

## THE PRACTICE OF REASON: RATIONALITY, LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

This text attempts to articulate, in broad outline, the concept of the practice of reason and its relationship to education. With this concept I mean to capture the way human thought and action is rationally constrained but without invoking any mental faculty of reason. Stimulated by the work of John Searle, I understand rationality as an integral part of the human capacities for perception, thought and intentionality, with a central role for language in their explanation: as a central part of what it is to lead a human life. I use the work of John McDowell to analyse the rationality of perception and the recent work of Searle to help analyse the rationality of thought and intentionality. However, I go beyond these authors in trying to locate socio-historical constraints on thought and action, mediated through mechanisms of collective intentionality and rationality, together with their grounding in a historically produced and reproduced social ontology. I end with some remarks on education as the practice of reason in that it inducts new generations into the space of reasons and can help them not only navigate this space but also transform it.

**Keywords:** Education. Ontology. Practice of Reason. Rationality. Searle

### RESUMO

Esse texto é uma tentativa de articular o conceito de prática de razão, em linhas gerais, e sua relação com a educação. Com o conceito de prática de razão gostaria de capturar a maneira pela qual o pensamento e a ação humanos são constrangidos, mas sem invocar nenhuma faculdade mental da razão. Estimulado pelo trabalho de John Searle, considero a racionalidade como parte integral das capacidades humanas para a percepção, o pensamento e a intencionalidade, com um papel central para a linguagem na sua explicação: como parte central do que é viver uma vida

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humana. Utilizo o trabalho de John McDowell para analisar a racionalidade da percepção e o trabalho recente de Searle para ajudar na análise da racionalidade do pensamento e da intencionalidade. Contudo, vou além desses autores na tentativa de localizar constrangimentos sócio-históricos ao pensamento e à ação, mediados pelos mecanismos de intencionalidade coletiva e racionalidade coletiva, junto com sua fundamentação numa ontologia social produzida e reproduzida historicamente. Termino com algumas breves reflexões sobre a educação enquanto prática de razão, na medida em que induz novas gerações ao espaço de razões e pode ajudá-las em navegar esse espaço bem como transformá-lo.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação. Ontologia Prática de Razão. Racionalidade. Searle

## Introduction

What is the relationship between rationality and education? This would seem, on the face of it, relatively clear. Surely, many would say, education includes as one of its most important aims helping students become self-determining beings and this, in turn, requires students to be rational in their thought and action. One of the principal aims of education, therefore, should be cultivating reason, to use Harvey Siegel's suggestive phrase. But, depending upon how one interprets this aim, it could imply that children – and possibly adults - are non-rational or, worse, irrational and therefore need education to remedy this unfortunate condition.

This is, I would suggest, how Kant saw the role of education, for example. The capacity for cognition needed developing in the growing child through the cultivation of the cognitive faculty of the understanding. The capacity to act in accordance with one's desires and inclinations involved cultivating the faculty of empirical practical reason - or what we would today call instrumental practical reason. Now, it could be expected that these two faculties would be developed in any normal child in the process of growing up, although Kant emphasised the role of formal education in their development. However, specifically moral action required the cultivation of the faculty of pure practical reason, beyond childhood and from one generation to the next. This probably explains the rather scant attention Kant gives to the former two in his text on pedagogy (Kant, 1996),

emphasising moral education and its basis in the faculty of pure Reason. This suggests that cultivating reason has two dimensions: allowing the cognitive capacities of children to develop together with the capacity they need to act rationally in the instrumental sense (in order to be successful in their life projects and accepted into society) and, additionally, developing the capacity to act according to moral maxims in order to respect the moral law, of which, as intelligible beings, they are also author. This is what could be called the *Bildungsprozess*. It is in this process that rational beings are formed. Of course, Kant understood all three capacities – for cognition, instrumental action and moral action – as grounded in a unifying faculty of Reason (with a capital ‘R’).

It seems clear to me that this Kantian framework is untenable nowadays, in what Habermas has referred to as our post metaphysical intellectual climate. However, I would suggest that the concept of rationality needs to be maintained at the centre of our analysis of thought and action. Otherwise, we would have no normative point of view from which we could evaluate thought and action and this would leave us with no critical perspective from which to analyse belief and action. One of the many problems with Kant’s thought is that it locates this critical point of view in an *a priori* realm of pure reason. It is my firm belief that we can only rescue rationality if we locate it within the facticity and historicity of human life.

In this paper I will explore some aspects of what I want to call the practice of reason. Now, it is important for my purposes to notice that there are at least two senses of what it is to be rational. To the extent that human beings acquire the capacity for cognition, they are, by definition, rational beings: they are able to perceive and have thoughts about the world. All normal human beings will become rational beings, in this sense, unless they suffer some problem in their development. The second sense is what we might call a reflexive form of rationality: the judgement and weighing up of reasons in deliberation about what to believe. A similar distinction can be made with regard to action. To the extent that we acquire the capacity for intentionality and action, we are rational creatures. However, here we can also talk of a reflexive form of rationality: the judgement and weighing up of reasons in deliberation about what to do.

In order to analyse both aspects of rationality we need to overcome a deep prejudice that has haunted Western philosophy since Descartes and Locke: the idea that reason is a faculty of the individual mind. To use a contemporary metaphor, it is as if each human being is born with an operating system like WINDOWS, identical with all others and enabling the use of specific programmes for the accumulation of knowledge and deliberation about what to do. We need to go beyond this idea of reason as a faculty of the mind.

If reason is not a faculty of the mind, written with a capital ‘R’, then what is it? John Searle, in his book *Rationality in Action*, helps here when he says:

There cannot be a separate faculty of rationality distinct from such capacities as those for language, thought, perception, and the various forms of intentionality, because rational constraints are already built into, they are internal to, the structure of intentionality in general and language in particular (Searle, 2001: 22)

If this is correct, then rationality is part of what John McDowell calls our second nature, that is, what makes humans (and maybe some other animals, in a limited form) the specifically evolved species they are. This also helps us understand how rationality is not something extra-worldly, separate from our finite, empirical existence as human beings. It is embedded, so to speak, within the structures of thought and action, in the capacities we use for interpreting and acting in the world.

We also need to overcome another dichotomy prevalent in Western thought: the division of reason into its theoretical and practical uses. In discussions of rationality, it is common to maintain this distinction but I would suggest that this is because we intuitively see them as separate faculties. However, this distinction becomes obsolete if we look at rationality as a human activity. As John Searle has also argued, “theoretical reason is (...) a special case of practical reason”. He goes on:

Rationality in action is always a matter of an agent consciously reasoning in time, under presuppositions of freedom, about what to do now or in the future. In the case of theoretical reason, it is a matter

of what to accept, conclude, or believe; in the case of practical reason, it is a matter of what actions to perform. There is a sense in which all reasoning is practical, because it all issues in doing something. (Searle, 2001: 90)

This leads Searle to reject the traditional focus, in the case of theoretical reason, on formal logic as the subject matter of rationality, i.e., the idea that theoretical reason is governed by rules of inference<sup>1</sup>. Linked to this is a rejection of any attempt at formulating a deductive logic of practical inference. I will return to these points later.

For Searle, then,

The central topic of discussion in a theory of rationality is the activity of human beings (and presumably some other animals ...), selves, engaged in the process of reasoning. (...) *[T]he subject matter of the philosophy of rationality is the activity of reasoning, a goal-directed activity of conscious selves.* (Searle, *ibid*: 95-6, italics in the original)<sup>2</sup>

Now, this might seem overly rationalistic in that it is unrealistic to assume that every time an agent believes something or acts she has gone through some kind of reasoning process whereby she has explicitly evaluated the reasons for believing or acting. It might even be that she could not explain her reasons for belief or action if she was asked to do

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<sup>1</sup> As he says: “*We need to distinguish between entailment and validity as logical relations on the one hand, and inferring as a voluntary activity on the other.* (...) [T]he premises entail the conclusion, so the inference is valid. But there is nothing that forces any actual human being to make that inference. You have the same gap for the human activity of inferring as you do for any other voluntary activity” (2001: 21. Italics in the original).

<sup>2</sup> Or, again: “in the investigation of rationality we should concentrate our attention on reasoning as an activity that actual selves engage in rather than focusing on rationality as an abstract set of logical properties. If we do, then it seems we find in any activity of reasoning a collection of intentional phenomena and a self that tries to organize them so as to produce another intentional state as the end product. In theoretical reason the end product is a belief or acceptance of a proposition; in practical reason it is a prior intention or intention-in-action” (*ibid*: 135). Incidentally, as Searle, notes, this rehabilitates Aristotle’s belief that the end result of practical reason is an action, something systematically rejected in much of the literature on practical reason.

so. As Dan Sperber has noted<sup>3</sup>, we often simply come to a conclusion or perform an action without paying attention to or being aware of the reasons for accepting the conclusion or performing the action. This he calls intuitive inference and contrasts it with reflective inference, where the agent is aware of her reasons for belief or action. This would suggest that we are not talking here of separate systems or faculties of mind but of the same capacity to respond to reasons, only that in the case of perception and intuitive inference the reasons impinge on the mind directly, so to speak, whereas in the case of reflective inference the agent is made aware of the reasons that motivate her belief or action. It might even be suggested that there is another, third-order form of inference, in which the meta-reasons that lie behind the reasons for action are made explicit. I will come back to this suggestion when I discuss social ontology.

We need to start our analysis of rationality, then, with the notion of reasons for action (which, of course, includes reasons for believing). Now, Searle argues that reasons for action, contrary to our philosophical intuitions, are entities in the world – they have an ontological status. At first blush, this might seem bizarre. Is he suggesting that reasons exist in the manner that Bertrand Russell apparently thought that numbers exist, like birds sitting on a telegraph wire? It is important to emphasise that talk of ontology here does not commit us to this absurd view. This would be, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, tantamount to using the language game of naming physical objects in describing moves in a quite different language game.

Now, it would seem to me to be simply a philosophical prejudice not to give reasons an ontological status. One possible test of such a status might be to ask the question: do such entities have the power to constrain or enable actions, including the act of believing? And it seems fairly obvious that they do. For example, my reason for giving an invited talk is that I had offered to give the talk, which gives me a commitment and obligation to do so even though I may desire to go to a concert at the scheduled time. Of course, the obligation to give the talk is not a *sufficient cause* for my doing so – I could simply go to the concert - but it is an *intentional cause* for my

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<sup>3</sup> D. Sperber. Reason in Reasoning. Lecture at the University of London, 1 June, 2011.

action that constrains me. And here it's not just a question of two desires – one to go to the concert and one to give a talk – but of a *desire-dependent reason* and a *desire-independent reason*. Therefore, it's not difficult to see the latter as a *real constraint* on my actions that exists and which has normative force. Reasons for action are not causally *sufficient* because of the phenomenon we call “freedom of the will”, as well as psychological conditions such as weakness of will, but one reason at least has to function as a necessary intentional cause of any action, and this reason is as real as anything could be<sup>4</sup>. I will come back to this question later.

### **Rationality**

Assuming, then, that analysing rationality means looking at how humans respond to reasons for action (including belief), and also assuming that there is no separate faculty of reason, we need to analyse what rational constraints, if any, are already built into perception, thought, intentionality and language. Some constraints constitute what we think and how we act, whilst others impose regulative or normative constraints on thinking and acting<sup>5</sup>. Let's look first at constitutive constraints.

I take my starting point from John McDowell's analysis of perceptual experience, which he locates in the logical space of reasons, while, at the same time, arguing that the experience of the empirical world is a rational constraint on our thinking. In this way, McDowell can avoid “bald naturalism”, which would conceive of the logical space of reasons as simply part of the natural world, in which case it wouldn't be a space of reasons any more but of natural causes, while also avoiding an idealism that would make thinking something frictionless, without any real connection to the world.

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<sup>4</sup> An ontology of reasons can also help in determining the sources of normativity, in the sense that desire-independent reasons are normative constraints on thought and action. It helps us, for example, steer between the two extremes of locating the source of normativity within an individual or a specific community that supposedly constructs such norms or, on the other hand, in some timeless “Platonic” realm of metaphysical entities. See Backhurst, 2011, chapter 4 for a discussion of this problem with respect to Koorsgaard and McDowell.

<sup>5</sup> I thank Paul Standish for suggesting this distinction.

I will only sketch out McDowell's analysis, which turns on the concept of second nature, to the relationship between mind and world. He starts by observing that no non-conceptual content can be directly given to consciousness because, in order to identify something as an example of *x*, we need to already have the concept of *x*. But this makes it look like concepts have to be prior to experience. However, if this is the case, our experience would never be able to modify our understanding; experience would not be a rational constraint on thinking. This dilemma leads McDowell to his thesis that "the world's impressions on our senses are already possessed of conceptual content" (McDowell, 1996: 18).

This looks suspiciously like idealism and McDowell answers this possible criticism by distinguishing between thinking and what is thinkable<sup>6</sup>. This allows him to claim that thinking is constrained by a reality external to it but thinkable content is not. There is no way of separating thinkable content, which is conceptual, and reality; they are one and the same thing. This idea is interesting because it gives conceptual, thinkable content an ontological status, thus making concepts part of the world. We can now begin to see how the ontology of the space of reasons we inhabit *constitutes* our experience of the world. Our experience of the world is already constrained by those reasons.

This position can be linked to Wittgenstein's argument that it is our form of life that is the bedrock of our perceptions and actions, etc. If we add to this the idea that conceptual content and reality are not separable, one can conclude that reality – thinkable content – is already available to us. Now, it is important to notice that it is not any individual that decides what content is available for human beings to perceive. This "agreement in judgements", as Wittgenstein might say, is part of a form of life and that is not something we can choose because it constitutes us. Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein meant when he said that "if a lion could speak, we wouldn't understand it".

McDowell's analysis is also close to that of Gadamer, in that it urges that we "find ourselves already engaging with the world in conceptual

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<sup>6</sup> McDowell's whole theory could be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the materialism/idealism dichotomy in modern philosophy.



activity within a dynamic system” (ibid: 34). This means, amongst other things, that coming to understand someone else’s interpretation of the world is not a question of seeing how her thoughts bear on an independent world, but “coming to share her standpoint within a system of concepts, a standpoint from which we can join her in directing a shared attention at the world, without needing to break out through a boundary that encloses the system of concepts” (ibid: 35-36)<sup>7</sup>.

The world, therefore, is a rational constraint on how we think about it. And we have access to the world through perception. Now, this locution might suggest that the world is, after all, outside of our conceptual capacities. If it were not, how could it constrain our thinking about it?<sup>8</sup> In other words, how can McDowell defend realism if he refuses to separate the world from our conceptual capacities?<sup>9</sup> What sort of realism does McDowell want to defend? It is partly a defence of common sense realism; in other words, that when we open our eyes we perceive the world as it is. Therefore, acquiring perceptually based beliefs is already an exercise of reason. That is to say, when I look at my desk I have a good reason to believe that there is a computer in front of me and that reason exists in the world, so to speak, in the form of the computer itself.

Now, as laudable as this common sense view of the world is, it is often thought that such a view would commit me to a naive empiricism, roundly condemned by post-empiricist philosophy of science and social science. But McDowell’s point is that “perceptual experience can directly open us to the world” (McDowell, 2009b: 140). McDowell’s “empiricism” is not naive, because he is not saying that perceptual experience gives us access to some non-conceptual reality; rather, it gives us access to a reality that is, at the same time, conceptual.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> McDowell himself relates this to Gadamer’s concept of “fusion of horizons” (ibid: footnote 11).

<sup>8</sup> This is Habermas’s starting point in his rehabilitation of empirical realism. See Habermas, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> In the words of Backhurst, McDowell’s central idea is “that rational requirements can be genuine constituents of reality (a view he calls ‘modest’, ‘benign’ or ‘naturalised’ Platonism).” (Backhurst, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> One of the problems in understanding McDowell’s thought is that we tend to approach it

Now, to say that we exercise our rationality when we open our eyes and perceive the world is not to say that perceptual beliefs are based on reflection.<sup>11</sup> Perception is a manifestation of our rationality because the world constrains our beliefs about it by offering reasons for them and these reasons just happen to be the reality we perceive.<sup>12</sup> McDowell puts it like this.

We can see experience as directly taking in part of the world, because the world, understood as everything that is the case, is not outside the sphere of the conceptual (...) The form of thought is already just as such the form of the world. It is a form that is subjective and objective together, not primarily subjective and thereby supposedly objective – an order of priority that would unmask its claim to objective as spurious (...) (McDowell, 2009b: 142-3)

For McDowell, then, “having [an] experience constitutes a rational entitlement to belief” (ibid: 132). But does this mean that experience can never deceive us or that reality can never be opaque to our ordinary perceptions of the world? Now, one of the implications of this view is that the genealogy of the normative is neither necessary nor possible; the normative character of reality “just is”.<sup>13</sup> I will have more to say of social reality later.

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from the basis of philosophical ideas deeply embedded in our tradition, while he is urging us to go beyond ideas like “idealism”, “realism”, “empiricism” etc. However, even he is forced, sometimes, to use such terms.

<sup>11</sup> A number of authors, including Dan Sperber and John Searle, accept that we can have “intuitive inferences”, to use Sperber’s phrase. The basic idea here is that we can rationally see the world without necessarily engaging in any process of reflection or explicit inference.

<sup>12</sup> Backhurst endorses the demand that we “[recognise] ... objective reasons as constituents of the world we inhabit, so we think of our form of life as a matter of engagement with a world that is alive with reasons for thought and for action” He also endorses the claim that we “return to the idea that the space of reasons is populated by reasons (among other things) and that we abandon a psychologistic conception of reasons. Not all reasons are mental contents: reasons can be worldly states of affairs”. Jonathan Dancy advances a similar position in his book *Practical Reality*, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Backhurst talks of the need to “think of reality as a normative space, with which we engage in a dialectic of recognition and transformation” (ibid: 114-115).

The important point for the moment is that McDowell's analysis enables us to see how perceptual experience can be a reason for a judgement. If what we appeal to in order to evaluate our thinking about the world is non-conceptual, it can only have a causal relation to judgement and not a rational relation. And this would rob us of our freedom to think one thing or another; the logical space of reasons would be irrelevant for the generation of thought and that would make the process non-rational. As McDowell says, in this case it is "impossible to see how an experience could be someone's reason for a paradigmatic exercise of spontaneity such as a judgement" (ibid: 69)<sup>14</sup>.

Being human, on this account, is a way of actualizing ourselves as animals, where this means actualizing our capacity for thought and judgement, which non-human animals do not have<sup>15</sup>. Seeing exercises of thought and judgement as natural to human beings is not to reduce them to causal relations in the realm of nature but to "stress their role in capturing patterns in a way of living" (ibid: 78) that is specifically human. And our way of living is, essentially, rational. Human beings cannot but engage in the practice of reason in this sense.

But how do we acquire the conceptual capacities necessary for perception? McDowell tries to capture this by reference to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. The habits of thought and action that result from being initiated into the space of reasons by an ethical upbringing are second nature; they do not need to be explained further in terms of a disenchanting conception of the natural world. In explaining the concept of second nature, McDowell says it "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 [natural – RB] law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science" (Ibid: 84). This makes reasons part of the world while not reducing them to the workings of a realm of nature divorced from the space of reasons.

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to notice that McDowell's point is not only that being justified in endorsing an empirical thought requires a rational relation between the thought and its ultimate ground in experience but that having a thought at all – justified or not – requires this relation. That is why he is not so interested in questions of epistemology.

<sup>15</sup> If this implies a correct characterisation of non-human animal minds is another matter, which I cannot discuss here.

Now, for McDowell, Aristotle's ethics provides only an example of initiation into conceptual capacities, into responsiveness to rational demands. As he says: "If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature. I cannot think of a good short English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*" (Ibid: 84). This points to the idea that the capacity for rationality is the result of a formative process of being initiated into a way of living that is human and, therefore, already rational.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing could be more crucial for education, it seems to me, since education can be understood as a process of "having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature", of being initiated into conceptual capacities, into responsiveness to rational demands. And this means being initiated into a space of reasons. One can see educational processes as primarily those that help students unveil, so to speak, the geography of the space of reasons they inhabit. Here the preoccupation isn't with justification but with occupying a space of reasons through learning the linguistic practices engaged in by those who inhabit this space, in other words, of acquiring the conceptual capacities that constitute our experience of the world.

But are there any regulative constraints on thought and action? Now, it would seem that formal logic might provide examples of such constraints. It is often claimed that logical relations of inference - consistency, entailment, etc. - act as constraints on the activity of thinking. If such constraints exist, of course, this does not mean that real human beings would make the necessary logical inferences. Self-deception, weakness of will and other psychological mechanisms might interfere here. However, it would enable us to say that someone was being irrational to the extent that he or she acted in a different way, that is, did not believe or do what logic demanded of them. We would have a handle on some regulative rules of thought and action.

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of this process, see David Backhurst, *The Formation of Reason*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, especially chapters 6 and 7. My own paper was written before reading Backhurst's book. I have tried to include in footnotes points where the two analyses overlap.

Take deciding what to believe first. Here, according to Searle, the constraints on the activity of believing are closely parallel to the constraints on deductive logical inference. That is to say, “it is possible to get a mapping of the logical relations occurring in theoretical reason onto deductive logic of a sort that is not possible for practical reason” (Searle, 2001: 266). Because belief is subject to truth conditions, and because holding a belief commits the agent to believing it to be true, the rules of deductive logic are related to the activity of thinking about what to believe.

Logic tells us more about the rational structure of theoretical reason than it does about the rational structure of practical reason, because there is a close connection between the rational constraints on belief and the logical relations between propositions. This condition derives from the fact that (...) beliefs are meant to be true (ibid: 262)

For example, from the first person perspective of the agent, it is irrational to hold inconsistent beliefs. Also, the truth of propositions can commit me to the truth of others by logical relations. For example, If I believe that John was at the cinema last night and I know that this could not be true unless he were not working at the office, I am committed to the truth of the proposition that John was not working at the office last night.

Searle claims that there is a “tight set of parallels” between logical notions and psychological notions of belief, even though questions of logic have to be separated from questions of philosophical psychology, and this seems to be true. This is because beliefs, as psychological states, are intentional states and they have propositional contents; because of this fact, they inherit features of the logical relations between propositions. Because belief is a commitment to truth (whether or not the proposition is in fact true), if I believe  $p$ , and  $q$  is a logical consequence of  $p$ , then I am committed to believing  $q$ . And this is because logical consequence is truth preserving.

It is worth pointing out here a feature of the relationship between rationality and truth. It is important to notice that something being false does not eliminate it as a reason for acting (as long, of course, as the agent does not know it to be false). So, the fact that something does not exist in

the world does not mean that the belief it does, held by a specific agent, cannot function as a reason for acting for that agent. Whether that reason is justified or not is another matter; this does turn on the question of truth or, at least, validity. So, I want to argue that in order to understand rationality in its wider form, we need to see it as a capacity to use and respond to reasons and this leads us away from an exclusive focus on epistemological questions, although they are not irrelevant, of course. Rationality isn't solely a question of *justifying* beliefs and actions, although of course it includes this. As Searle observes, "rationality is much more general than justification. In general, justified intentional states are rational, but not all rational intentional states are justified" (ibid: 109). It is important to note that rationality and justification are not co-extensive terms, in order not to tie rationality exclusively to questions of truth and validity, that is, specifically epistemological questions.

Of course, the activity of reasoning not only applies to what to believe but also to what to do. Now, action is the result of intentional states such as desire, hope, fear, etc. When we decide what to do, we arrive at what Searle calls a prior intention that, in turn, could lead to an intention-in-action, which is an integral part of the action itself. Also, we act on desire-dependent and desire-independent reasons. The former are, obviously, intentional states of the agent. The latter, while not necessarily intentional states of the agent, could become so to the extent that they are recognised by her and, therefore, internalised as reasons for action. The external nature of these reasons is something I will return to below.

Are there regulative constraints on rational action? Can deductive logic help us here as well? For a start, it is not irrational to hold inconsistent desires. For example, if I say to someone "I wish you would leave and I wish you would stay", this is not like saying "I believe you were at the cinema last night and I believe you were at the office last night" (assuming, of course, that the office is not situated at the cinema). This is because belief has a commitment to truth and it cannot be the case that both statements are true. However, desire does not have a commitment to truth. Desires cannot be true or false. Of course, they can be sincere and insincere and we might suspect that at least one of the wishes expressed above is insincere. But it could be the case that the speaker is being sincere in expressing these

two wishes at the same time. Indeed, if we didn't recognise the possible sincerity of such a contradictory expression of desire, a lot of literature, theatre, cinema, etc. would simply seem bizarrely irrational instead of an acute commentary on the human condition.

Also, there are no comparable logical relations for desires as there are for beliefs. In other words, there is no deductive logical structure of practical reason. Of course, there is a long history, since Aristotle's theory of the practical syllogism, of attempts to develop a deductive logic of practical inference, which would put constraints on action similar to logical constraints on belief. However, notoriously, no consensus has developed on the success of such attempts. I do not want to go into this hotly debated topic here but simply point out the limited nature of logic in deciding what to believe and what to do.<sup>17</sup> Logical constraints on believing are greater than those on acting. Some constraints on acting do exist, however. For example, since intentions imply actions and since it isn't possible to have two inconsistent actions, we cannot rationally intend to do inconsistent things. However, although tight, these constraints are limited, in two important ways. First, they will not exclude any but a small number of beliefs and actions from being rational. Second, even if logic can preserve truth in a deductive argument, it cannot guarantee the truth of the premises. Of course, that does not mean that logical constraints are useless. On the contrary, pointing out contradictions in someone's held beliefs or errors in their inferences can be a powerful tool for critique. But, however sharp the tool is, its use is very limited.

However, with respect to rational deliberation about what to do there is an even greater problem, based on the familiar means-end model: it assumes that agents have fixed and ordered preference schedules<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Searle shows how inconsistent desires are not only logically possible but quite common. Even if a person has consistent beliefs and a set of consistent primary desires, by using independent chains of reasoning, she will often end up with inconsistent secondary desires as conclusions. Most importantly, all of the inconsistent desires will have been rationally motivated. This Searle calls the "necessity of inconsistency".

<sup>18</sup> Here the problem isn't just that people do not necessarily make such probabilistic inferences in real life, although that is true, but also that "[d]ecision theory (...) assumes that I have a well-ordered preference schedule in advance, and that it is just a matter of making probability estimates as to how to get on the highest rung of the preference ladder.

This is the problem with nearly all rational-choice models of practical deliberation. A far more realistic analysis shows us that deliberating over conflicting reasons for action is the really hard question, both in theory and in practice. It also shows that understanding the socio-historical formation of reasons for action is fundamental for understanding the *real constraints* human beings face in deciding what to do, because it is these formative processes that create the reasons available to agents at any specific time. I'll come back to this point.

All of this would suggest that a system of concepts and conceptions, even of the natural world, has a history. As McDowell says: "there is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development" (ibid: 40). This is important because if we understand the world as offering rational constraints on our thinking about it, as well as what we can do within it, we can understand how, at certain historical times, our thinking about the world, as well as our action, can be wrongly constrained because we do not yet have the conceptual capacities necessary to perceive things correctly or, in some cases, perceive them at all. This helps us get a hold on the idea of rationality developing historically.

McDowell's objective, as we saw, is to develop a picture of human beings as beings whose life is led *in the world*, as opposed to simply in an environment, as is the case with non-human animals. Here, the important point is that, in occupying the space of reasons, we are able to weigh them and decide what to do and think; we have *the freedom of spontaneity and the ability to act intentionally*. All of this requires conceptual powers. Human beings can perceive the world, which makes it possible for them to have thoughts about it and to act in it. We have what McDowell calls an "orientation to the world".<sup>19</sup> However, McDowell restricts his analysis to perceptual experience saying very little – at least in *Mind and World* – about how that thinkable content can be questioned or challenged. For

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But the real difficulty is in setting the preference schedule. Most of the difficulty of rational deliberation is to decide what you really want, and what you really want to do. You cannot assume that the set of wants is well-ordered prior to deliberation" (ibid: 125).

<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that McDowell refers not only to Gadamer in this connection, but also to Marx, as well as their roots in Hegel. I will not explore these parallels here.



example, when he defines the “power of spontaneity” as comprising “a network of conceptual capacities linked by putatively rational connections, with the connections essentially subject to critical reflection” (ibid: 124), he makes no attempt to analyse *how* critical reflection takes place. In spite of his insistence that “the tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it” (Ibid: 126), he says nothing about the mechanisms for this or the motivation for questioning the historically constructed and putative rational relations between concepts. I will come back to this point at the end of the paper.

## Language

McDowell gives a central function to language in *Bildung* and, therefore, to the idea that mature adult humans, in that they are “at home in the space of concepts”, are also “at home in the space of reasons”. The language we are initiated into already contains rational relations between concepts. For McDowell, the central function of language, then, becomes that of “a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what”. This gives us a handle on how constraints on belief and action come from language, in that it already contains “a network of conceptual capacities linked by putatively rational connections”, which we learn when we learn a language. Now, the social nature of language means that the individual consciousness is formed from the outside in, so to speak, and cannot be understood as a spontaneous self-consciousness, as in the philosophy of the subject that was developed from Descartes and Locke to Kant<sup>20</sup>. As Habermas affirms: “nowadays, the problem of language substitutes the problem of consciousness”. Until the so-called linguistic turn in contemporary philosophy, the mind and its faculties of cognition were primarily understood as logically separate from language. As Cristina Lafont puts it: “language became the medium to merely express pre-linguistic thoughts” (Lafont, 1999: 3). Habermas attributes this designative view of language to the philosophical paradigm

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the social conception of mind of Wittgenstein, one of the severest critics of the philosophy of consciousness, see Williams, 1999.

of the Enlightenment, saying that “in the Kantian paradigm, language does not have a constitutive role in theory or practice (...) [The] mind can see through the transparent medium of language as if it were clear glass” (Habermas, 2003: 109).

Now, although the linguistic turn itself does not imply the rejection of the designative theory of language, I would defend the thesis that the role of language isn't simply to designate thoughts, as both Plato and Locke famously thought. Contrary to this is the view that language is constitutive of thought. But how can this idea be cashed out? More broadly, what is the relationship between language and mind? This is a complex question and I cannot go into it in depth but let me touch on some possible answers.

A radical view would advance the thesis that language constitutes the mind in that our experience of the world and our understanding is determined by the natural language we speak. Something like this view was advanced by the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis but it leads to a debilitating relativism in which human thinking is simply the consequence of the language one learns. From the premise that language moulds thought, together with the premise that there are a plurality of natural languages, it follows that there are a variety of different ways of thinking about and relating to the world as there are natural languages.

A similar view appears to have been held by von Humboldt in the XIX century. For Humboldt, the semantic content of a language unveils the world, that is, expresses the specific manner of thinking and feeling of a people or nation. In Habermas's words, for Humboldt “the lexicon and syntax of a language structures the totality of fundamental concepts and ways of understanding that articulate the pre-understanding of all that the members of a linguistic community can encounter in the world” (ibid). The natural language of a community, in other words, is constitutive of its interpretations of the world. This view has always come under attack for its apparent commitment to conceptual relativism and a strong incommensurability thesis. That is, if our vision of the world is determined solely by the semantics of natural languages, there seems to be no way of comparing different visions. And this seems to block, *a priori*, a better understanding of the world, i.e., learning in any robust sense of

the word<sup>21</sup>. According to Habermas, Humboldt himself anticipated this problem, claiming that if our perception of the world is constituted by language, the visions of the world expressed in different languages must have an a priori necessity for the members of that linguistic community. But, if this is true, “the linguistically constituted vision of the world has to be a closed semantic universe, from which speakers can escape only by being converted to another vision of the world” (ibid: 56). But this seems to eliminate the possibility of having our beliefs challenged and thus changing them in the light of evidence and argument.<sup>22</sup> It also eliminates the possibility of intercultural communication and criticism, for which there is ample evidence in the practices of translation and debates between members of different cultures.

Now, if we reject this radical constitutive view of language, how can we make good on the basic idea that language, in the words of Habermas, is “the formative ‘organ’ of thought: the interpenetration of language and reality is such that there is no immediate, non-interpreted access to reality for the cognising subject” (Habermas, 2003: 54)? I will return briefly to Habermas’s own answer to this problem, which is principally concerned with rationality as justification, but first I would like to look at another suggestion of how language is related to mind<sup>23</sup>.

One suggestion, noted by Clark (1997, 1998) is to see public language as a medium of a special kind of thought, a view he attributes to Carruthers. Here, mind is not reducible to language, although some mental operations are dependent upon public language in that “certain kinds of human thinking are actually constituted by sequences of public language symbols (written down, spoken or internally imagined)” (Clark, 1998). This

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<sup>21</sup> This criticism is well elaborated in Lafont, 1999, chapter 5, for whom the linguistic turn in hermeneutical philosophy has led to the thesis that “meaning determines reference”. However, it could be argued that this criticism presupposes the distinction between perception (meaning) and the world (referents) that the authors discussed above are trying to avoid.

<sup>22</sup> It is true that Habermas has found a way to overcome this problem in the work of Humboldt himself but following this line of argument would take me beyond the scope of this paper. See Habermas, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> For an initial attempt to analyse Habermas’s pragmatic theory of learning, see Bannell, 2009.

is because some of our thinking is done in inner speech, using the words and sentences of public language to compose our thoughts. In other cases, the writing down of a thought and the thought itself cannot be separated: the thinking is the writing. But in both cases language is understood as a tool for problem solving and not simply as a code for communicating.

Clark relates this to a Vygotskian analysis of how the use of public language has profound effects on cognitive development, especially the role of private speech and what has become known as scaffolded action. The basic idea here is that we can only succeed at specific tasks with the support (scaffold) of public language. In the context of a child's learning, for example, an adult or more competent child will guide a (less competent) child by talking through a problem with her. Later, when the more experienced agent is absent, the child will conduct an internal dialogue, which will guide her behaviour.<sup>24</sup> Here the basic idea is that public language is a tool for structuring and controlling action.

Clark further develops this idea of language as a tool by arguing that language augments the human brain's capacity for computation. This theory is, of course, out of the stable of cognitive science. Now, this kind of theory is not necessarily incompatible with that of McDowell, for example, especially in the form developed by Clark.<sup>25</sup> Clark is well known for advancing the extended mind hypothesis (Clark and Chalmers, 1995) and sees language as an external artefact that augments the brain's computational capacity. In advancing this thesis he lists a number of very interesting ways in which linguistic artefacts can augment memory, simplify our negotiation of complex environments, coordinate and reduce the deliberation required to perform actions or solve problems, focus our attention and help us store, sequence and manipulate ideas and data that would be too taxing for the brain on its own, etc.

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<sup>24</sup> Clark notes that this Vygotskian view is supported by other research in developmental psychology, such as that of Berk and Gavin, who observed that 5-10 year olds will use private or self-directed speech, not addressed to anyone and while the child is alone, as a guide in the performance of difficult tasks.

<sup>25</sup> McDowell explicitly says he does not object to cognitive science. For this and Backhurst's own endorsement of cognitive science, in which he makes reference to Clark's work, see Backhurst, 2011: 157.

However, interesting and convincing as it is, does this help us understand language as, in McDowell's words, "a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what (...) a network of conceptual capacities linked by putatively rational connections"? Both want to overcome the entrenched prejudice in our culture that mind is something inside the "Fleshbag of brain and body" (Clark). As unintuitive as this notion might sound, the idea is that our minds are as much outside of us as inside us.<sup>26</sup> Now, this doesn't sound too far from McDowell's idea that we inhabit a space of reasons that is, so to speak, part of our mind *and* part of the world. The Cartesian dichotomy between mind and world is undermined from both theoretical perspectives.<sup>27</sup> As Clark would have it, in talking of the mind, we need to put brain, body and world back together again (Clark, 1997). What is important to notice here is that this makes the world part of mind, not only bodily movements but also the artefacts that augment the brain's capacity<sup>28</sup>.

Clark gets close to locating the role of language as a repository for tradition, of "a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what" when he suggests that language is involved in what he calls cognitive path-dependent learning. This term refers to the familiar phenomenon that one can only learn from the place one is at, which strongly constrains the learning process. As Clark puts it, "certain ideas can be understood only once others are in place" (ibid).<sup>29</sup> Although he couches this in computational terms, talking of learning as "involving something like a process of computational search in a large and complex space [where] previous learning inclines the system to try out certain

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Clark talks of humans as natural born cyborgs.

<sup>27</sup> Backhurst notices the similarities between McDowell's work and some work in cognitive science and advances 'personalism' by which he means the view that "mental states and properties can be properly attributed only to persons". See Backhurst, 2011: 157-8.

<sup>28</sup> The relationship between the body, especially body schema, and the mind has been analysed in a stimulating book by Shaun Gallagher (2005).

<sup>29</sup> He refers, in this context, to formal education, which is "geared to take young (and not so young) minds along a genuine intellectual journey, which may involve beginning with ideas now known to be incorrect, but which alone seem able to prime the system to later appreciate a finer grained truth" (ibid: ??).

locations in the space and not others”, the idea of prior learning acting as a filter on the space of options to be explored is also to be found in Gadamer, for example, although, obviously without the computational language and within the tradition of hermeneutics. Of course, Clark is not talking here of a space of reasons, preferring to talk of neural networks, but the idea is still worth preserving, if we think of these ‘systems’ as a “network of conceptual capacities linked by putatively rational connections”. It is even more interesting when he suggests that collective cognition can be enhanced by the fact that ideas can migrate from one brain to another via language, providing a “stunning matrix of inter-agent trajectories”. This, it is argued, means that collective cognition of this kind can transcend the path-dependent nature of individual cognition. Once again, substituting the “space of reasons” for Clark’s “computational system”, we can see how

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<sup>30</sup> Backhurst gets close to something like Clark’s view of language when he says: “a distinctive feature of the view I have defended is that the social is portrayed as enabling the life of the mind, but not as constituting it. We acquire rational powers through Bildung, but neither the exercise of those powers, nor what we achieve through their exercise, is determined by, or otherwise hostage to, the relations we bear to others” (ibid: 150). However, it is not clear what this entails. Backhurst himself rejects the view that “a person’s being in some particular mental state, or undergoing some particular mental process, is to be analysed in terms of the occurrence of social facts, processes, practices or relations, or that the normative standing of mental states and processes is determined by such social facts, processes or relations” (ibid: 162, note 3). Of course, if the denial here is of some kind of social determinism, in which such social facts etc are seen as sufficient causes for mental states and processes, then he is obviously right. However, it seems to me that Backhurst has interpreted the ‘constitutive’ relation so tightly that it is reduced to a kind of social determinism. However, the important point is not that my judgements are dependent on the specific judgements or attitudes of others but, as he says, we do have a “dependence upon real relations to real people – those who brought us up, nurtured and educated us – as well as more amorphous relations to our culture, sustained as it is by the countless actions of countless real people, and the ever-present background that is our common form of life” (ibid: 151). It seems to me that this relation can also be called constitutive, because to say that this relation is merely enabling seems to me to assume that the mind is somehow separate from these enabling conditions, thus re-creating the dichotomy between mind and world that McDowell and Backhurst are at pains to deconstruct. It must be said that Backhurst explicitly rejects the account of the mental as something occurring in an ‘inner’ realm, just as Clark does, for example. However, to think of mind as “present in activity” is not captured, it seems to me, by seeing language as merely enabling. Enabling for what? A brain? But in this case the brain would have to be identical to the mind for it to be able to take advantage of these enabling conditions. It is not clear to me exactly what the relationship is between the social and the mental that Backhurst wishes to maintain.

this insight can help us perceive how collective cognition is not just simply the sum of individual cognitions.

If being initiated into the space of concepts is also being initiated into the space of reasons, can we get closer to McDowell's idea of language as a "repository of tradition" through something like Clark's analysis?<sup>30</sup> Since Clark thinks of language as part of the extended mind, we are not talking here of a mind that is separated off from the world. However, to talk of the computational capacity of the brain and how it can be augmented by external factors, including language, could invite a causal account of how the world provides constraints on judgements. Does Clark's treatment of this question threaten our freedom of spontaneity and the ability to act intentionally? The answer to this question must be "no", because, in the final analysis, it is the brain that makes decisions and solves problems. Language is simply an artefact that makes these tasks easier to perform. However, it seems to me that there is something missing from this account of language. This is not to deny the role played by the biological brain, body and 'external' supports for the functioning of the mind but to focus more on the brain's biological capacity for intentional action and the role of language in this capacity. Language, in this view, can then be seen as part of mind not only in its scaffolding function but also because it is central to a variety of important intentional states.<sup>31</sup>

However, this does not commit us to the view that meaning is internal to the brain. On the contrary, I would argue that meaning is public in something like the way Wittgenstein suggested<sup>32</sup>. However, the capacity for language is grounded in the biological brain evolution has

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<sup>31</sup> The exact relationship between language and intentionality is complex. Searle's analysis can be found in his book *Intentionality*.

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of this in Wittgenstein, see Williams, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> This does not deny the insightful observations of Clark regarding the way public language can augment human mental capacities. The problem is that this already assumes a mind capable of creating and understanding meaning and of intentionality, which can take advantage of such 'external' tools, including linguistic props. However, Clark does not use the term 'public language' with the same meaning as, say, Wittgenstein. It could also be argued that Vygotsky was interested in how children acquire concepts, not just how they learn to do difficult tasks. And this is a question of meaning going from the outside in, so to speak, through exposure to how language is used by more experienced agents in a linguistic community.

equipped us with.<sup>33</sup> Talk of ‘public language’, then, must focus on public meanings, constituted by how language is used in a linguistic community, as determinants of the meanings each individual agent uses in her thought and action. Of course, in thought we are talking of the public meanings of words and utterances, while in the case of actions, we are talking of the meanings of public rules that determine how we act in specific contexts. To this extent, we are not free to decide what a word or utterance means or what a social rule means. Of course, we are free to think, talk and act in a multitude of ways, some original, but this is made possible by the rules of language, including syntactic, semantic and pragmatics rules, as well as the social rules for acting. Saying something original in a language is dependent on mastery of its grammatical rules.<sup>34</sup> In fact, if we didn’t share these public aspects of language, we wouldn’t understand each other nor be able to formulate thoughts in language. Likewise, acting in the world is dependent on the background social norms and rules that give human action its meaning. So, freedom of thought and action is preserved against a background of shared meanings.

Now, if we focus on the intentionality of mind, we can begin to see how reasons for action can function as intentional states both in the explanation and justification of rational actions<sup>35</sup>. They are ontologically intersubjective but epistemically objective entities in the world and, as such, they can motivate rational actions. Therefore, acquiring intentional states, is having one’s eyes opened to reasons, to use McDowell’s phrase, and this, it seems to me, is something that is contextualised in a specific, concrete social and ethical space, which is itself fashioned by historical processes. It is important to notice here that nothing in this account implies we could do without brains to be animals capable of intentionality. A human brain is a necessary condition for intentionality in that its biological constitution enables us to, in the words of Searle, “activate the system of intentionality and to make it function, but the capacities realized in brain structures do not themselves consist in intentional states” (ibid: 58). Another important

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<sup>34</sup>Of course, I am not here talking of a prescriptive grammar but the actual grammar employed by the speakers of the language.

<sup>35</sup> See Searle, 1983, 2001.



point is that intentionality functions against a background of abilities, beliefs, values, norms etc. that are instantiated in culture and are not themselves intentional states. A human being would not be able to form or act on intentional states if a background of meaning and ability was not presupposed (ibid. chapter 5).

Another theory that focuses on the relationship between rationality and language is the formal pragmatics developed by Habermas. However, his main focus is on the justificatory function of rationality in the evaluation of validity claims, something not discussed by Searle or Clark. Now, in this theory the final arbiters of validity are reasons, themselves constituent parts, so to speak, of the lifeworld of social participants. Habermas focuses on the social mechanism of argumentation in the resolution of conflicts (about the truth of empirical claims, the correctness of normative claims and the sincerity of subjective claims), and the pragmatics of language necessary to analyse this mechanism.

Habermas does not draw the conclusion that we are trapped within a semantic universe incommensurable with others. He discovers an alternative analysis in the very work of Humboldt himself.

While a semantic analysis focuses on a linguistic vision of the world, a pragmatic analysis concentrates on processes of dialogue [in the sense of] discourses in which interlocutors can ask questions, give replies and raise objections (ibid: 53).

Here we come across a major difference between Habermas and hermeneutics. Habermas accuses hermeneutics of only being able to disclose the world view – the specific way of thinking and feeling – that already exists in a community and cannot challenge that perception, leading to a better understanding of the world.

According to Habermas, a formal, pragmatic analysis of language can show the relation between the communicative function of language and its cognitive function. It is in dialogue that one vision of the world is put in opposition to others in a way that can extend the horizons of meaning of each participant. But this can only happen if “the form of dialogue and the pragmatic presuppositions of discourse can include a critical potential capable of affecting and interfering in the horizon of a world unveiled linguistically” (ibid: 58). Habermas grounds this critical

potential in the universal pragmatic presuppositions of any use of language in communication, as well as the “internal structure of speech” (Cooke, 1994) that is also universal and capable of providing a normative point of view that cannot be reduced to the semantic content of any tradition or world view.

Habermas does this for two main reasons: to avoid privileging the semantic content of any specific world view or language; and to develop a procedural conception of communicative rationality, itself divorced from *the specific semantic content of the reasons for thinking and acting available for agents*. Now, the first reason is motivated by the epistemological problem of how to evaluate the semantic content of truth claims if we cannot compare them to some bit of uninterpreted reality. The second is an attempt to develop a critical conception of rationality that is linked to language and, although not capable of escaping the hermeneutic circle completely, can offer an internal normative vantage point from which human beings can judge whilst working within the conceptual capacities they also use for perceiving the world.

Habermas argues for what he calls communicative competence, which is made possible by the pragmatic presuppositions and formal rules of argumentation that enable interlocutors to stand back from a part of their lifeworld and examine it through argumentative discourse. The resulting mutual understanding will either confirm the validity of any specific belief, norm or value or reject it, substituting it with one considered more valid by the interlocutors. This is done by each party offering reasons for or against the thematised belief, norm or value in a process in which the force of the better argument prevails. This ensures that the resultant mutual understanding is rationally motivated and not motivated by the private interests, desires or preferences of either interlocutor.

I do not want to analyse Habermas’s theory of formal pragmatics in detail. Suffice it to say that he detects a universal, formally analysable internal structure of speech, which links language and rational justification. This structure enables human animals - capable of speech and action - to raise and criticise validity claims through the use of speech acts. Such claims are divided into three main categories: claims to the truth of propositional contents; claims to the validity or correctness of social norms; and claims

to the veracity or sincerity of the speaker's own subjective states. Every normal human being develops the ability to do this as they mature from birth to adolescence.

According to Habermas, then, it is this deep structure of speech acts that puts human animals in a *reflexive relation* to reality, in three dimensions: the natural world, the social world and the internal world of the individual. This, in turn, permits a reflexive form of communicative action, which Habermas calls Discourse, which he understands as the principal learning mechanism for humans. So, from this perspective, learning is not only induction into a space of reasons but, perhaps principally, the process of changing those reasons through solving problems.

From this perspective, the phenomenon of cognition, therefore, can be described as the creative solution to problems that are caused by disturbances in our common practices. It is this that stimulates a possible change in our beliefs about the world: "From the pragmatic point of view, 'cognition' is the result of the intelligent processing of *performatively experienced* frustrations"(Habermas, 2003:13, emphasis mine). Consequently, the principal task of epistemology alters. It is no longer an explication of the semantic relation between propositions and reality, as well as the inferences that can be made from them. Instead of this, "epistemology should explain the complex and profound learning processes that take place when the expectations that guide our actions are problematized". This makes the "totality of practices that make up a form of life epistemologically relevant" (ibid.). In this pragmatic conception of learning, the cognitive function of language is tied to "contexts of experience, action and discursive justification" (ibid: 26). For Habermas, then, the power of experience to revise our knowledge cannot be explained by any correspondence between a proposition and the world, because our knowledge of the world is always interpreted and mediated by language. In other words,

Our cognitive ability cannot be analysed independently from our linguistic ability and our ability to act, because as cognitive subjects we are already always inside a horizon of lifeworld practices. For us, language and reality permeate each other without any possibility of

separating them. All experience is linguistically saturated to the point that no comprehension of reality is possible without being filtered through language (ibid: 30).

The concept of experience invoked here is not an empiricist conception grounded in sense data, which is rejected with the argument that we do not have access to uninterpreted sense data, because we do not have access to a reality that isn't already linguistically mediated. Therefore, the experience of the senses loses its authority, so to speak. In other words, the concept of experience is necessarily linked to human action from a perspective that already incorporates a background of beliefs, values, norms, etc.

If we did not take our background beliefs for granted, it would be impossible to act in the world. We cannot treat all the background beliefs that form our lifeworld as if they are hypotheses that need testing. However, when our action, based on these beliefs, fails, we are forced to thematise them and submit them to a discursive process of justification, in which their claim to truth is certified or not.

On the argumentative level, the shaken certainties of action transform themselves into controversial validity claims for hypothetical statements; they are tested and, if this is the case, discursively redeemed, so that the accepted truth can return to the context of action. With this, the certainties of action (...), which are supported by what we take to be true, can be re-established (Habermas, 2003: 250)

In addition, we can trust the result of this process of justification, because the rational warrant achieved in "our community of justification" is "sufficient proof of truth" (ibid: 36-42). The finitude of our processes of justification, together with the fallibility of any result, "condemns our finite spirit to be content" with its results.

Therefore, there is no decisive, non-interpreted evidence that can decide questions of knowledge, according to this view, but only the force of the reasons raised and evaluated in processes of justification. Therefore, for Habermas, "argumentation remains the only medium for evaluating the

claims to truth that have been problematized and cannot be tested in any other way. There is no unmediated and non-discursively filtered access to the truth conditions of empirical beliefs” (ibid: 38). Therefore, after a truth claim has been subject to this discursive process of validation, we can say that someone knows that “p”, even knowing that the process is fallible and that, in other epistemic conditions, we might arrive at the conclusion that the reasons used to justify the belief were not good ones. Nevertheless, it is this process that gives the claim to know that “p” its authority (ibid).

The motive for developing a procedural conception of rationality is similar to that for privileging pragmatics in relation to semantics. In other words, this strategy supposedly preserves some kind of impartiality in the process of weighing reasons for and against a specific validity claim. The idea is that what is endorsed in this process of deliberation should not be influenced by power relations of any kind, either internal or external to the argumentative process, but simply by the “force of the better argument”. Now, there is something in this idea in that the rules of Discourse that Habermas enumerates would, I believe, be accepted by most agents engaged in argument, at least in Western societies. For example, the logico-semantic rule that says that an agent should not contradict herself or use different predicates to attribute the same feature to similar objects, could be seen as a minimal condition for any successful communication. Similarly, conversational rules that state, for example, that only points relevant to the topic at hand can be made, would also, I believe, be generally accepted. And, finally, procedural rules, for example, that all participants should have equal opportunity to engage in the debate, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity etc., would also find agreement, I imagine. One test of this would be to deliberately break one of these rules in a discussion and observe the reaction of the other participants<sup>36</sup>.

However, if such rules do form part of the normative horizon of the linguistic practice of arguing in our society, it must be acknowledged that they didn’t do so in the past and that they do not do so now in all cultures. Now, it is simply implausible to think that these normative rules have just

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<sup>36</sup> I have done this and the reaction, at least in the contexts in which I have tried this, is usually to invoke the rule broken, implying that a process that does not recognise the validity of such rules is essentially unfair or partial or whatever.

been waiting to be discovered, like metaphysical entities written in the skies, so to speak. But are they rational constraints that are internal to the use of any language in communication, even if they are counterfactual, as Habermas would argue? If so, they could then be thought of as historically developing structures, part of the form of life of homo sapiens and underwritten, so to speak, by evolutionary processes, as indeed Habermas suggests in his defence of what he calls “weak naturalism”. We could then understand them as transcendental but not metaphysical, that is, conditions for the possibility of justifying practices that are, nevertheless, this worldly and not extra-worldly.

However, even if we could defend these regulative, procedural rules, *the reasons advanced and challenged in any argument are substantive; they come from the stock of reasons we inherit through the Bildungprozess that has formed us as human beings*. It is this that makes them possible reasons for belief or action. They come from the stock of *semantic resources* available to individuals and groups, which form part of their lifeworld. So, in the final analysis, it is the *semantic content* of specific world views that *is the final arbiter* in argument. Now, it seems to me that this brings us back to the question: How are these reasons for belief and action formed historically and why do some have more force than others? Having one’s eyes opened to reasons, to use McDowell’s phrase, is a process that is concretely contextualised in specific social and ethical space, which is, itself, fashioned by historical processes much more powerful than the force of the better argument. It seems unlikely that coming to share someone else’s interpretation of the world, sharing her standpoint within a system of concepts and, therefore, joining her in directing a shared attention at the world, can be achieved only, or even primarily, through argumentative discourse.

However, here again we are confronted with a problem that has haunted us since the beginning of my discussion. If we cannot move outside of the hermeneutic circle, do we lose the world, so to speak, within the meanings we construct? One version of this view is to suggest that it is language games that determine the meanings we use for interpreting the world and, since we cannot interpret the world without reference to a language game, then we are only confronted with the world from within

the language game itself. This then often leads to the idea that the world is made up solely of language or texts<sup>37</sup>. I want to resist this move. For this reason I want to make a distinction between an ontology of reasons, which are linguistic in form, from a broader social ontology, which cannot be reduced solely to linguistic practice.

## Ontology

This brings me back to the question of social ontology, raised at the beginning of my paper. I want to make a distinction between an ontology of reasons, which are linguistic in form, from a broader social ontology, which cannot be reduced solely to linguistic practice. This broader social ontology is comprised of the socioeconomic, political and cultural structures and mechanisms that have developed historically, including what Mészáros (1996) calls capital's second order mediations. Of course, it is human activity that has produced these structures and mechanisms but not under the conscious control of the majority of humanity, nor, increasingly, even under the conscious control of the "personifications of capital", the system's managers. This is not the place to analyse this vast, intertwined "mode of social metabolic control"<sup>38</sup>, nor its increasingly destructive effects. I simply want to point out the obvious fact that this mode of control is reproduced by the countless actions – individual and collective - of those

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Standish (1992: 68) refers to something like this position when he says that "the world, inasmuch as we can conceive it, is made up of texts". However, although language games are a pre-condition of our *understanding* any particular aspect of the world, I don't think it follows that the world is made up only of texts. Neither does Standish, of course; he observes that "language-games are embedded in practices" (ibid) and warns of the error of "positing the existence of a world of texts somehow cut off from the ordinary world" (ibid: 69). Language makes it possible to experience something that is beyond language itself. However, what is the ordinary world that is experienced? My own view is that if we can distinguish between discursive and non-discursive practices, we can point to social practices that are constitutive of the world and not themselves necessarily linguistic. We could then get a handle on the idea that there exist some kinds of human practice, not reducible to language or texts, that are historical determinations of the world we live in. Of course, we can only understand the world through language but it is not itself exclusively textual or linguistic.

<sup>38</sup> For a monumental attempt at such an analysis, see Mészáros, 1995.

who are forced to participate in its productive, social, political and cultural practices.

Now, human beings act - individually and collectively - on the basis of reasons, as we have seen above. I want to suggest that these reasons form themselves a part of social ontology, the basis, so to speak, of the ideological structures which motivate people to act in one way or another. More than this, an important part of social reality is created by the collective intentionality of its members, constituting institutional facts that carry with them the social and historically formed deontic powers that constrain human belief and action. It is language that makes this part of the social world although, as already said, social reality cannot be reduced to language. But how do we make the social world through the use of language?

It is here that John Searle's recent work can help us again, especially his work on the construction of social reality<sup>39</sup>. Searle's principal thesis is that social reality, however complex it might be, is produced by a single, linguistic mechanism, which he calls a Declaration. The basic idea is that humans can create what Searle calls status functions, that is, impose functions on objects and people that could not exist in virtue of their physical structure. However, for the object or person to perform this function it must have a *collectively recognised* status. An example would be a fence that, because it is collectively recognised as a boundary, can perform the function of delimiting the extent of someone's private property, which, in turn, has the function it has because it is also collectively recognised as having the status assigned to it. A teacher would be another example, where the special function she has is made possible by the fact that we collectively recognise the status function such an individual has, together with the status function of the institution - school - within which she can exercise it.

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<sup>39</sup> It may seem ironic that I am using the work of a liberal philosopher in order to analyse the mechanisms for producing a social reality that I believe is in need of urgent transformation. However, I do believe that Searle's analysis of mind, intentionality, language and social reality can be used – perhaps against his wishes – as the basis of a radical critique of how and why contemporary society reproduces itself.



It is absolutely crucial that the object or person is *collectively recognised* as having the status function in question, thanks to the phenomenon of collective intentionality. Also, recognition does not necessarily imply approval here, as we can recognise the existence of something that we reject. Now, perhaps the most important aspect of Searle's analysis is that status functions have deontic powers. That is, they carry rights, duties, obligations, permissions, authorizations, entitlements etc. Such powers both enable and constrain both individual and collective action. Such powers can be direct, as when I have an obligation to do something I have promised to do, such as give a talk, or conditional, as when I am entitled to vote, given that I am on the electoral register of a particular district and country, am over a certain age, etc.

Once we recognise the deontic powers that constrain and enable our action we are provided with desire-independent reasons for acting. For example, if I recognise something as your property, which, of course, implies that I also recognise the status function of private property in general, then I have an obligation not to take it without your permission. Now, this deontic power, which constrains my action, only exists to the extent that private property is collectively recognised. If this recognition were to disappear, then the physical object would no longer have this status function and the deontic power would also cease to exist, thus removing the obligation - the reason - I now have not to take the object. It is very important here to notice that reasons for action are not always desire dependent, as Hume famously thought and many philosophers, as well as economists, rational choice theorists, etc. still think. I could have a reason for acting in some way even if I do not desire to do so. Indeed, if we didn't act for desire-independent reasons, it is unlikely that societies would be sustainable over time. Indeed, one could speculate that some desire-independent reasons for action are so deeply embedded in the background of intentional action they are simply taken for granted. The reason 'that something is private property' as a constraint on action might well be such a background reason in most societies today.

If everyone, or enough people, recognise a status function, then the

deontic powers it carries will become effective within that community<sup>40</sup>. In sum, the linguistic operation of Declaring creates social reality. Moreover, the reality that is created is epistemically objective, in that it exists independently of my or any other opinion, but ontologically intersubjective; that is, the entities that make up the social world do not exist independently of the subjective states of human beings (intentionality, recognition, belief etc.), as does, for example, the natural world<sup>41</sup>. But that does not make them any less real as constraints on the beliefs and actions of human beings. Now, the important point here is that this social ontology creates an ontology of reasons but this does not mean that the latter is reducible to the former. What counts as a reason for action depends upon the wider social practices of which I am part and their history.

Now, we can conceptualise reasons as linguistic entities. Searle, for example, advances the following hypothesis.

All reasons are propositionally structured entities: they may be facts in the world such as the fact that it is raining, or they may be propositional intentional states such as my desire that I stay dry. They can also be propositionally structured entities that are neither facts nor intentional states, entities such as obligations, commitments, requirements, and needs (Searle, 2001: 103).

Now, how can a fact in the world have a propositional structure? Here Searle makes a distinction between *events* in the world and *facts*

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<sup>40</sup> Of course, it is not necessary for a Declaration to actually occur every time a status function is created. A constitutive rule, which Searle calls a standing Declaration, can be applied at specific moments so particular objects or people can acquire the status function in question. Thus, the constitutive rule ‘the leader of the party that gains the majority of seats in Parliament at a general election counts as the prime minister in the United Kingdom’ is applied at every general election, thus giving the person that satisfies this condition the status function of being prime minister (ignoring, for the sake of argument, the possibilities of a hung parliament or a coalition government), together with the deontic powers that status confers on him or her, without it being necessary for a separate Declaration to establish this status function.

<sup>41</sup> This, of course, does not mean they are reducible to the subjective states of individuals. It simply means that without such states social reality would cease to exist, in contrast to the natural world, which would continue to exist even if there were no human beings on earth.

about events in the world. So, for example, the earthquake in Japan in 2011 was an event in the world that caused extraordinary damage and loss of life. This event *caused* the loss of life. However, the reason for that loss of life is the *fact* that there was an earthquake, which caused a tsunami, which killed thousands of people. As Searle asserts, “the statement of fact specifies the cause, but the cause is not the same entity as the reason” (ibid: 107).<sup>42</sup>

There is no reason to deny this distinction in relation to events in the social world as well. For example, the current economic crisis was caused by a series of events (actions of investors, bankers and home buyers within the context of a deregulated financial world market). The events caused the crisis. However, the reason for the crisis is the fact that people bought homes with cheap loans, together with the fact that mortgage companies lent them money they did not have and the fact that this was possible because of the derivatives market, etc. Note that all of these reasons make reference to institutional facts or status functions that are part of our social reality. Mixed in with these reasons are the intentional states of individuals: the desires of people to own their own home, the desires of bankers to make ever larger profits, the belief that the whole market would sustain itself etc. And, as well as this, we can add the obligations, commitments, requirements, and needs of all of those involved, the deontic powers to which they are subject as members of a particular society and the corresponding reasons everyone was subject to<sup>43</sup>. Now, the important point

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<sup>42</sup> It might be objected that making reasons propositional in form is privileging the designative/ assertive view of language as against an expressivist or other non-designative approach. However, to say that reasons are propositional in form is not to commit oneself to the idea that the only meaningful utterances are assertive. As I understand it, Searle’s theory does not carry this commitment. Moreover, even if it may be necessary to instantiate reasons into language in a different way, and I leave this possibility open, this would not affect the principal idea that reasons are embedded within the language we use, so to speak, and are, therefore, part of the culture we inherit through the process of Bildung and separable from other, non-discursive, aspects of reality. For a sustained attack on the designative conception of language, see Taylor, 1985 and Standish, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that this does not ignore the larger determinations of all of this that derive from the capital system itself and its second order mediations. In this sense, perhaps we can talk of different layers of social reality, at the base of which are the structures and mechanisms generated by the antagonistic relation between capital and labour.

here is that the reasons are not identical with the events. They are factitive entities (to use Searle's term) that can detach themselves, so to speak, from the specific events they refer to. This is why they can be reasons for other events as well. But if they are at least semi-autonomous entities, how are they (re)produced? I think it plausible to advance the thesis that reasons are socially dependent entities in the sense that they only exist if there exists (or has existed) social practices, themselves the result of collective intentionality, that sustain them<sup>44</sup>.

An important implication of this idea of an ontology of reasons is the location of the source of normativity outside the individual without having to invoke any kind of metaphysical "Platonic" entity. Normative authority is not created by us, if this refers to some kind of radical constructionism, but it is instituted by the activity of human beings in making the social world (but not the natural world, which is not made by human beings, although, of course, it is transformed by human activity)<sup>45</sup>. This preserves the "freedom" of the individual agent, in that she acts on reasons that are to her compelling, even if the reasons don't leave her any clear option about what to think or to do.<sup>46</sup> The only point I want to make

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<sup>44</sup> A parallel could be established here with Joseph Raz's thesis of the social dependency of value (Raz, 2003). However, since Raz's thesis applies to values it is not obvious that it also applies to reasons. For this reason, I don't want to push this parallel too much. Another parallel might be with the work of Ilyenkov, especially his concept of the ideal; however, my acquaintance with his work is very recent. Backhurst (2011: 111) says of Ilyenkov's work that it presents a "vision of the space of reasons as a realm of phenomena that have a normative bearing on thought and action. This is part of the reality individuals confront in experience. It is objective in that it confronts each individual as an external reality, both in the form of its embodiment in culture and in the meaning the world takes on through our interaction with it". However, exactly how to work out the thesis of the ontology of reasons eludes me at the moment.

<sup>45</sup> This distinction seems important because it avoids postulating, as Backhurst accuses Ilyenkov of doing, that human activity leads to the idealisation of nature, that human activity constitutes the natural world as well as the social world. I agree with backhurst that this is an untenable position .

<sup>46</sup> Backhurst (2011: 90) also defends the idea that "rational necessitation is constitutive of freedom: that we are free because we are, and in so far as we are, responsive to reasons, even where those reasons necessitate what we must think or do". Of course, here we are talking of freedom of will, in the philosophical sense, and not the social and political freedom to engage in non-alienating productive labour. Although it is always possible for

here is that the reality of reasons can explain their normative force and their source as constraints on thought and action. Another important point is that to the extent that an agent recognises the status function of an object or person, she also recognises the deontic powers associated with that status function - obligations, rights, entitlements etc. - as reasons for action that can compel her to think or act in specific ways.<sup>47</sup>

Now, reasons also function as causes in an explanation of action, as mentioned before. However, such phenomena are intentional causes and figure in the explanation of the process engaged in by the person who acted and not non-intentional events in the world. Such reasons have an explanatory function and not a justificatory function<sup>48</sup>. If we accept this, it's not so difficult to see why reasons can motivate individuals to act. When internalised, they are very strong motivators for both belief and action. Now, if language is, as McDowell suggests, a repository for historically constructed reasons for action, which are the resources we all use to act in the world, we need to analyse not only their differential distribution within a society but also how ideology can present some reasons as good for some social groups and classes when, in truth, acting on them would disadvantage that group or class. I will come back to this point at the end of this paper<sup>49</sup>.

Now, the problem with Searle's position is that it totally ignores the historical processes that lie behind, so to speak, the structures and

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someone to say "no" to alienating labour, their very survival depends on accepting it in contemporary societies.

<sup>47</sup> Of course, this recognition is dependent upon the acceptance of the putative reasons that link the network of conceptual capacities we acquire through education. Now, such putative reasons can be challenged and rejected through reflection, to be sure, and we have seen in Habermas a theory of how such reflective processes can be generated. However, I would suggest that Habermas' acceptance of the mode of social metabolic control of the capital system prevents him from perceiving that dialogue and argumentation, however important they might be, are not sufficient for breaking the strangle hold of the capital system.

<sup>48</sup> Although they are not to be confused with natural causes, which would determine human actions and undermine free will.

<sup>49</sup> Here we need to analyse how reasons for belief and action are constituted by larger historical and structural forces, as mentioned above. For an analysis of how theory as ideology can contribute to the strengthening of particular reasons for belief and action, see my critique of Rawls' political theory as political ideology (Bannell, 2012).

mechanisms he analyses. Of course, he concedes that status functions can change and, therefore so can the reasons we have for acting. But he does not analyse the social, economic, political and cultural formation of society that produces the institutional facts and factitive entities he talks about. Take private property, for example, or money, a favourite example of his. He is right to say that these institutional facts exist and that they do so to the extent that most people recognise them and therefore sustain them. This, in turn, produces desire-independent reasons for action, factitive entities, which constrain how we think and act in the world. However, he pays no attention to the power of ideology in maintaining the (positive) recognition of private property or money, nor the historical process - based on antagonistic class interests - that has led to its creation and sustainability. Searle writes as if the institutional facts of capitalism are immutable and legitimate. He also has nothing to say about how desire-dependent reasons for action are formed, a process which is also historical.<sup>50</sup>

### **The practice of reason and education**

Now, because our social world has been formed historically by the activity of social groups whose real interests have been in conflict or antagonistic in relation to each other, we cannot assume that the space of reasons is homogeneous. Indeed, we might even talk of different and incompatible spaces. But it would probably be more accurate to talk of different positions within the same space of reasons. The practice of reason, then, is the practice of “being at home in the space of reasons”, to use McDowell’s phrase, of navigating its geography, so to speak. This practice we all engage in every day of our lives. Now, in order to do this we need to be educated, in the sense of inducted into a space of reasons, which

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<sup>50</sup> The intentionality and rationality of the emotions is analysed by Martha Nussbaum in her *The Upheavals of Thought*, in which she also analyses how emotional responses are socially and historically conditioned and not idiosyncratic aspects of the individual. Now, although desire and emotion are not synonyms, there is a very close connection between them. Also, there is a close connection, it seems to me, between the emotions and our recognition of desire-independent reasons for action although I do not have space to go into this question here.

is always an induction into a concrete position within that space, which has its own specific contours. However, it is crucial to see that “being at home” in a space of reasons does not mean acquiescing in beliefs and values that one does not consider to be good reasons for acting. We might think of “being at home” in a space of reasons as more like recognising social functions, deontic powers and reasons for action in much the way I have suggested above, even if that recognition is negative. Now, of course, how an individual will act in the world will depend upon whether her recognition is positive or negative and, this, in turn, will depend upon the extent to which acting on these reasons advances or hinders her vital interests.

Now, certain normative structures will become institutionalised if they reflect the interests of the dominant groups in society. They will become a dominant part of the ontology of reasons within that society and, thus, exercise deontic powers with respect to all of its members, including those disadvantaged by its social, economic and political structures. In this respect, such reasons become part of the ideology that sustains the power of the dominant groups and classes within a society. Here we can understand the paradoxical but common phenomenon of individuals and groups acting for reasons that are clearly contrary to their real interests, in that they positively recognise reasons that, when acted upon, will sustain or bring about conditions contrary to their own well being, or even survival. Others, of course, will negatively recognise the same reasons but still act in conformity with them because of the weaker position they occupy within the relationship of power established within society. These two groups are “at home” within the space of reasons to the same extent that serfs were at home within feudal estates or beggars are “at home” on the streets of large cities. We could add to these groups the increasing number of unemployed in the world, not to mention those marginalised and excluded from the goods and services socially produced within capitalist societies, wherever they happen to live within the globalised economy. Finally, those in full employment, even though they may feel more “at home” than others, are also constrained by reasons that, in the vast majority of cases, determine them to act in ways contrary to their real interests.

But if the function of education is to induct the new generations into an instituted space of reasons, it should equally be a practice that takes a reflexive relation to reality and to the beliefs and values that motivate people in their thought and action. We are all dependent on culture and our form of life but we can also stand back from both and reflect on aspects of them. We thus endorse or reject the beliefs and values to which we were initiated in the course of *Bildung*. However, I would reject the notion that such a practice is or could ever be neutral. Reflection itself has to be grounded; it cannot float free from its embeddedness in the contingency of social reality. We can even agree with Habermas that reflection is provoked when we are confronted with a recalcitrant reality. However, he underestimates the power of ideology in preventing the process of collective reflection necessary in order to deconstruct the putative rational connections between the network of conceptual capacities acquired through educative processes. To this extent, and to the extent that he is incapable of understanding the deep structural determinations of the existing socioeconomic order, or even of comprehending its destructive character, his conception of reflection is inadequate to the task confronting humanity.

Now, to the extent that ideologies can be linked to social classes, education has to recognise the relationship between class interests and the ideologies members of classes defend and reject. Moreover, since class interests are antagonistic and, therefore, not reconcilable through dialogue, we shouldn't be surprised at the deep difficulties with any attempt at reconciliation. Education is asocial, political and cultural practice. This means we have to take sides and use the conceptual capacities we have as human beings to strengthen reasons for belief and action that confront and challenge those that, deeply ingrained in educational thought, policy and practice, reproduce educational inequalities of all kinds. What the philosopher can do is reflect more closely on the world view behind beliefs and values, exposing, where possible, its inconsistencies and incoherencies as well as its class bias.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> I don't want to suggest that the critique of ideology is a sufficient condition for the transformation of society. However, it is a necessary condition and educational processes and institutions are powerful cultural/ ideological mediations within the capital system.



But, someone might object: How can we tell which reasons for action, and the world view on which they are grounded, are more valid? Here the proof of the pudding is in the eating: those reasons for action that, when acted upon as intentional causes, help solve the crises faced by the most vulnerable in the world would be pretty good candidates, it seems to me. This would be education as the practice of reason in the interests of human emancipation.

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