Radical internalism meets radical externalism or: Smithies' epistemology transcendentalised

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Abstract

In *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness* (2019), Declan Smithies has carried out a thorough radical internalist programme. Along the way, he compares and contrasts many different views, including a group he calls “radical externalism”. From the labels, it might seem that radical internalism and radical externalism must be very different in their core commitments. In this short note, I will single out a version of radical externalism—factivism, more specifically John McDowell’s version (McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., McDowell, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55:877–893, 1995, McDowell, J. (2011). *Perception as a capacity for knowledge*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.)—and argue that actually this version has many similarities with Smithies radical internalism. Where there are differences, they do not obviously lie at the internalist/externalist juncture. The main point of this comparison is that philosophical positions that seem very different can share much common ground, and in seeing this, one can be in a better position to understand the crucial points of disagreement.

Keyword Radical internalism · Radical externalism · Factivism · Consciousness · Reason · Evidence

1 State of play

In the Acknowledgement of *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness*, Declan Smithies has this intriguing passage:

My philosophy of mind tutorials with David Mackie covered two major challenges for physicalism: the problem of explaining consciousness and the problem of explaining rationality. I was sure these two problems must be connected

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somehow, but the philosophers on my reading list seemed to treat them quite differently. After finals, while reading John McDowell's fascinating book *Mind and World*, I began to see how the two problems might be connected in the philosophy of perception (2019, p. xi).

Together with other parts of the book, this passage is intriguing on many fronts, for example:

- 1) Despite this source of inspiration, in the book, Smithies does not explicitly discuss McDowell's work substantively.
- 2) To the extent that Smithies does discuss McDowell's factivism, their perspectives seem radically different.
- 3) McDowell does not often discuss consciousness explicitly, but Smithies here emphasises the fact that *Mind and World* helped him see how problems concerning consciousness and concerning rationality link together.
- 4) Smithies states specifically that he "began to see how the two problems might be connected in the philosophy of perception", but actually his book is more about how the two problems might be connected in general.

These points are not listed as criticisms; they only serve as a general background that hopefully can generate enough interests for some readers. In this short note, I will highlight some striking similarities between Smithies and McDowell in relation to consciousness and rationality, and the moral is that views that look very different can actually share much common ground. In this specific case, where there are differences, they do not obviously lie at the internalist/externalist juncture. It is the hope of the current author that in seeing this one can be in a better position to understand the crucial points of disagreement.

2 Smithies' radical internalism: selective highlights

The Epistemic Role of Consciousness is a tour de force: it contains many significant views and intricate arguments, and Smithies has done an excellent job in summarising what he has done in the book at appropriate points. It makes no sense to provide a semi-comprehensive summary of the book on this occasion; some book reviews can also be consulted for that purpose (e.g. Cheng, 2022; Howell, 2020). In this section, therefore, I will only highlight points that are directly relevant to the main purpose here, i.e. comparing Smithies and McDowell in relation to consciousness and rationality.

Why is it apt to call Smithies' overall picture "radical internalism"? After all, Smithies has not used this term to label his own view. I submit there are at least two reasons, the broadness and the deepness. For the former, he holds internalism for consciousness, representational content, and evidence; for the latter, he believes *no* element beyond the subject's skin plays any role in determining consciousness, representational content, and evidence. The second point can be more clearly seen when we compare it with a compromise and composite view, according to which

consciousness, representational content, and evidence supervene on *both* elements within and beyond the subject's skin. So, this initial labelling seems justified.¹

Now the loci for our purposes are ch.2 Representation, where Smithies mainly argues for representationalism, and ch.3 Perception, where he mainly argues for phenomenal internalism, the view that "perceptual experience justifies beliefs about the external world because its phenomenal character is a way of representing content with phenomenal force" (p. 111). As promised, I shall not summarise these points in a semi-comprehensive manner; rather, I will only discuss what are mostly relevant to the comparison with McDowell's factivism. To make sure these points are easy enough to follow, I will again list them as separate items, without implying that there is no close connection between them.

- a. The conceptual grounding thesis has it that "[a]ll conceptual mental representation is either conscious or grounded in consciousness" (p. 35). There are different formulations of it in the book, but for our purposes, this does not matter. What is important is that although this view is not the main point of ch.2, it is something Smithies accepts (unlike representational grounding thesis, for example), and he further holds that "[t]he epistemic grounding thesis... provides a plausible explanation of the conceptual grounding thesis" (p. 72). The epistemic grounding thesis has it that "[a]ll mental representation that plays an epistemic role in the justification of belief is either conscious or grounded in consciousness" (p. 36).
- b. The main goal of ch.3 "is to examine what perception *must be like* in order to play this justifying role" (p. 74; emphasis added). Smithies' answer is that "the presentational force of perceptual experience explains both its distinctive phenomenal character and its distinctive epistemic role" (p. 96).
- c. A subsidiary goal of ch.3 is to argue against radical externalisms, including reliabilism, factivism, and etiologism. For our purposes, we need only to look into factivism, which holds that "[n]ecessarily, a perceptual experience with the content that *p* justifies believing that *p* only if you veridically perceive that *p*" (p. 98). Smithies offers a general form of argument against radical externalism in p. 99, and some detailed defence of its premisses from p. 99 to p. 103, which we will come back to in Section 3.

For those who have read ch.2 and ch.3 of the book, they may find that these points take up only a small portion of what Smithies has covered, but again here the point is to highlight elements that are relevant to our comparisons. In Section 3,

¹ Here are some references for the textual evidence: for internalism for consciousness, see his remarks on a brain-in-a-vat having "exactly the same phenomenal character as it does in the real-world scenario ..." (p. 202). Internalism for representational content follows from this view on BIV plus "Representationalism about Perceptual Experience: Every perceptual experience has phenomenal character that is identical with the property of representing some content with presentational force" (p. 91). Internalism for evidence is derived by further adopting "The Content Principle: Every experience that represents that *p* with presentational force thereby provides immediate, defeasible justification to believe that *p*" (p. 92). And since BIV by definition does not go beyond one's skin, the second point holds too.

I will envisage a potential exchange between these two authors, and consider some philosophical implications.

3 Challenges from McDowell's factivism

McDowell's relevant ideas are too rich to be meaningfully summarised in a few sentences, and to attempt to summarise them will actually become a distraction. Therefore, what I will do here is to stick to Smithies' original contexts, and envisage what McDowell would react to Smithies' moves. I shall begin with item b, i.e. Smithies sets out "to examine what perception must be like in order to play this justifying role". Although Smithies himself does not think in these terms, this strategy is worthy the name of "transcendental"²; the idea can be formulated as follows:

Transcendental phenomenal internalism The possibility of perceptual justification presupposes the presentational force of perceptual experience.

This is not, to be sure, Smithies' own wordings; for example, in the formulation cited above, he uses "because" ("perceptual experience justifies beliefs about the external world because ..."), which is not normally read as indicating necessary conditions. However, at some point he does come close to this transcendental reading: "the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is both *necessary and sufficient* for justifying beliefs about the external world" (p. 111; emphasis added). However, another worry is that he does not mention *the possibility* of perceptual justification, but when he writes that he aims "to examine what perception must be like in order to play this justifying role", he comes close to say "in order to ensure the possibility of perceptual justification". It should be agreed that this paraphrase is not synonymous with the original statement, but it does not seem a stretch to paraphrase in this way, and after doing so, it is clearly seen that Smithies' project here is in effect a transcendental one: the possibility of perceptual justification presupposes or requires *the presentational force* of perceptual experience.

Now, the first comparison with McDowell comes in. For McDowell, the possibility of perceptual justification requires *the conceptual contents* of perceptual experience (1994; let's not worry about McDowell scholarship too much here, given the main line). There is no immediate inconsistency between McDowell's and Smithies' views here: the possibility of perceptual justifications can have multiple transcendental *cum* necessary conditions, (say) one being perceptual experiences have presentational forces, and another being perceptual experiences have conceptual contents (exclusively). There are two potential tensions here. The first tension is that as quoted above, Smithies holds that phenomenal characters are by themselves *sufficient* for justification, which means that conceptual capacities need not be invoked

² I briefly indicated this in my book review (2021a); here I have slightly more space to elaborate this. The nature of transcendental arguments is a huge and controversial topic; for my take in this area, see Cheng (in preparation).

to jointly support justification. One possible reaction is to soften Smithies' claim so that the tension can disappear; after all, sufficiency claims are often too strong to be defensible.³ The other potential tension looms large if we consider McDowell's thesis of the "unboundedness of the conceptual" (1994, lecture II), which is naturally read as a version of content externalism. Be that as it may, content externalism here is extraneous to transcendental conceptualism per se, so it would be more interesting if we focus on the transcendental aspect of the two projects. This brings us to item a.

The conceptual grounding thesis has it that all conceptual mental representation is either conscious or grounded in consciousness. McDowell is notoriously not concerned with consciousness as such, at least not explicitly. He sometimes uses the term "sensory consciousness" (2005, 2006), but it is always in passing and without substantive elaborations. Perhaps one hint can be found here:

Not, of course, that we cannot distinguish sapience from sentience. But they are not two simply different problem areas: we get into trouble over sentience because we misconceive the role of sapience in constituting our sentient life. (1989, p. 269)

It is natural to read "sentience" as consciousness, and "sapience" as rationality and intentionality, including conceptual capacities. So it is safe to interpret McDowell as saying that if we misconceive the role of conceptual capacities (amongst other things), we get into trouble over consciousness. Now, consider again the conceptual grounding thesis, which has it that all conceptual mental representation is either conscious or grounded in consciousness. It is of course premature to jump to the conclusion that McDowell has that thesis in mind; indeed, it might be more apt to speculate that he holds its opposite, i.e. sensory consciousness is either conceptual or grounded in conceptual capacities. Here we do not have enough clue to be certain, but the point of the above discussion is that Smithies and McDowell have much in common, at least in spirit, in items a and b. It can even be further speculated that McDowell might hold that perceptual experiences have the presentational force they do due to the conceptual capacities operative in those very experiences, but I will leave these for future occasions.⁴

What about item c? Even if items a and b are more or less common grounds shared by the two authors, item c is where the disagreement emerges. To evaluate the situation here, we need to look into Smithies' discussions around p. 99 carefully. Let me quote his argument in full, though I will alter the way he numbers the premisses and the conclusion:

- P1. Subjects in the bad case form the same beliefs as subjects in the good case.
- P2. If perceptual experience doesn't provide equal justification for belief in the good case and the bad case, then subjects in the bad case are less rational than

³ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer pointing out this problem.

⁴ In discussing the conceptual grounding thesis, Smithies takes issues with Davies (1995), Evans (1982), and Campbell (2002). Although these philosophers all hold different views, an Oxford trend can still be seen implicitly in the background, so the affinities with McDowell is to be expected.

subjects in the good case insofar as they form the same beliefs as subjects in the good case.

P3. Subjects in the bad case are no less rational than subjects in the good case.

C. Perceptual experience provides equal justification for belief in the good case and the bad case.

On P1, Smithies rightly points out that proponents of *de re* beliefs would disagree at that point, but for our purposes, we do not go into that. He then states that P2 is a common ground between internalism and externalism. I dispute this point. For example, McDowell presumably holds that if perceptual experience does not provide equal justification for belief in the good case and the bad case, then subjects in the bad case are *less entitled/warranted with respect to the beliefs in question* than subjects in the good case insofar as they form the same beliefs as subjects in the good case. This can be asserted without implying (the implausible thesis) that subjects in the bad case are *less rational* or *have weaker rational capacities*. How about P3 then? If we have rewritten P2 in the above way, P3 needs to be rephrased as stating that subjects in the bad case are *no less entitled/warranted* than subjects in the good case. And McDowell (and some other externalists) does reject this. Are they right in doing so? In order to make progress here, we need to look into James Pryor's distinction between the good-bad case and the bad-bad case (2001), as Smithies suggests. Let me quote him at length:

In “the good-bad case”, subjects form beliefs that conform to the contents of their experiences, although their experiences are systematically illusory. In the “bad-bad case”, in contrast, subjects form beliefs in conflict with the contents of their illusory experiences owing to the influence of some cognitive delusion. Subjects in both cases are blameless, but those in the good-bad case seem justified, whereas those in the bad-bad case seem unjustified. The challenge for radical externalism is to explain the epistemic difference between subjects in the bad case without conceding that some of them hold justified beliefs. Let's call this “the reverse new evil demon problem” (Smithies, 2019, p. 101).

Why is this a challenge? Smithies succinctly explains that radical externalists often appeal “to a distinction between justification and blamelessness. The suggestion is that although your beliefs are unjustified in the bad case, you nevertheless have an excuse for holding them. Since you have an excuse, you cannot be blamed for holding these beliefs without adequate justification. In the bad case, you are blameless, but irrational or unjustified” (ibid., p. 100). Now, wordings are very important here. It is certainly strange or even wrong to deliver the result that subjects in the bad case are irrational. After all, they might be very good at evaluating evidence and inferential relations. It might also be strange to say they are unjustified, but this is where the real disagreement comes in. Pryor's challenge is that subjects in the good-bad case is epistemically better than subjects in the bad-bad case, but radical externalism's two-way distinction between justification and blamelessness cannot accommodate the three-way distinction between the good case, the good-bad case, and the bad-bad case.

In the following pages, Smithies considers some radical externalists' responses, such as Timothy Williamson's (forthcoming), but not McDowell's. What would McDowell say then? Well, I cannot speak for him, but it seems natural for him to reply that subjects in the good-bad case and in the bad-bad case are both unjustified, though the former is more rational than the latter. I see no obstacle for him to endorse this. What McDowell really needs is that subjects in the bad case are unjustified and therefore *less entitled/warranted* than subjects in the good case; within the bad case, the good-bad case is epistemically better than the bad-bad case in that the former forms beliefs that conform to the contents of their experiences.

In the same context, Smithies raises a specific challenge to factivism, which again I will quote at length:

Suppose that Macbeth undergoes a “seamless transition” from the good case of seeing that there is a dagger before him to the bad case of merely hallucinating that there is a dagger before him. The transition is seamless in the sense that Macbeth cannot know by introspection when it is occurring and it makes no relevant impact on his doxastic attitudes – in particular, he continues to believe that there is a dagger before him with the same high level of confidence throughout. Factivism makes the implausible prediction that Macbeth's belief is justified at the start of this transition but unjustified by the end, since he has more justification for his belief in the good case than the bad case (Smithies, 2019, p. 99)

This is indeed a general problem for any disjunctive approach: if the good case and the bad case can have seamless transitions, it is hard to see how the dichotomy between veridical perceptions and nonveridical perceptions can accommodate it. However, note that justification (and entitlement, if one prefers that) is itself a gradational notion: belief A can be more justified than belief B, which is in turn more justified than belief C, for example. Therefore, we can say that during the seamless transition, Macbeth's relevant belief is continuously losing its justification, without being known by Macbeth himself. Whether there is any threshold for justification is a matter of dispute, to be sure (e.g. Smith, 2018). Macbeth's rational capacities are constant along the way, but he runs out of *epistemic luck* gradually, so he becomes less and less entitled for that specific belief. This should not be surprising, as here the knowledge in question is knowledge of *the external world*, which is largely beyond one's consciousness, or so we shall hope.

4 Roads ahead

So what do all these lead us to? We see that Smithies and McDowell actually share much common ground for items a and b, but disagree with each other strongly concerning item c. However, McDowell seems to be able to answer the relevant challenges, at least initially. Smithies would not be satisfied with the envisaged answers above, but it is safe to conclude that this is an ongoing conversation that is worthy of continuing.

What about my own view? Well, having been working on McDowell scholarship (e.g. Cheng, 2021) for quite a while, I am in general sympathetic with his viewpoint, though I must confess that my instinct has always been broadly internalist. That is one motivation to show that McDowell's and Smithies' agenda are actually not as different as it might seem—at least they largely converge for items a and b, if I am correct. They do significantly differ concerning item c, amongst other things, and at those points I tend to think that McDowell can respond to the challenges, at least to a good extent. I cannot cover more than I have done above due to the space limit, but I hope this note can serve as an invitation for Smithies and others to look into what McDowell has to say on these topics in details, and accommodate potential insights, if there is any.

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