the advantage of the idealist approach over certain of its realist competitors.

I shall not attempt in the space of this paper to reconstruct Green's theory of how reality itself and our knowledge of it is constituted. What I wish to emphasise is that Green perceives the need for an explanatory account, which, by going beyond the

description of experience may provide a justification of our cognitive claims, or, at least, improve our understanding of why we experience the world in the way we do. McDowell, on the other hand, wishes to abstain from the activity of theoretical system-building, and he is thus deliberately silent on metaphysical issues of explanation and justification. However, I would suggest that in philosophy silence is not always golden.