

Course	PHIL60801
Title	Issues in Metaphysics: Themes from John McDowell
Tutor	Prof Thomas Uebel

Aims

The course unit aims to:

- Enable students to analyse and develop their own reasoned opinions on both John McDowell's metaphysical (and more broadly philosophical) thinking, and his meta-philosophical approach.
- Enhance students' powers of critical analysis, reasoning and independent thought.
- Familiarise students with some of the central writings of one of the most interesting and influential philosophers currently at work.

Objectives

On completion of this unit successful students will be able to:

- Complete a substantial piece of research in an area of analytical philosophy.
- Present a substantial piece of research to a critical audience.
- Demonstrate a broad knowledge of seminal and recent literature on advanced topics in analytical philosophy.
- Conduct independent research, under supervision by an expert supervisor.
- Understand, critically assess, and respond to advanced philosophical writing.

Assessment

5000 Word (100%)

Course Content

In a series of influential papers and in his seminal *Mind and World*, John McDowell has tackled, in a highly distinctive way, some of the central questions in metaphysics (and philosophy more broadly). He has, for example, enlightening, original and iconoclastic things to say about: the relation between thought and reality; norms and their place in nature; the metaphysics of meaning; the character of our perceptual experience; the nature of secondary qualities; the prospects for evaluative realism; the mental lives of non-human animals; and the nature of philosophy itself. His views on these topics – influenced by philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Frege and Wittgenstein – comprise a doctrine that he has labelled 'minimal' or 'transcendental' empiricism: a kind of metaphysical realism that supposedly avoids the excesses of both Platonic realism and idealist approaches that 'cut the world down to size'.

In this MA class, we shall read McDowell's *Mind and World*, alongside some of his other papers, with a view to both critically evaluating McDowell's position and thinking philosophically about some of the issues he raises. Elements of McDowell's philosophy have been forcefully criticised by writers such as Robert Brandom, Richard Rorty and Crispin Wright. It will be interesting to see whether McDowell's minimal empiricism can withstand such criticism.

Teaching Methods

After an initial meeting, there will be seven two-hour seminars, at which students will give presentations, and the tutor will lead a discussion of issues raised by the week's set reading. Students will also have the opportunity to discuss their private reading and writing assignments one-to-one with the tutor.

Preliminary reading

John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 2nd edn (Harvard U.P., 1996)

Tim Thornton, *John McDowell* (Acumen, 2004)

Maximilien de Gaynesford, *John McDowell* (Polity, 2004)

Richard Gaskin, *Experience and the World's Own Language: A Critique of John McDowell's Empiricism* (O.U.P., 2006)

(The books by Thornton and de Gaynesford are introductory; Gaskin's is much harder.)