'But of course it is! …' - McDowell, Davidson and Natural Realism

Henk Borgdorff

I

Hilary Putnam has remarked in a Kantian and Wittgensteinian spirit, that 'something in us both craves more than we can possibly have and flees from even the certainty that we do have.'[1] This antinomy of human life, as you might call it, is the craving for what transcends our human condition, while at the same time we seem blind to what is already there in plain view. One of the recurrent, disquieting characteristics of modern philosophy, certainly from Kant onwards, is a sort of metaphysical or transcendental anxiety, which derives from this antinomy and which comes down to the threat of scepticism. The anxiety is aroused by the unsatisfactory answers to the question of whether or not, and if so how, our conceptual capacities, our cognitive powers can be thought of as related to, as about, a world independent of our thinking. Or to formulate the question more dangerously: how does our mind, our knowledge, our language hook on to the world?

The transcendental anxiety - I borrow this expression from John McDowell[2] - has induced philosophers of both analytical and continental origin to continue discussion and to pursue questions on the nature of our natural relation to the world and to others. Even while metaphysics sometimes seems to have been rendered out of date, and to have become a common target for both 'classical' analytics, postmodern deconstructionists and post-Adornian pragmatists, recent investigations into the ontological, epistemological and semantic relation of our mind, knowledge and language to the world have revived the old questions of metaphysics, albeit in new dress.[3] I think Putnam is surely right when he says that it is '… a fact of life that there is a sense in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion.'[4]

One other characteristic of modern philosophy from Kant to Wittgenstein and beyond is the aspiration to overcome, once and for all, the discomfort aroused by the antinomy of human life, or aroused by the unsatisfactory answers to this antinomy. The answers to the metaphysical anxiety are considered unsatisfactory for one of two reasons. Sometimes they seem to deny that there is any antinomy at all - to deny that there is a problem with our understanding of our relation to the world and to others, in which

---

[1] Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*. Harvard UP 1992, p. 178.
[2] John McDowell, 'Précis of *Mind and World*', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LVIII 2 (1998), p. 365.
[3] 'These questions … will be, I do not doubt, the old questions of metaphysics in new dress. But the new dress is in many ways an attractive one.' Donald Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford UP 1984, p. 214.
[4] Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*. Harvard UP 1990, p. 19.

case the threat of scepticism is often *said* to be avoided, but the anxiety and the accompanying discomfort which gave rise to the sceptical worries in the first place, will not be relieved. Or sometimes the answers imply a recoil - to use another expression from McDowell - to positions which, on further investigation, are found to be at the root of the sceptical problem themselves. I will not go into detail about these discomforting 'solutions' to the sceptical paradox, but I will just call to mind one thing to set the stage. Common to much contemporary thought - whether in the field of philosophy of mind, epistemology or semantics - is the desire to bring peace, or restore peace, to philosophy, if only for a moment – to relieve the discomfort caused by the threat of scepticism or by the unsatisfactory answers to it.

What I will do in this article is to focus mainly on some aspects of the work of John McDowell and Donald Davidson, in particular McDowell's views on perception and Davidson's views on the emergence of thought, in an attempt to sketch one apparent way to deal with this discomfort. My overall aim will be to question whether McDowell and Davidson succeed in bringing quietude to philosophy by giving an intelligent reply to the sceptics, or by showing the sceptics that what they say makes no sense. In one respect, I will argue, they *do* succeed. They show convincingly that our beliefs and thoughts do not - in any relevant sense - fall short of the worldly facts they are about. But in another respect these two philosophers do *not* succeed in relieving us of the discomfort that seems to be inherent to our form of life. I will show that, even if McDowell is right in claiming that 'the world is embraceable in thought', and even if Davidson is right in claiming that 'we do not give up the world'[5], this still leaves us with the problem of how to *account* for our 'natural' relation to the world. And subsequently - referring to, but also diverging from Wittgenstein - I will suggest that maybe, if we cannot provide a positive philosophical account, we will have to abandon the whole project of searching for comfort and satisfaction in philosophy.

Let me now just say a few words about how John McDowell and Donald Davidson, each in their own way, believe they can bring quietude to philosophy. They try to relieve philosophy of the discomfort it has been haunted by ever since the epistemological scene was defined by Descartes and his followers – a potential sceptical uneasiness that persisted even after the linguistic turn had changed the programme. Here McDowell and Davidson differ in their understanding of how to bring peace to philosophy. They both agree, though, that the way to approach the sceptic is not to give a final refutation of scepticism - by showing scepticism to be false, by showing that we *can*, after all, give a positive and constructive philosophical account of how we know such-and-such is the case. They agree that that is not the way to bring philosophy the comfort it longs for. They prefer an indirect approach to answering the sceptic.

---

[5] McDowell, *Mind and World*. Harvard UP 1994, p. 33. Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, p. 198.

Davidson blocks the sceptic's path even before he can pose his troublesome questions, by showing him that what he wants to say makes no sense, or can make sense only when he has gained command of the concepts and beliefs he wants to dispute. Questions about our epistemological access to the world - to confine myself to that one area - about how knowledge of the world is possible, come as it were too late. They are parasitic on the possession and the acquisition of primitive perceptual beliefs in the first place, beliefs that we acquire in our dealings with the world and other people. This triangular situation leaves no room for error at the moment we acquire our beliefs and concepts. So for Davidson the sceptical problem could never even get off the ground.

In the case of John McDowell, the problem of scepticism seems at first sight a less prominent topic. But his attempt to bridge the gap between mind and world - a crippled metaphor, I admit - also aims at dissolving the metaphysical anxiety and at providing a depiction of our life in which there is no room for scepticism. I will come back to McDowell's views in more detail in a moment.[6]

So in a certain sense the threat of scepticism is taken seriously, and is averted, by both McDowell and Davidson. Common to these thinkers - ignoring their differences for the moment - is also, first of all, that they criticise reductionistic approaches, in which the realm of the mental is supervenient on the realm of the physical, and in which rationality is ultimately subordinated to causality. Second, they criticise any too anti-realistic or idealistic coherentism, adhering to the conviction that - to quote Putnam - 'the notion that our words and life are constrained by a reality not of our own invention plays a deep role in our lives, and is to be respected.'[7] Third, they all distance themselves from what Wilfrid Sellars has called the Myth of an extra-conceptual Given: the idea that non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought not only cause, but also in a mysterious way justify our beliefs and knowledge about the world.

These critiques of reductionistic naturalism, idealistic coherentism, and the myth of the Given would not be able to do the work of bringing quietude to the philosophical scene if they were not complemented at the level of a theory of perception by a rejection of the notion of an intermediary between our beliefs, our thoughts about the world and the world itself. That is to say, they have to be supported by a rejection of the notion of an interface between our experience and the world we

---

[6] To one of America's leading Wittgenstein scholars, Stanley Cavell, the sceptical problem seems a more stubborn phenomenon that cannot be dismissed so easily. The 'truth of scepticism' - as he calls it - is the circumstance that 'our natural relation to the world's existence … is closer, or more intimate, than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey.' (Stanley Cavell, 'The Ordinary as the Uneventful', in Stephen Mulhall (ed.), *The Cavell Reader*. Blackwell 1996, p. 257.) This view on the intertwinement of world and life leads Cavell to shift from questions about our epistemological access to the world and others to questions about our acknowledgement of, and attunement with, the world and others. This acceptance of (which some have even called acquiescence in) our disappointment with human knowledge indeed retains some of the tension of scepticism, but at the same time - in its acknowledgement of, in its quest for and its regaining of the ordinary - it also aims to give philosophy its peace and satisfaction – not by bringing philosophy to an end, but by breaking off philosophy when need be.

[7] Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World*. Columbia UP 2000, p. 9.

experience - interfaces which are traditionally labelled impressions, ideas, sensations or qualia, and which are sometimes identified nowadays as computational states or functional brain processes. In this respect, McDowell and Davidson both endorse Wittgenstein when he says in *Philosophical Investigations*: 'When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we - and our meaning - do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this - is - so.*'[8] Of course, it depends how you read the phrase 'do not stop short of the fact'.

In next part of this article I will go into this further. In doing so I will focus mainly on some aspects of what Putnam has called 'natural realism'.[9] This is a form of direct realism which does not appeal to any notion of unconceptualised sensory givens, nor to any reductionistic account of our relation to the world. A highly elaborated, interesting, though also hard-to-get-at approach to that form of direct realism can be found in the work of John McDowell. My question will be whether this 'natural realism' truly brings us the comfort and quietude that philosophy seems to be longing for - and if not, whether this is something we necessarily have to regret. To articulate that question I will first go into some of the views of John McDowell (II). Then I will say a little more about Davidson's views on perception and thought (III). I will finish with an interpretation of Wittgenstein's incitement to let philosophy come to rest (IV).[10]

---

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. (hereafter PI*)* (transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe) Blackwell 1958[2], §95.

[9] Cf. Putnam, *Words and Life*. Harvard UP 1994, esp. ch. 14. 'Realism without Absolutes', pp. 279-294. Putnam has enriched the realism debate by calling to mind the direct realism of James, the American New Realists and Austin's critique of the interface conception of perception (cf. *The Threefold Cord*, pp. 11 ff.) Whether an inquiry into these forms of direct realism would help us understand what 'natural realism' in the contemporary debate is about is an interesting one, but not a question I will pursue here.

[10] In discussions on these matters, much attention is focused on the differences in opinion between McDowell and Davidson, e.g. with respect to perception. (For a recent elucidating exposition, cf Roger F. Gibson, 'McDowell on Quine, Davidson and Epistemology.' In *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Knowledge*, edited by Urszula M. Zeglen, 123-35. London: Routledge, 1999.) McDowell and Davidson represent two separate worlds that cannot so easily be reduced to a common denominator. My aim is not to emphasise the differences, but to highlight a certain convergence in the outcome of their thinking, notwithstanding those differences.

Also the link I am making between Wittgenstein's and Davidson's views might come across to some people as too hasty to be convincing. But again my aim is not to bring Davidson's interpretive view in line with Wittgenstein's practice view, but to show that some sensible things can be said from Wittgenstein's perspective about the aporetic outcome of Davidson's ideas. How Davidson's views on language and practice have been modified since 1984 under the influence of Wittgenstein's investigations on rule-following is discussed by Meredith Williams, 'Wittgenstein and Davidson on the Sociality of Language', in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30:3 (2000), pp. 299-318.

II

McDowell is best known for his John Locke Lectures, published in 1994 under the title *Mind and World*. But some of the basic views in those lectures were already present in his 1982 article entitled 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge'.[11] In particular his interpretation of Wittgenstein's views on rule-following and criteria and what came to be known as the 'disjunctive view of perception' were already spelled out more or less in that article. Both his Wittgenstein interpretation and the disjunctive view of perception are at the core of his later book-length treatment of the question of how our thoughts can be understood as answerable to the world.[12]

McDowell aims to show us a way to escape oscillation between, roughly speaking, two dominating philosophical positions that have been characteristic for the epistemology and philosophy of mind since the 17th century. He judges both positions to be unsatisfactory and ultimately sceptical answers to the question of how our thought can be understood as being about a world independent of our thinking.

The oscillation is generated by two opposite poles. At one end there is an inclination (or 'recoil', as McDowell calls it) to plain naturalism or to its reverse, some form of platonism. The former reduces our rational and intentional stance in life to something that can ultimately be understood in terms of positive science, in particular in the discourse of physics. In so doing, it fails to do justice to the sui generis character of the realm of the mental (Sellars 'logical space of reason'). Platonism, for its part, invokes a view from outside our language and practices, a mysterious view from 'nowhere', or from 'sideways-on' as McDowell puts it. At the opposite pole is an inclination towards idealistic coherentism, which threatens to cut through our intimate and direct ties with the world altogether, thereby endangering the independence of reality. To a large extent the discussion between McDowell and Davidson is dominated by the question of whether coherentism is possible without jeopardising our conceptual openness to the layout of reality.

It has been suggested that for an adequate understanding of McDowell's views we have to place them against the metaphilosophical background of *quietism*.[13] McDowell - following Wittgenstein -

---

[11] McDowell, *Mind and World*. Harvard UP 1994. McDowell, 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', in *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXVIII (1982), pp. 459-479. (This article is reprinted in McDowell, *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Harvard UP 1998, pp. 369-394.)

[12] James Conant has pointed out to me that McDowell, in his 1982 article, cuts into a 'Cartesian' problematic, focusing on the critique of the interface theory of perception, while McDowell's *Mind and World* deals with a more 'Kantian' problematic concerned with broader epistemological and metaphysical issues. In 1994 the focus is no longer so much on the problem of knowledge in terms of the relationship between our senses and the external world, as on the problem of intelligibility and our mindedness überhaupt. James Conant, *Varieties of Scepticism*. forthcoming. However, in the argumentation supporting McDowell's main claims in *Mind and World*, the disjunctive view of perception still plays a central role.

[13] Jonathan M. Weinberg, 'John McDowell, *Mind and World*', in Noûs 32 2 (1998), pp. 247-264. Cf. footnote 22.

opposes the idea that '… a basis for a judgement must be something on which we have a firmer cognitive purchase than we do on the judgement itself'.[14] And it seems that the interpretation McDowell gives of Wittgenstein shows us a way to escape oscillation between metaphysical realism and anti-realism, without the need for a constructive theory. For any attempt to formulate such a theory will end up at one of the two opposite poles, whereas an attempt that tries to escape the oscillation will, in the pursuit of justification, ultimately reach bedrock.[15] This does not mean, pace Rorty, that there is nothing more to say about notions such as truth, meaning, reference and knowledge; but it does mean that any understanding of these notions will have to link up to the way we use our language and live our lives. In this way, philosophy indeed reaches bedrock, ending in the moment where we bring back our words 'from their metaphysical to their everyday use'.[16]

One of the misguided attempts to formulate a firm basis for our judgements is - at the level of a theory of perception - the notion of an interface between our thoughts and beliefs about the world and the world itself. This notion of an epistemic intermediary is, as I have mentioned, criticised by both Davidson and McDowell, but in McDowell's case it is connected with his quietist position. Davidson sees no need for an intermediary because it is enough to realise that we are causally connected and in unmediated touch all along with the world that makes our sentences true or false. I will come back later to Davidson's views on perception, causation and the emergence of thought.

McDowell's critique of the interface theory of perception narrows down to his critique of the so-called 'highest common factor' in experience. This highest common factor view tells us that what is available in experience in a deceptive case and what is available in a non-deceptive case must be alike - say, when I look and have the experience of seeing a pen case in front of me; deceptive cases (like illusions and hallucinations) are experientially indistinguishable from veridical cases, in which our experience truly matches how things are in the world. This highest common factor view suggests an understanding of our experience of the world in which an epistemic intermediary functions as the supplier of appearances. At best such an interface is a defeasible ground for knowledge.

McDowell opposes that view by putting forward the so-called disjunctive view of perception. As he puts it, '… the object of experience in the deceptive case is a mere appearance. But we are not to accept that in the non-deceptive case 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 experience.'[17]

The possibility of, you might say, a formal identity between our experience and the world, in the case of a veridical experience, makes the world accessible in principle. The world is 'embraceable in thought'. Our mind 'penetrates deep into reality', to use a phrase from Putnam, even though the

---

[14] 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', p. 471.
[15] Cf. PI §211.
[16] PI §116.
[17] 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', p. 470

deceptive experience and the non-deceptive one are qualitatively indistinguishable, and even though our epistemic access to the fact that such-and-such is the case is defeasible. McDowell differentiates here between our actual thinking and judging that such-and-such is the case, which is a defeasible practice, and the fact that what is disclosed in experience must be thinkable, must be a thinkable content. He argues that the rational constraint on thought 'comes from outside *thinking*, but not from outside what is *thinkable*'.[18]

Whether or not the content of this prejudgemental experience is fully conceptual is not a question I will pursue here.[19] Nor will I go any further into how McDowell, in *Mind and World,* uses the view that the world is 'embraceable in thought' to argue for an extrapolation of the logical space of reason, and thereupon for the 're-enchantment of nature'.[20] Instead I want to direct your attention to the following: Let us assume McDowell is right, and that the disjunctive view makes clear that we do not have to 'flee from the certainty that we ... have' – since after all we are - in the case of a veridical experience - in unmediated contact with the world. Does that bring us the quietude we are longing for? Does it take away the discomfort aroused by the intrusive and provoking questions of the sceptic?

After all, we are in no way able to articulate unequivocally *what* is disclosed in veridical experience. We know - in an ordinary sense of 'knowing' - that when we are not misled, our experience does *not* fall short of the facts we perceive. But we cannot tell *whether* this openness is the case, or *how* to know whether it is the case, or furthermore, *what it means* that we are open to the fact that such-and-such is the case. What difference does it make for our stance in life when we cannot articulate that openness to the facts in a way that bypasses our fallible cognisance and reserved acquaintance with the world? What is the status, what is the merit, of this being open to the world, if that is what we have to presuppose all along and have to think beforehand, have to take as 'fundamental'.

So in one respect it seems we are falling back into the predicament where sceptical worries are just as alive as before. But in another sense we have made some progress. The world is not lost. The world is there – all the time, alongside and interwoven with our experience of it. (That is a truism, as Wittgenstein reminded us, but it is disguised as a paradox as well.[21]) The prejudgemental content of that experience may be nonconceptual, or 'preconceptual' as Putnam has recently proposed, or 'conceptual' as McDowell believes. But our thoughts about it - whether veridical or not - are dependent on and fuelled by the world as disclosed in veridical experience. Our thoughts belong to the world and the world belongs to our thoughts. Reality penetrates our mind deeply, to reverse Putnam's phrase. In our receptive

---

[18] *Mind and World*, p. 28.
[19] Cf. *The Threefold Cord*, p. 156 f.
[20] I will also not go into the criticism that has been formulated of his disjunctive view of perception, for instance by Simon Glendinning, who radicalised the openness view by renouncing the first-personal experiential standing of a subject over against 'external facts'. Simon Glendinning and Max De Gaynesford, 'John McDowell on Experience: Open to the Sceptic?', in *Metaphilosophy* 29 1/2 (1998), pp. 20-34.
[21] Cf. PI §95.

stance we are open to the facts all along and we take in the world, which is embraceable in thought, although no constructive story can be told about how that works.

The *quietist* stance[22] – this relinquishment of the need for a constructive philosophical account of how our mind, knowledge and language hook on to the world – is well expressed by Wittgenstein when he says: 'This is connected … with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description … The difficulty here is: to stop.'[23] The sceptical strategy was to question the possibility of bridging the gap between our beliefs about the world and the world itself. But the opening step of the sceptical strategy is already a step too far, viz. the problematic presumption that the world, and the facts it is made of, is something that can be considered by itself first, before asking the seemingly pressing question of how to close the gap between the content of our thinking and various bits of the world that may or may not be in accord with that content – as if the world is a sign that has not revealed its secrets yet, and just waits there to be interpreted, to use another image from Wittgenstein. The fact is ignored that, although the world is not made of mind-stuff, and the independence of reality is a sine qua non, there is no sense in considering the world in itself independently of our acquaintance with it, independently of our ordinary beliefs and practices.[24]

I realise I have not said much yet, if anything at all, that might pass for a response to the discomfort I sketched in the beginning. And the question still remains whether the 'quietist' approach of withholding a constructive account of our natural relation to the world bring us the peace we are said to be craving for. Let me pause and sidestep for a moment and approach the issue from another perspective. I will say a bit more about Davidson's ideas on the emergence of thought. Here we find the same difficulty of accounting for what it means that we are open to the world all along.

III

To understand Davidson's views on perception and thought we have to make a distinction between his epistemic holism - the idea that justifications of our beliefs about the world cannot be found outside the

---

[22] James Conant, in expounding on Putnam's interpretation of Wittgenstein, also addresses the issue of quietism (James Conant and Hilary Putnam. 'On Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics: II. James Conant.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97 (1997), pp. 195-222.). I agree with Conant that - contrary to Blackburn's explication of quietism as 'dismissive neutralism' - the question of a constructive philosophical account does not disappear if we just avert our gaze from it by renouncing the problem before making any effort to show that perhaps there was no problem (or merely a nonsense problem) in the first place. I am not sure, though, whether by investing in efforts to understand 'the life we lead with our concepts' (Putnam), we actually will gain understanding in the end. Maybe our spade will always turn somewhere.

[23] Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright) Blackwell 1967, §314.

[24] I am indebted here to Martin Stone, who in 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction' (in A. Crary and Rupert Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*, Routledge 2000, esp. pp. 100-108) gives a detailed reconstruction of this sceptical strategy.

realm of the psychological - and his semantic 'realism' - the idea that those beliefs and other propositional attitudes are nonetheless about a world independent of our thinking. Davidson has summarised his view by stating: 'I am an anti-foundationalist, and I have left the door open for some form of externalism.'[25]

Davidson has repeatedly said he regrets the title of his 1986 article 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'.[26] Commentators - among them McDowell - have criticised his views as overly idealistic, with consequences that are ultimately sceptical. But the overall idea of the article was just to argue that nothing counts as a *reason* for a belief that is not itself a belief. The article does not deny that such beliefs are anchored in the world – the world that causes us to believe the things we do believe. As Davidson had already argued in 1974: '... we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.'[27] It all depends, of course, on how we conceive this anchoring, this unmediated touch with the world – and in particular on how causality and rationality are related and linked together in this context.

In answer to the sceptic, Davidson argues convincingly that questions about how we know things, how knowledge is possible, come after questions about the conditions of meaning and thought. How do sceptics acquire the thoughts that constitute their sceptical worries? How did they once learn the concepts whose reliability they call into question? The issue narrows down to that of the acquisition of primitive perceptual beliefs. That is one of the reasons for the current renewed interest in questions of perception in epistemology. The content of our beliefs about the world is fixed, first of all, by whatever event caused us to have those beliefs, in conjunction with, second, the situations in which we first learned to have beliefs of that kind. So when I now see and believe I have a pen case in front of me, my perceptual belief is determined by the fact that there is actually a pen case out in front of me here and now, which causes me to believe that it is there. And the content of my belief is also framed by the situation in which I learned to talk about pen cases, about 'in front of me', about 'here' and about 'now'.

The acquisition of perceptual beliefs occurs in situations where we are introduced to the truth-conditions of sentences. That is possible only when a given situation is shared with others, who also interact with the world and with whom I interact in my turn.[28] This triangular situation, which relates the speaker, the other and the world, is essential for having any propositional attitudes at all. We would not be able to discriminate between the truth or falsity of beliefs and thoughts - the idea of getting it

---

[25] Davidson, 'The Problem of Objectivity', in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 57 2 (1995), p. 219.

[26] Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in Ernest Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Blackwell 1986, pp. 307-319.

[27] Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in Davidson, *Truth and Interpretation*, p. 198.

[28] 'The ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating speaker, interpreter, and the world, determines the contents of thought and speech.' Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', in *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 6 (1990), p. 325.

right or getting it wrong - if it were not in interaction with the world, and in interaction with others whose reactions and interactions with the world, and with us, we more or less share.

But it is also the case that when we first learned to use a word or a sentence, the idea of a mistake has no application; in the beginning there is no room for error. Our thoughts about the world cannot fall short of the world, because that is the situation where we have acquired our primitive perceptual beliefs and thoughts in the first place. There is no room for sceptical questions in that situation. Only after we have acquired some beliefs about the world, by working our way into the ontology of objects and events, does the interaction with others create the space for applying the concepts of truth and error, of getting it right and getting it wrong. Then the realm of rationality is disclosed and the holistic machinery of the mental is set in motion.

We have here three perspectives on what it is to have beliefs and thoughts. First, our beliefs are caused by the world – an extensional relation that has no bearing on the way these beliefs are justified. Second, our beliefs are justifiable in relation to other beliefs that we acquire in our acquaintance with the world and other people – and it is here that Davidson's holism of the intentional and his notion of 'charity' comes in. And third, our beliefs and thoughts emerge in a way that does not fall short of the facts they are about, and in which the concepts of truth and error have no application yet. Our unmediated touch with the world is guaranteed by the interplay of these three perspectives. But it is still unclear *how* that works.

In a recent article on the emergence of thought,[29] Davidson goes into this matter further and attempts to describe the stages that lead up to thought and belief. But he admits that a real understanding of the emergence of thought faces conceptual difficulties that cannot be overcome so easily. The only thing he can do is to describe the conditions that have to be fulfilled for thought to exist at all. First there is the triangular situation that provides the space for interaction to occur with other creatures and with the world – a situation we share with animals. And there is the acquisition of language, whose expressive power enables us to communicate our thoughts about the world to others - in particular learning the use of quantifiers, because they enable us to predicate properties of objects and events.

But it is still not possible to overcome the conceptual difficulties we are faced with when we try to grasp just what it means that (in the beginning) our beliefs about the world do not fall short of the facts they are about. We can establish more or less that this has to be the case, but we cannot articulate this 'fact of life'. 'What we lack is a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps'[30], and this is not only a problem for developmental psychology, but for philosophy too. We can formulate some necessary conditions for the emergence of thought, but, as Wittgenstein noted, 'we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words'[31] that would enable us to account for the *sufficient* conditions – to grasp fully what the acquisition of thought and language really amounts to. In a recorded conversation

---

[29] Davidson, 'The Emergence of Thought', in *Erkenntnis* 51 (1999) pp. 7-17.
[30] 'The Emergence of Thought', p. 11.
[31] PI §122.

with Barry Stroud, Davidson has observed: 'There is no definition or analysis of intentional states on the basis of extensional facts, or on the basis of the triangular situation alone. How to make the jump from just these interactions to thought, meaning, and so forth, I have no idea, and, I am convinced it can't be done.'[32]

So here we face the same difficulty as we encountered with McDowell's account of 'natural realism'. We do not understand, and perhaps we can never understand, *what it means* that we are open to the fact that such-and-such is the case at the very moment we acquire our basic beliefs about them. We can accept that we were not misled at the moment we acquired our primitive perceptual beliefs; or better: the idea of misleading has no application there. And we also can accept - following McDowell - that when we are not misled, our experience does not fall short of the facts we perceive. But we face insurmountable obstacles in articulating the merits of this 'fact' of life.

So much for my description of the metaphysical predicament *before* the discomfort aroused by it is claimed to be overcome; so much for my attempt 'to get a clear view … of the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved'[33]. I will conclude with a few words about what this observation might mean: what it comes down to if we say we do not understand, and cannot understand, what it means that we are open to the world all along.

[32] *Donald Davidson in Conversation: Stroud Discussion.* (video) London: Philosophy International, The London School of Economics, 1997, 58' 56'' f.
[33] PI §125.

IV

Behind my considerations about our natural relation to the world is the following dialogue on rule-following from *Philosophical Investigations*, where the interlocutor says: 'But I don't mean that what I do now (in grasping a sense) determines the future use *causally* and as a matter of experience, but that in a *queer* way, the use itself is in some sense present.' Wittgenstein (if indeed it is Wittgenstein) answers: 'But of course it is, "in some sense"! Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression "in a queer way".'[34] The question I want to ask now is the following: In what respects may we (or may we not) regard the circumstance that our experience and belief do not stop short of the fact as something that has nothing strange about it – as something that, being a truism, no more deserves our wonder than the fact that there is a world in the first place?

First, as the Davidsonian account of the mental tries to show us, there is nothing strange about the way we *justify* our beliefs about the world. And second, the quietist disjunctive view of perception and the tentative account of the emergence of thought try to show us *that* we are open to how things are all along. So in that respect, too, there is nothing strange about our natural relation to the world. We do not have to slide back into either platonism or reductionism in order to account for our ability to grasp a sense, to follow a rule or to embrace the world in thought. But at the same time, we do not seem to really understand *how* that works. No positive philosophical account can be given of our pre-reflexive acquaintanceship with the world and of our initiation and maturation into the realm of rationality.

Quietism seems to be the only way out of the dilemma. But, as Cavell has reminded us again and again, although 'our relation to the world as a whole … is not one of knowing',[35] we also have to acknowledge the *other* 'truth of scepticism': that we are not only intimately tied to the world, but also tied to our epistemic stance towards it. That is the problem with understanding the real drift of the often-cited phrase that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'.[36] The difficulty is that '... we want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand ...'[37]

'But of course it is …!' says Wittgenstein. 'Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression "in a queer way".' As a critique of platonism and reductionism we can and must accept Wittgenstein's rebuke of the epistemologist who is craving for what we cannot have. But it would be a mistake to interpret his phrase as rejecting the *uneasiness* – queerness if you like – which is geared into our lives all along, and which cannot be tempered or expelled so easily, either by quietism or by any other diagnostic or therapeutic endeavour whatsoever.

---

[34] PI §195.
[35] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford UP 1979, p. 45.
[36] PI §43.
[37] PI §89.

What I have tried to say in referring to McDowell's and Davidson's views on perception is, first, that there are good reasons for claiming that our beliefs and thoughts about the world *are* about the world, and that we are in intimate, unmediated, pre-judgemental contact with the world all along; and second, that there is no way we can articulate that openness - no way that we can, in that respect, bring comfort to the philosophical scene. We can *indicate* our intimacy with the world, but we cannot *articulate* this 'fact of life'. No comforting or soothing story can relieve us from the queerness of that fact. The sceptic may be rebuked, but the metaphysical predicament is still there.

Wittgenstein – who made us aware that 'the results of philosophy are the uncovering of … bumps that the understanding has got by running his head up against the limits of language' – also believed that even though 'this running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless', it 'is a tendency in the human mind which [we] cannot help respecting deeply …'.[38] Maybe it is time to stop aiming our efforts at bringing peace to philosophy. Maybe it is time to stop trying to free ourselves of the discomfort aroused by the metaphysical predicament. It is time instead to start focussing on the question of what it means that we cannot do so.[39]

It was Wittgenstein again who spoke about the *civil status* of the difficulties we are facing - about the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved.[40] In our eagerness to relieve ourselves of the disquietude and to offer an intelligent reply to the sceptic, we have overlooked the fact that the work of philosophy is also to remind us of the hopelessness of *that* project. If there is a sense in which the task of philosophy is to continue metaphysical discussion, then it consists in assembling reminders for that purpose. That is metaphysics as it must be carried through even after its fall.

---

[38] Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics'. in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis, Hackett 1933, p. 44.

[39] In an afterword to *The Threefold Cord*, p. 174, Hilary Putnam writes, in a context where the same 'mystery' is discussed: 'Many things deserve our wonder, but the formulation of an intelligible question requires more than wonder.' I do not pretend to have formulated an intelligible question, but what I do hope to have done is to articulate to a small extent the frame within which the question about our natural relation to the world must be posed.

[40] Cf PI §125.