

Idling and Sidling Towards Philosophical Peace

Huw Price

Centre for Time · University of Sydney



- 1 Introduction
- 2 Sidling on one hand
- 3 Idling on the other hand

1 Introduction

- Five philosophical errors
- Giving philosophy peace
- Good metaphysics or no metaphysics?
- My project: boxing-in the third way

2 Sidling on one hand

3 Idling on the other hand

Avoiding five errors

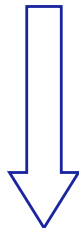
Avoiding five errors

The Myth of the Given



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The Myth of the Given

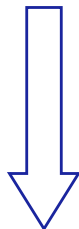


Bare naturalism

Rampant platonism

Avoiding five errors

The Myth of the Given



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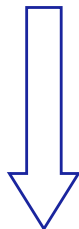


Idealism/anti-realism

Frictionless spinning
in the void

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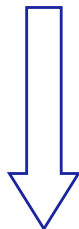
Naturalized platonism
("Re-enchanting nature")

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Good metaphysics or no metaphysics?

“[N]othing but bad metaphysics suggests that the standards in ethics must somehow be constructed out of facts of disenchanted nature.” (MVR, 187)

“[I]t 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 . . . The detranscendentalized analogue of Kant’s picture that empiricist realism amounts to is not the educated common sense picture it represents itself as being; it is shallow metaphysics.” (MVR, 182)

My issue: Is the right philosophical pacifier – and is McDowell’s *proposed* pacifier – a *better, deeper* metaphysics? Or does it renounce *metaphysics* altogether, in favour of some other mode of philosophical enquiry (or, perhaps, in favour of a blanket quietism)?

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My project

- I want to try to constrain McDowell's third path from two sides – one “sidling”, the other “idling” – to see if I can reach a point at which it must jump one way or other.
- And I want the *character* of that choice to be a choice between an uncomfortable *metaphysical* commitment, on one side, and an acceptance of “*sideways*” though *non-metaphysical philosophical stance*, on the other.

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- Sellars and McDowell
- Deflating “describing”
- Revision, idealism and anti-realism?
- Getting sidling right

3 Idling on the other hand

A fellow pluralist . . .

"Now, once it is granted . . . that empiricism in moral philosophy is compatible with the recognition that 'ought' has as distinguished a role in discourse as descriptive and logical terms, in particular that we reason rather than 'reason' concerning *ought*, and once the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse, are not *inferior*, just *different*.

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"We have learned the hard way that the core truth of 'emotivism' is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of the fact, so properly stressed (if mis-assimilated to the model of describing) by 'ethical rationalists,' that ethical discourse as *ethical discourse* is a mode of rational discourse.

It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume's philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, *ungrudging* recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the 'metaphysical rationalists' laid such stress but also mis-assimilated to describing." [CDCM, §82]

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Comparing Sellars and McDowell

Similarities

- Sellars and McDowell are both pluralists, non-reductionists, and non-“second-rate-ists” (e.g., about ethical discourse).
- They agree that “ethical discourse is a mode of rational discourse”.

Apparent differences

- Sellars thinks:
 - That there is nevertheless something *right* about the empiricist claim that ethical (and modal) vocabulary is not in the business of “describing reality”.
 - That there is a fruitful perspective “from sideways-on”, examining the distinctive “function” or logical role of these vocabularies – and, as for the empiricists, that this perspective provides an alternative to metaphysics (as a route to philosophical illumination about the matters in question).

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Deflating “describing”?

A tempting move¹

- Deflate “describing”, in order to undermine Sellars’ claim that ethical (and modal) vocabulary is not in the business of “describing reality”.

Yes, but ...

- What does this do to Sellars’ *positive* program – his “sideways”, explanatory *alternative* to metaphysics?
- It makes no difference to his positive claims about the functions of ethical and modal vocabulary (because a *deflated* notion of description doesn’t provide any sort of *rival* theory).

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²In the lives of natural creatures like us – hence its naturalism.

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- Let’s call this modified Sellarsian view “Sellars-lite” – roughly, it is Sellars minus the descriptive/non-descriptive “Bifurcation Thesis”.
- Questions:
 - Does Sellars-lite fall into the traps that McDowell takes to lie in wait for other varieties (especially empiricist varieties) of naturalism, such as *reductionism* and *projectivism*?
 - Is Sellars-lite guilty, e.g., of *revisionism*, *idealism* or *anti-realism*?

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Revisionism?

McDowell on a characteristic philosophical failing:

Ordinary modern philosophy addresses its derivative dualisms in a characteristic way. It takes a stand on one side of a gulf it aims to bridge, accepting without question the way its target dualism conceives the chosen side. Then it **constructs** something as close as possible to the conception of the other side that figured in the problems, out of materials that are unproblematically available where it has taken its stand.

Of course there no longer seems to be a gulf, but the result is bound to look more or less revisionist. . . . Phenomenalism is a good example of a philosophical construction with this traditional shape (MW, 94)

Comments:

- Sellars-lite isn't offering a construction of anything – that would be metaphysics, which is a different business entirely.
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If there is nothing to the normative structure within which meaning comes into view except, say, acceptances and rejections of bits of behaviour by the community at large, then how things **are**—how things can be said to be with a correctness that must partly consist in being faithful to the meanings one would exploit if one said that they are thus and so—cannot be independent of the community's ratifying the judgements that things are thus and so. (MW, 93)

Challenge: The view allows no gap between its *being the case* that P and *the community's ratifying the judgement* that P.

Response:

- The view I have in mind isn't offering truth conditions for P – again, that would be (something like) metaphysics, which is a different business entirely (and depends on the kind of sideways view I reject).
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Isn't the view committed to **anti-realism** – to *denying* that there are really any values, causes, meanings, or whatever?

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- No, that would be metaphysics.
- Again, it would presuppose an illegitimate "external" standpoint from which to address the question whether there are such things (or whether they are "real").
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After Carnap

Influenced by ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the [Vienna] Circle **rejected both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality . . .**; the same was the case for both the thesis of the reality of universals . . . and the nominalistic thesis that they are not real

It is therefore not correct to classify the members of the Vienna Circle as nominalists, as is sometimes done. However, if we look at the basic anti-metaphysical . . . attitude of most nominalists . . . , then it is, of course, true to say that the Vienna Circle was much closer to those philosophers than to their opponents. [Carnap 1950, 215]

Compare McDowell:

Some of these essays can thus be taken to defend a version of what has been called “moral realism”. But that label would risk obscuring the fact that what I urge is more negative than positive; my stance in these essays is better described as “anti-anti-realism” than as “realism”. What I urge is that anti-realist positions such as emotivism and its sophisticated descendants, all the way down to Simon Blackburn’s projectivist quasi-realism, are responses to a misconception of the significance of the obvious fact that ethical, and more generally evaluative, thinking is not science. (MVR, *iii*).

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Aside: Is Blackburn really an anti-realist?

“What then is the mistake of describing [quasi-realism] as holding that ‘we talk as if there are necessities when really there are none’? It is the failure to notice that the quasi-realist need allow no sense to what follows the ‘as if’ *except* one in which it is true. And conversely he need allow no sense to the contrasting proposition in which it in turn is true.” [Blackburn, ‘Morals and modals’.]

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Q. 18. Aren't you really trying to defend our right to talk 'as if' there were moral truths, although in your view *there aren't any really*?

Ans. No, no, no. I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong, when 'really' it isn't wrong. I say that it is wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of a moral truth, so there are moral truths).

This misinterpretation is curiously common. Anyone advancing it must believe themselves to have some more robust, metaphysically heavyweight conception of what it would be for there to be moral truths REALLY, and compared with this genuine article, I only have us talking *as if* there are moral truths REALLY. I deny that there is any such coherent conception.

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"What then is the mistake of describing [quasi-realism] as holding that 'we talk as if there are necessities when really there are none'? It is the failure to notice that the quasi-realist need allow no sense to what follows the 'as if' *except* one in which it is true. And conversely he need allow no sense to the contrasting proposition in which it in turn is true." [Blackburn, 'Morals and modals'.]

Getting sidling right

Claim:

There is an explicitly non-metaphysical option on the table here. (“Sellars-lite”)

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- It is not idealist, or (necessarily) revisionist, or anti-realist. (On the contrary, it is like McDowell’s own view in being *anti-anti-realist* – though *anti-REALIST*, too!)
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- 1 Introduction
- 2 Sidling on one hand
- 3 Idling on the other hand**
 - How idle can we be?
 - Contingency and plurality
 - McDowell = Sellars-lite?
 - Conclusion

A quietist defence of “rampant platonism”?

Imagine this opponent (the “hyperquietist”, perhaps):

“i am what mcdowell terms a ‘rampant platonist’.

however, i prefer not to call myself ‘rampant’. when it comes to philosophical theory, i am a quietist – a mouse, not a lion!

and i prefer not to call myself a ‘platonist’, because that suggests a metaphysical viewpoint, and again, i am a quietist.

so i prefer to call myself simply a commonsense pluralist.¹

i don’t see any need for mcdowell’s ‘third way’ – to me, that smacks of the philosophical excesses i have left behind.”

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- These facts are second nature (let's suppose) to well-brought-up Italians – but not, presumably, to well-brought-up members of any conceivable community.

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Hirsute naturalist with loud tie

Handling contingency

McDowell on the subjectivity of some subject matters:

Values are not brutally there—not there independently of our sensibility—any more than colours are: though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular apparent experience of them. (MVR, 146)

Claim:

- If we want to combine this thought with a recognition that our sensibilities might well have been *different* – and if want to avoid both an implausible *idealism* and the kind of *fla-footed pluralism* that lay in wait for the hyperquietist – then we need to put the variability at the level of language games (and the contingencies on which they depend), not in *metaphysical* terms.
- In other words, we need the modest (non-metaphysical) “sideways” perspective of Sellars-lite.

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Is McDowell Sellars-lite?

McDowell on the suggestion that his view is a form of projectivism:

Can a projectivist claim that the position I have outlined is at best a notational variant, perhaps an inferior notational variant, of his own position?

It would be inferior if, in eschewing the projectivist metaphysical framework, it obscured some important truth. But what truth would that be? (MVR, 147)

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Good metaphysics or no metaphysics?

“[N]othing but bad metaphysics suggests that the standards in ethics must somehow be constructed out of facts of disenchanted nature.” (MVR, 187)

Our issue

- Is the path to philosophical peace to find a better metaphysics?
- Or to renounce *metaphysics* altogether, in favour of some other mode of philosophical enquiry (or blanket quietism)?

My answer

- To renounce metaphysics in favour of another mode of philosophical enquiry ...
- ... which is significantly sideways.

Good metaphysics or no metaphysics?

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'Leaning Tower with Pentagram', Groom, TX.

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