Chapter 1

What Can Philosophy Tell Us About How History Made the Mind?

This chapter is concerned primarily with two questions. First: to what degree do we owe our distinctively human psychological powers to history, society and culture? Second: if our relatedness to others is a precondition of our mindedness, to what extent can this be demonstrated or illuminated by philosophical reflection?¹

My interest in these issues goes back to the early 1980s, when I began research on Russian philosophy. I spent the 1982–3 academic year in Moscow, trying to get inside the philosophical culture of the USSR. I was convinced that there had to be more to that culture than the tired doctrines of dialectical and historical materialism that were the official creed of the Soviet state. And I was right. I was fortunate to fall in with a group of talented philosophers, who took me under their wing. These thinkers were not dissidents; they were Marxists, but they were representatives of a very different form of Marxism from the kind peddled by the Soviet establishment. These were so-called ‘men of the ’sixties’, who had done their most creative work during the brief ‘thaw’ that succeeded the Stalin period. They were creative, critical and scholarly. They were steeped in German classical philosophy, especially Hegel. Their cast of mind was sceptical, playful and, as you might expect, dialectical. They were typically excellent orators.²

One prominent theme in their work was that the human mind is an essentially ‘socio-cultural’ or ‘socio-historical’ phenomenon. Now, I had been brought up to think that the idea that human beings are ‘socially constituted beings’ was a leitmotif of the incorrigibly feeble-minded: the sort of claim that no self-respecting philosopher would advance. So I was intrigued to find the idea flourishing among thinkers whose intelligence and ingenuity were hard to question. I therefore set about trying to establish what exactly these Russians were arguing and to explore similar ideas advanced by other thinkers. As it happens, since the early 1980s, the idea that the human mind cannot be understood without essential reference to culture has come to prominence in certain areas of Western philosophy and

¹ What Can Philosophy Tell Us About How History Made the Mind?

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psychology: for example, communitarian political philosophy, feminist theory, certain readings of Wittgenstein, some forms of poststructuralism, and the various species of social-constructionist, discursive and cultural psychology. Even in cognitive science it is now common to hear reference to the importance of culture. Yet there remains little consensus about how exactly to understand the relation of mind to culture, or society, or history.

WHAT ROLE FOR PHILOSOPHY?

My Russians were convinced that the socio-historical character of mind is something that philosophy can illuminate. But there are grounds for scepticism here, for the influence of culture, or social interaction, or history, on the nature and development of mind must be an empirical matter, and as such one that lies outside the province of philosophy. If you muse about how great the influence of culture is on your own development, you might find yourself asking questions like: *What would I have been like had I been born the child of a Roman centurion?* And you might think that headway can be made by treating this as a thought experiment. But in so far as we can make sense of the question at all, surely the only interesting reading is this: *How would someone with your genetic make-up have turned out had he or she been brought up as the child of a centurion?* That looks like an empirical question about the respective contributions of nature and nurture, not a philosophical one. Questions about the manifestation of genetic traits in contrasting environments are the stuff of twin studies, not thought experiments.

It is interesting that my Russians strongly resisted the idea that they were making a speculative intervention in the nature–nurture debate. In fact, they explicitly argued that psychological development should not be seen in nature–nurture terms (see Mikhailov, 1995, pp. 76–7). First, they maintained that it is a mistake to suppose we can neatly distinguish two discrete causal factors, natural/biological, on the one hand, and cultural/environmental, on the other, and then sort influences on development into one kind or the other. Second, they complained that the nature–nurture debate portrays development exclusively in causal terms. It represents individual development as a product of either natural or environmental influences, or (more plausibly) of some combination of the two. But the position these philosophers were advancing was not one about the causal conditions of human development. Their argument was more transcendental in character: that initiation into culture, social interaction, having a history, and so on are not so much causes of psychological development as preconditions of the possibility of rational agency, and hence of mind, at least in its human form, since these Russian thinkers identified our mindedness with our status as rational agents. We can ask of a rational agent, say, whether she is naturally good at mathematics or prone to fits of anger, but we cannot portray rational agency as determined by nature, nurture, or anything else, for we represent an agent as rational in so far as we see her as autonomous and self-determining. The question for my Russians was the relation of history, culture and society to the possibility of self-determination, an issue that, they complained, was rendered invisible by the nature–nurture debate.
But even if we take a nuanced view of nature and nurture, human development is surely in the realm of the empirical, so what exactly is there for the philosopher to contribute? Well, the Lockean job of underlabourer for the sciences is available. But we can probably find more challenging employment even if we concede that the relation between culture and mind is to be explored by empirical investigation. One role might be to integrate material from different disciplines. Understanding the mind is an interdisciplinary project: we need insights not just from psychology, biology, neuroscience, linguistics, anthropology, etc., but from a number of historical disciplines, such as archaeology, ancient history, and so on. There are many reasons why practitioners in one field may be unable to see the significance of work in another, even if they are aware of its existence. So one task the philosopher can assume is to weave insights from different fields into a single synoptic vision. This is no easy job, not just because it is hard to establish a common universe of discourse, but because one has to reckon with all the entrenched reasons for thinking the project unnecessary or impossible.

I want, however, to consider whether there might not be a yet more ambitious role for the philosopher—that is, to argue that the human mind is essentially a socio-historical phenomenon. Might there not be distinctively philosophical arguments that would show what my Russians wanted to show—namely, that there is a more than merely empirical connection between possession of a mind and membership in society, culture or community?

Such a position seems to have been held by two of the greats of twentieth-century analytic philosophy: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. I shall briefly sketch their respective positions.

**WITTGENSTEIN AND DAVIDSON**

In the passages in the *Philosophical Investigations* known as the ‘private language argument’ and the ‘rule-following considerations’, Wittgenstein argues—or appears to argue—that there could not be a language that is essentially private in character, from which it seems to follow that language is necessarily a public, or communal, phenomenon.

The argument is this: a language in which the meaning of the words was given by entities accessible only by the speaker (such as the speaker’s ideas or sensations) would lack standards of correctness. There would be no way to distinguish correct usage of the words of the language from usage that merely struck the speaker as correct. But a language with no standards of correctness is no language at all; therefore, a private language is impossible.

The ‘rule-following considerations’, which precede the private language argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*, seem to show that we can make sense of standards of correctness in a practice only by appeal to such notions as agreement and custom. There is no philosophical vantage point from which we can declare that one way of extending a mathematical series, or deploying a concept, is correct and another incorrect. Correctness and incorrectness are disclosed from within our practices—activities that cannot be underwritten by philosophy but must be
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accepted for what they are: namely, aspects of our natural history or ‘form of life’. Norman Malcolm concludes:

When Wittgenstein says that following a rule is a practice, I think he means that a person’s actions cannot be in accord with a rule unless they are in conformity with a common way of acting that is displayed in the behaviour of nearly everyone who has had the same training. This means the concept of following a rule implies the concept of a community of rule-followers. (1986, p. 156)

Given the intimate connection between language and thought, and between rule-following and rationality, it appears we have an argument that represents membership in a community as a precondition of mind and rational agency.4

What of Davidson? In several of his later essays, Davidson argues that interpersonal communication is a precondition of the possibility of thought. This is so in two respects. First, communication is ‘the source of the concept of objective truth’ (Davidson, 1991/2001, p. 209). Invoking Wittgenstein, Davidson argues that a person can be supposed to be engaged in a norm-governed practice—such as thinking, reasoning or speaking a language—only if a distinction can be drawn between her acting correctly or incorrectly; that is, we must be able to distinguish between what the thinker or speaker takes to be the case and what is the case. Davidson maintains that for a mind in isolation nothing can ground this distinction. He writes: ‘[W]e would not have the concept of getting things wrong or right if it were not for our interactions with other people.’ This is not because agreement determines truth, as relativists or social constructionists might argue; rather, consensus ‘creates the space’ in which the concept of truth has application (Davidson, 1997/2001, p. 129). Only a shared public language can have genuine standards of correctness.

Second, Davidson contends that the very possibility of what philosophers have come to call ‘mental content’ depends upon social interaction. He argues that our mental states owe their contents to their causes. My perceptual belief that there is a desk in front of me has the content it does in virtue of the causes that engender it. But the causal process in which the belief originates is complex and the number of contributing causal factors enormous. Why should we pick out the desk as the cause of the belief—and hence as the object the belief is about—rather than some other part of the causal chain, such as images on my retina or events in the visual centres of my brain? Davidson’s answer is that only when we introduce another person into the picture do we have reason to identify the causes of our mental states with the public objects about which we take ourselves to talk and think. Content is determined by a process of ‘triangulation’, in which two people’s responses to stimuli are traced back to a common object. Davidson concludes: ‘Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content—that is, no content at all’ (1991/2001, p. 212).

Davidson (1991/2001) maintains that these insights resolve many of the traditional problems of epistemology. Knowledge of our own minds and knowledge of other minds are shown to be ‘mutually dependent’: triangulation presupposes that I cannot know what I think unless I can have knowledge of the minds of others, and
that I cannot know what others think unless I am able to know my own mind. Both these varieties of knowledge rest in turn upon beliefs about the environment with which my interlocutor(s) and I interact. Davidson famously argues that these beliefs about the environment must be largely correct. For interpretation to be possible, interpreter and interpreted must share a significant number of true beliefs about the world. This is not just because the assumption that one’s interlocutor has largely true beliefs is a precondition of understanding her; triangulation ensures that speakers cannot be significantly in error about what they take their beliefs to be about. If knowledge of the external world, knowledge of other minds, and self-knowledge are all interdependent, and if many of our ordinary beliefs must be true, then the appearance that there is a gulf between mind and world, or between mind and mind, must be illusory. The traditional problems of philosophy are problems no more.

For present purposes, what is crucial is Davidson’s conclusion that ‘interaction among similar creatures is a necessary condition for speaking a language’ (1992/2001, p. 120) and for possessing thoughts:

Belief, intention, and the other propositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without having a concept of intersubjective truth, and this is a concept one cannot have without sharing, and knowing that one shares, a world, and a way of thinking about the world, with someone else. (1992/2001, p. 121)

If Davidson is right, minded beings are essentially social.

WITTGENSTEIN AND DAVIDSON CONTRASTED

I shall not undertake a detailed examination of the pros and cons of these much-discussed arguments, but restrict myself to a couple of observations.

It might appear as if Davidson’s and Wittgenstein’s positions are complementary—and hence that the weight of their considerable combined authority pressures us to acknowledge the social character of mind. But things are not so simple. Even sympathetic interpreters of Wittgenstein are profoundly divided about just what his arguments show. Among the most persuasive interpretations is the one propounded by Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, and it is far less bold than Malcolm’s quoted above.

Baker and Hacker take Wittgenstein to have shown that a language must have public standards of correctness only in the sense that its rules must be such that another agent could understand and adhere to them. It does not follow that there must be other agents who actually do understand and adhere to them. What is crucial is that language practices exhibit regularity, but there is no reason why a contingently solitary person should not establish such practices so long as the practices could in principle be learnt by someone else. Wittgenstein treats language as a system of conventions, but a convention could be set up by a solitary individual if the convention were such that someone else—if there were someone else—could adhere to it. This shows that anything that is a language must be learnable by more than one person. It does not show that speakers must be members of communities if language is to be possible (see, for example, Baker and Hacker, 1984, pp. 71–80; 1990).
On this reading, the significance of Wittgenstein’s remarks is primarily negative: they explode Cartesian and classical empiricist conceptions of mind and language. They fall short, however, of establishing a substantive doctrine of the socio-historical self. And this, one might think, is to be expected, since Wittgenstein was clear that the aspirations of his philosophy were to criticise and dissolve philosophical misconceptions rather than to advance positive philosophical theories. Moreover, if we look at what Wittgenstein says about persons and selves in his notorious argument that the first-person pronoun is not a referring expression, we see that advancing a vision of the person as socially constituted is pretty far from his mind.\textsuperscript{7}

Davidson, in contrast, is committed to the stronger view that more than one subject must actually exist if language and thought are to be possible: ‘it takes two to triangulate’, as he puts it (1991/2001, p. 213). At the same time, Davidson is profoundly opposed to the idea that language is a system of conventions or that we can understand a language as a kind of social entity or institution over and above the interpretative activities of individual speakers trying to make sense of each other. To understand others, each speaker deploys Tarski-style theories of interpretation, short-term and long-term (‘passing’ and ‘prior’, in Davidson’s terminology), speaker-specific and more general in character, but none of these describes what philosophers and linguists are inclined to call a language. In fact, for Davidson, there is ‘no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what philosophers and linguists have supposed’ (1986/2005, p. 107; see also Davidson, 1994/2005). What there is is the coincidence of idiolects.\textsuperscript{8}

So Wittgenstein gives credence to the notion of language as a set of shareable conventions, but does not require that a community exist to share them, while Davidson insists that more than one speaker must actually exist for thought and language to be possible, but he has no time for the notion of language as a social institution. There are deep differences here.\textsuperscript{9}

It is also notable that neither view really has a developmental dimension. Although Wittgenstein’s writings are peppered with examples about teaching and learning, he tells us relatively little about how he conceives the child’s initiation into a form of life save for a few remarks about ‘training’. Davidson recognises that we are owed an account of the emergence of thought and language in the child, but despairs of giving one. He writes:

\begin{quote}
We have many vocabularies for describing nature when we regard it as mindless, and we have a mentalistic vocabulary for describing thought and intentional action; what we lack is a way of describing what is in between. … It is not that we have a clear idea what sort of language we could use to describe half-formed minds; there may be a very deep conceptual difficulty or impossibility involved. That means there is a perhaps insuperable problem in giving a full description of the emergence of thought. (Davidson, 1997/2001, p. 128)
\end{quote}

Davidson wryly concludes this passage by giving thanks that he is not in the field of developmental psychology.
McDowell maintains that the distinctive feature of the kinds of minds that human beings have is that we are responsive to reasons. Human beings are not merely pushed about by blind causal forces: our thoughts and actions are guided, and in some cases determined—that is, rationally determined—by our appreciation of what there is reason to think or do. Human mindedness resides in this ability to commune with reasons. We are inhabitants of ‘the space of reasons’, as he picturesquely puts it, adopting a phrase of Wilfrid Sellars.  

McDowell advances a distinctive view of experience. He argues that experience should be understood as exercising a rational rather than merely causal influence over us. In perception, what we take in is not raw data that the mind has to work up and conceptualise before it can form the basis of judgement. The content of our experience is that things are thus and so. The deliverances of perception are already conceptual in character and hence fit to yield judgement and to serve as grounds for belief. If we construe experience in this way, we can think of it not as a mediator that comes between us and things as they are, but as openness to reality. Experience discloses the world to us.

If experience is both essentially conceptual in character and is able to reveal reality to us, then reality itself must be conceptual in character or at least not alien to the conceptual (see McDowell, 1994, pp. 25–9). This requires us to think of the world as ‘all that is the case’ rather than as brutely physical in character. To achieve this, McDowell argues, we must overcome the scientism that insists on representing nature as ‘disenchanted’, as bereft of significance.

In the present context, the crucial aspect of McDowell’s position is that human beings are not born into the space of reasons but are initiated into it by education, or Bildung, as he puts it, adopting the evocative German term. The child is born a mere animal, as it were, but acquires a ‘second nature’ as she develops conceptual capacities that put her in touch with reality in experience. She thereby becomes a conscious rational being—a person. McDowell writes: ‘[I]t is not even clearly intelligible to suppose that a creature might be born at home in the space of reasons. Human beings are not: they are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity’ (p. 125). McDowell gives ‘pride of place’ to the acquisition of language in this process of transformation. Initiation into language is our entrance into the conceptual realm. In this, McDowell thinks of language not just as a sophisticated symbolic system, but as a living repository of evolving forms of thought. This is a vision of language in marked contrast to Davidson’s: the language that makes ‘our orientation towards reality’ possible is, McDowell writes, ‘essentially the possession of a we’ (McDowell, 2007a/2009b, p. 149). In acquiring language, the child enters an intellectual culture or cultures, comprising
conceptions of the world, styles of thinking and reasoning, values that are epistemic, moral, aesthetic, and so on. She inherits a tradition of thought, ‘a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what’ (McDowell, 1994, p. 126), and in so doing becomes a minded being. With this, it seems, McDowell arrives at the view that history makes the mind.

THE IDEA OF BILDUNG

It is interesting to note that there are significant parallels between the kind of socio-historical vision of mind that emerges in *Mind and World* and the views of my Russians. The latter also portray the child’s mind as emerging only through her initiation into culture. They too argue against scientism and the disenchantment of objective reality, urging us to think of the world as embodying meaning and value. And, as McDowell does, they draw a sharp division between the modes of thought and experience available to rational agents at home in the space of reasons and the non-conceptual forms of awareness of ‘mere animals’. There are, of course, important differences of emphasis, but the commonalities are plain. This is perhaps not so surprising: the Russians were much inspired by Hegel and ‘German classical philosophy’, a tradition that has increasingly influenced McDowell since his move from Oxford to Pittsburgh in the mid-1980s.

What, then, are we to make of McDowell’s idea of Bildung? His immediate source is the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose *Truth and Method* has a conspicuous influence on the concluding pages of *Mind and World* (see also McDowell, 2007a/2009b). Gadamer in turn describes the idea of Bildung as one of the guiding concepts of humanism (1975, p. 9), and his use of it puts him in conversation with a tradition of German philosophical and educational thinking whose participants include Herder, von Helmholtz, Schiller, Moses Mendelssohn, and Hegel among many others. The term is related to the verb *bilden* (to form) and the noun *Bild* (image), and is variously translated into English as formation, education, cultivation and culture (though the later translation, once predominant, can mislead). The notion came to prominence in German educational thought in the second half of the eighteenth century to characterise an idea with roots in Renaissance Humanism and ultimately Ancient Greek thought: education as character formation in accord with an ideal image of human development (see Nordenbo, 2003). This became the idea of a process of ‘formative self-development’ (Wood, 1998, p. 301), in which the individual transcends the particularity of her natural existence through the development of the intellectual, rational side of her being, thereby enabling her to commune with the universal and to enter, in von Humboldt’s phrase, ‘the most general, most animated and most unrestrained interplay’ with the world (von Humboldt, quoted by Løvlie and Standish, 2003, p. 2). Critical in this is the individual’s relation to culture and tradition, which are seen as actively appropriated and transformed to become part of the individual’s inner life.
These rich themes all find expression in McDowell’s philosophy, albeit sometimes parenthetically and in a philosophical idiom rather different from the German thinkers in whose work the idea of Bildung is at home. Most prominent is the link to Greek thought, for McDowell takes a modified version of Aristotle’s view of the development of virtue of character as his model of the Bildungsprozess. Yet apart from this appeal to Aristotle, McDowell tells us little about how he intends Bildung to be understood. We can, however, note two important features of his use of the concept. The first is that his conception of the telos that Bildung aspires to realise is thin. The end of the Bildungsprozess is the emergence of an autonomous, critical rational agent ‘at home in the world’. To this extent, his work might be thought allied to educational philosophies that stress rational autonomy, such as the so-called London School of R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst and Robert Dearden. But McDowell offers no account of which of the many ways in which a life can manifest rational autonomy are worthy of cultivation, let alone a story about their developmental or educational preconditions, assigning questions of what kind of people we should be to first-order ethical and political deliberation and debate.

Second, notwithstanding this thin teleology, McDowell takes a very strong view of what Bildung accomplishes. He casts Bildung not as the development of an already-existing self, but as the process in which minded beings come to be. He explicitly describes the transformation Bildung effects as ‘acquiring a mind’; that is, ‘the capacity to think and act intentionally’ (McDowell, 1994, p. 126). Cultural formation, then, is relevant not just to how rational agents manifest their rationality: it is a precondition of a human being’s having rationality to manifest. McDowell’s view of Bildung incorporates both senses contained in the ambiguous term self-creation. It is the process of the coming into being of a self able to engage in practices of self-making.

Just how distinctive McDowell’s position is in its relevance for philosophy of education depends in large measure on how we are to understand these claims about the transformative powers of Bildung. McDowell admits that his position ‘risks looking mysterious’ (1994, p. 125). He cannot be suggesting that the human infant is literally ‘mindless’ in the sense of lacking psychological capacity altogether. Nor will it do to lean too heavily on the distinction, favoured by his Pittsburgh colleague Robert Brandom, between sentience and sapience. For though the child may not yet be sapient, in the sense of being genuinely responsive to reasons, she is far more than merely sentient—that is, capable of being ‘aware in the sense of being awake’ (see Brandom, 1994, p. 5). There is no question that the pre-linguistic child can ‘think and act intentionally’ in a perfectly uncontentious sense of those terms. What the infant lacks are psychological capacities that enable her, as McDowell would put it, to hold the world in view. The transformation effected by Bildung makes the child not just something in the world, interacting with her immediate local environment, but a subject with a view on the world that can think and act in light of that conception.

It might be thought that the natural next step would be for McDowell to offer us an account of just how the transformation occurs. It is interesting, then, that he does
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not venture even a sketch of how such an account might go, or refer us to relevant empirical work. Rather, in his treatment of Bildung, he writes as if he is drawing attention to facts of human development that are there in plain view, just so long as they are not rendered invisible by scientism or philosophical prejudice.

How, then, can his account be taken further?

UNDERSTANDING THE BILDUNGSPROZESS

Perhaps McDowell is reticent to say much about Bildung because he does not think this the appropriate province of philosophy. However, although McDowell would certainly acknowledge that philosophy cannot pretend to discover facts about human development by a priori means, I do not think he believes that, having made room to acknowledge the importance of Bildung, the philosopher must simply step aside and leave it for the psychologist, linguist and cognitive scientist to make good on the notion.\(^{18}\) We can look to philosophy not just to observe the importance of Bildung, but to elucidate the concepts that will enable us to think its importance: person, rationality, the space of reasons, mindedness, thought, meaning, normativity, agency, second nature, and so on. Moreover, speculative reflection on aspects of human development that are in plain view can be genuinely illuminating. We should not think of such reflection simply as a place holder for a genuine theoretical account, any more than we should see Aristotle’s reflections on moral character as merely provisional, awaiting a proper empirical moral psychology.

With these considerations in mind, let us attempt to describe one way in which we might elucidate the Bildungsprozess. In this, it will be important to avoid an easy misunderstanding. Reading McDowell, or my Russians, one might think they suppose children to undergo a kind of ‘cognitive baptism’. The infant is immersed in culture by her elders and ‘acquires a mind’, emerging a conscious rational being. McDowell’s appeal to first language acquisition serves to mitigate such an impression. Yet it is still tempting to think that we must be able to identify discrete, critical moments of transition that enable the child to cross a line that divides the minded from the unminded, the pre-rational from the rational, ‘first nature’ from second nature, the merely animal from the personal. But of course there is no moment at which the child becomes rational, any more than there is a moment at which she first qualifies as a speaker of her native language. There are no lines that are crossed, just complex, many and varied development processes in which black and white end points are joined by numerous overlapping links in shades of grey. Moreover, the child’s location at any point in her development is influenced, causally and perhaps constitutively, by how others relate to her. In our engagement with children, we attribute to them capacities that they do not yet possess, or possess only embryonically, and this ‘lending of capacity’ is a precondition for the child’s coming to acquire the self-standing capacity itself.\(^{19}\) Any attempt to elucidate Bildung must be alive to these complexities.

McDowell identifies the space of reasons with the realm of the conceptual: the child enters the space of reasons in so far as she acquires conceptual powers. It is therefore natural to propose that we enrich our conception of Bildung by exploring
the development of the child’s concepts, and how society, culture and history are implicated in their acquisition and their exercise.

There are, of course, many contrasting accounts of concepts in the philosophical literature. David Wiggins, following Frege, treats a substance concept, e.g., horse, as something general or universal (Wiggins, 2001, pp. 8–11). The concept is ‘the general thing horse’ (p. 79, n. 2). The sortal predicate ‘horse’ refers to the concept. A concept is said to have ‘marks’: a property that is a mark of the concept horse is a property that anything that is a horse has. On this view, concepts are objective in the sense that they are possible objects of analysis, the nature of which is open to discovery.

It is much more common, however, to treat concepts as purely psychological phenomena, and there are contrasting ways of thinking about concepts as psychological. One is to construe concepts as mental representations. On one version of this view, to have the concept horse is to possess a mental representation (a) which has a certain characteristic (i.e. horsey) content, (b) the occurrence of which is correlated causally with the appearance of horses, and (c) which can be deployed to form thoughts about horses.

A second view holds that to possess a concept is to have a certain range of abilities. Opinions differ about the nature of the abilities in question. On the most minimal view, they are recognitional and discriminatory abilities: to possess the concept horse is to be able to identify, individuate and keep track of horses—or, more demanding, to be able to identify, individuate and keep track of horses as horses. A stronger view holds that the abilities are linguistic in kind. Brandom, for example, advances a ‘linguistic pragmatism’ that maintains, following Sellars, that ‘grasping a concept is mastering the use of a word’ (Brandom, 2000, p. 6). McDowell focuses on the ability to form thoughts: ‘the concept of water is an ability that is exercised in thinking about water’ (McDowell, 1992/1998b, p. 289).

Advocates of the second, ability-centred view might say that mental representations underlie the abilities in question, just as proponents of the first view might hold that, although concepts are mental representations, what is important about them is what they enable us to do. But there is nonetheless a marked difference of emphasis in the two approaches. Some advocates of the first view are atomists about concept possession: to have the concept of an x simply requires that you have the right kind of mental representation (see, for example, Fodor, 1998). At least when it comes to concepts of the substances we encounter in perception, each concept is a discrete entity, possession of which does not demand the possession of other concepts—a being could in principle have it and it alone. Advocates of the ability-centred view, in contrast, tend to be conceptual holists. Even on a minimal-ist account of the abilities in question, their exercise requires a whole range of concepts, not just the concept horse. These certainly include more fundamental concepts of the kind Kant thought of as ‘categories’, but they will also include lots of cognate empirical concepts. To be able to identify and re-identify something as a horse, it helps if you can make certain kinds of inferences (‘If it’s a horse, then …’) and if you have a handle on what kind of thing a horse isn’t (‘That can’t be a horse because it barks like a dog.’).
One attraction of the ability-centred approach is that it represents conceptual competence as a matter of degree: someone’s ability to identify, individuate and keep track of something can be more or less sophisticated, just as there can be different standards to which we can hold someone when we ask: ‘Does he know what an x is?’ Where competence comes in degrees, we can meaningfully ask how it develops.

Let us consider the development of children’s understanding of a straightforward substance concept. For this purpose, the concept horse will do fine. I shall suggest that we can identify four stages in the child’s developing understanding of a substance concept. However, I do not want to make much of this stage talk. It is useful simply because it enables us to illustrate the different ways in which socio-historical influences may be operative. Perhaps the course of conceptual development is not best seen as divided into stages, or, if we can define stages, we should delineate more than four. I want to leave these questions open.

Stage One: At the foundation of the child’s understanding of a substance concept is the ability to identify and re-identify the substance in question. So the first stage of the development of the infant’s understanding of the concept horse is simply her pre-linguistic ability to pick out and keep track of horses. The signs of this ability are pretty obvious: she responds to horses. Of course, early on there may be no clear distinction between the child’s responding to the appearance and reappearance of a particular horse and her responding to continuants of a type (or a subclass of that type). But equally, there may be: the child may be characteristically delighted at the appearance of the family pet while generally, if differently, excited when any horse is on the scene.

It might be thought that there is nothing socio-historical about this ability: it is primitive, innate, pre-linguistic and individual. In a sense, this must be true: if the child cannot ‘lock on’ to horses, there is nothing for Bildung to work with. At the same time, we should not overlook the role played by the adults and other children who surround the child. From the outset, the activities of others, including of course their speech, play a significant organising role. Many appearances of horses are accompanied by utterances of the word ‘horse’ by parents and caregivers (and not just utterances, of course; adults respond to, and interact with, horses in characteristic ways): the word starts to anticipate, register and acknowledge experience. Moreover, adults present the boundaries of the concept to the child. The child learns what does and does not count as a horse from the reactions of adults to her responses to the appearance of candidates, which might be real animals, or toys, pictures in books, photographs, and so on. Even the most primitive of conceptual abilities is exercised in a complex social context.

Stage Two: At the beginning of the child’s linguistic awareness, she starts to master simple words. She grasps that utterances of ‘horse’ refer to this continuant and to similar others, and she begins to deploy the sound herself, whether to express excitement, make a request, express fear or just for the fun of it. At first the child may overextend the term, calling all four-legged medium-sized animals ‘horses’, or underextend it, reserving the term only for Dobbin, but the influence of adults and other children brings her usage into line with their own (other things being equal, which they often are not).
At this stage, the child’s use of the concept is ‘in the space of reasons’ in the sense that her usage of the word ‘horse’ is held accountable to standards of correctness, standards that are upheld by other members of the community of speakers. (Note that even at stage one, the child’s non-linguistic responses, while at first seen by others as merely causal, are gradually treated as warranted or not by the situation and hence as accountable to standards of appropriateness: ‘Don’t get excited, Paul, it’s not a horse.’). Of course, it is one-dimensional to think of the adults’ role simply in terms of correcting and training, or even as ‘scaffolding’ linguistic usage (to use Jerome Bruner’s famous metaphor). They constantly offer the child linguistic possibilities; they encourage, play and revel in language. They initiate the child into a form of life in which meaning is ubiquitous, and, as I observed above, they invite the child into this form of life by treating her as far more competent than she actually is.

Stage Three: Now we begin to see increasing sophistication in the child’s linguistic knowledge. The child not only uses a term in response to certain circumstances, or for certain purposes; she begins to associate the term with criteria for its application. She begins to justify her use of words, and the judgements she expresses in using them, by appeal to such criteria. We need not portray such criteria as comprising a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that, in the case at hand, would specify what properties a substance has to have to count as a horse, properties that can be invoked to explain the meaning of the term ‘horse’. Not many predicates have criteria for their use that can be regimented into informative necessary and sufficient conditions, and our understanding of a concept need not take the form of something like a definition. What is critical, however, is that the child begins to justify her thought and talk, and this involves an appreciation of the kind of conceptual connections and inferential relations stressed by conceptual holists: if it is a horse, then it is an animal, four-legged, fond of hay, prone to neighing, trotting, cantering, and so on and so forth. Over time, the child’s linguistic knowledge becomes increasingly reflective.

To what extent are these abilities socio-historical in character? First, the child becomes progressively more proficient in the art of giving and taking reasons. She comes to understand that she owes others an explanation of what she says and thinks, just as others have a similar debt to her, and that the kind of explanation expected is a normative one that justifies or vindicates judgement. Second, the criteria with reference to which the appropriateness of the use of substance terms like ‘horse’ have to be assessed are inherited by individuals from their culture. What counts as a horse and what the word ‘horse’ means are not up to the individual. Here we see two important dimensions of the Bildungsprozess: we learn what Brandom calls ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’, and we learn to play it by appeal to standards we inherit from our intellectual tradition.

Stage Four: It is important, however, that even though the child inherits a conception of what a horse is, and what the word ‘horse’ means, she also inherits this thought: a horse is something that has a nature independent of how we respond to it or interact with it. Horses are creatures of a kind, the nature of which is discoverable by enquiry. So, to put it paradoxically, there is a sense in which someone can
know what a horse is without knowing what a horse is; that is, we can have a handle on the criteria a continuant has to meet to count as a horse by our lights, without understanding the real nature of horses, that in virtue of which these animals are representatives of the kind we pick out with the term ‘horse’.24

It might be argued that we should distinguish two kinds of concepts, those of ‘common sense’, on the one hand, and something more rigorous, on the other. This is the kind of view Vygotsky takes in *Thought and Language*, where he discusses the transition between ‘everyday’ and ‘scientific’ concepts (1934/1986, ch. 6). Vygotsky’s insight is that someone interested in concept acquisition and development should not simply focus on the acquisition of the former kind of concept, while ignoring the latter and the transition from the one to the other. I prefer to say, not that there are two kinds of concepts, but that our ability to form thoughts about horses develops in a process with a long, indeed open-ended, developmental trajectory. This stretches the story of a person’s conceptual development into adolescence and adulthood.25

But whatever view one takes, socio-historical factors will play a significant role. A scientific understanding of horses involves theory set against a considerable amount of background knowledge, much of which we typically acquire only through formal education. The theories in question are parts of an intellectual tradition, just as our practices of enquiry are socially and historically situated. Enculturation into this tradition and these practices gives us the capacity to deploy substance concepts with a proper understanding of what they put us in touch with. Of course, many of us actually lack this understanding and must ‘borrow’ it from competent authorities, a fact that brings out a further profoundly social dimension to knowledge.26

**THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE PRACTICAL**

The point of our sketch of the development of the child’s grasp of one straightforward substance concept is to bring out the many kinds of social influences that must figure in a satisfying rendition of *Bildung*. The account is obviously incomplete, and not just because there is more to *Bildung* than concept mastery. Even in its own terms it is evidently wanting in two respects. First, a fuller story would countenance different kinds of concepts: concepts of artefacts (which are also substances, but markedly different from biological kinds such as horses), abstract entities, moral and aesthetic phenomena, events, actions, psychological notions and (perhaps combining all of the above) the concept of a person. In each of these cases, our understanding of the concept can range from the superficial to the profound, though in many, perhaps all, these cases depth is not found by scientific enquiry disclosing a nature that is hidden from view, but by a variety of other means, and in each case the role of *Bildung* in the path to illumination will be different.

Second, the sketch is one-dimensional: it risks being dismissed as too intellectualistic.27 At the beginning of *Hard Times*, Dickens describes how the schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind, who is obsessed with the teaching of facts and only facts, asks two of his pupils to define ‘horse’. The first is a girl named Sissy Jupe (or ‘girl
number twenty’, as Gradgrind calls her). Sissy is unable to produce a definition, and is duly ridiculed, though we are to surmise that she really knows a good deal about horses because her father works with them. The second, a boy called Bitzer, pronounces: ‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth … ’ The satisfied Gradgrind comments, ‘Now girl number twenty … you know what a horse is’ (Dickens, 1854/1901, p. 10).

My sketch of the child’s developing facility with a substance concept—with its movement from basic recognitional abilities, through increasingly sophisticated and reflexive language skills, to theoretically informed understanding—looks Gradgrindian in that it privileges abstract, verbal, theoretical knowledge and neglects precisely the sort of lived understanding and local knowledge that Sissy possesses. Dickens reminds us that there are other ways of knowing what something is than being able to rattle off a definition or give a theoretical description. Sometimes these other ways are far richer and more meaningful. But the developmental trajectory of the kind of knowledge Sissy possesses is neglected in the sketch I have given. This not only makes for an impoverished view of concepts, it obscures certain important socio-cultural dimensions in the development of mind. Just think of the significance of joint activity and apprenticeship to the development of Sissy’s competence.

This is an important objection, both in its own right and because similar complaints have been brought against McDowell’s philosophy. Hubert Dreyfus, for example, protests that by placing perception and agency in the domain of the conceptual, McDowell is preoccupied with ‘the conceptual upper floors of the edifice of knowledge’ and indifferent to ‘the embodied coping going on on the ground floor’ (Dreyfus, 2005, p. 47).

I have no intention of disparaging the kind of knowledge Sissy possesses. One thing the Russian socio-historical tradition is famous for is its emphasis on activity, not just as facilitating knowledge and as facilitated by it, but as embodying and expressing knowledge, and a good deal of work inspired by this tradition is concerned to attack models that portray knowledge as something abstract and theoretical in favour of conceptions that emphasise the situatedness of cognition. The tradition shares with pragmatism a hostility to what Elizabeth Anscombe called modern philosophy’s ‘incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge’ (1957, p. 57).

How, then, to accommodate such knowledge in our picture? We could opt to invoke a familiar distinction between theoretical and practical forms of knowledge. This would permit us to say that Sissy has practical knowledge of horses (of how they behave, interact with each other and with humans, what makes them content, what anxious, and so on), even though she cannot fashion the sort of description or definition Gradgrind is after. But she knows what kind of beasts horses are and the kind of lives they lead in that she knows how to act with and around horses; hence the absurdity of the idea that she does not know what a horse is. Bitzer, in contrast, has a sort of theoretical knowledge, or the shell thereof.
At this point, we might be tempted to argue that conceptual capacities pertain to the theoretical, not practical, domain. After all, concepts are often portrayed as constituents of thoughts, and thoughts are, or are typically, propositional in structure, but this is not the form taken by practical knowledge (which, one might say, is know-how, not knowledge-that). Having said that, of course, it would be open to us to note the mutual relations and dependencies between the two kinds of knowledge, emphasising how they complement each other. Bitzer’s definition, we may conclude, remains abstract and skeletal so long as it is not enhanced by the sort of knowledge Sissy possesses.

I think this strategy insufficiently radical. It is a mistake to exclude practice from the domain of the conceptual. We should think of conceptual capacities as exercised where we are responsive to reasons, and what Aristotle called ‘practical wisdom’ (phronesis) is unquestionably an aspect of that responsiveness. Such practical judgement, however, does not always find linguistic expression: it may simply be manifest in action. Sissy’s appreciation of how to interact with horses is a form of responsiveness to reasons (for example, she takes such-and-such a movement by the horse as a reason to tighten the reins), even though she may be unable to articulate why and how she does what she does. Indeed, the knowledge she displays in riding may be uncodifiable. When Sissy acts as she does, she realises concepts of things to do, concepts realised by doing what she does, not by articulating thoughts about it. This is McDowell’s response to the charge of ‘intellectualism’, and it is exactly what we need to say to appreciate how mindedness can be present in our bodily engagement with the world (see McDowell, 2007c/2009b, p. 325).

So the model of conceptual development sketched above must recognise that real facility with a straightforward substance concept, $x$, must be embedded in a network of (possibly uncodifiable) practical knowledge if a person is to attain a proper appreciation of what an $x$ is. What form that requirement will take will depend on the concept in question. In the case of moral or aesthetic concepts, for example, the practical may be absolutely critical; for instance, you do not know what generosity is unless you know how it is appropriate to act in certain situations. We must also acknowledge that there can be genuine conceptual capacities that find verbal articulation only partly, and perhaps not at all. The nature of the developmental trajectory of such capacities and the role of socio-historical factors therein will depend on the concepts at issue.

**CONCLUSION**

Focusing on the thought of John McDowell, we have been considering the view that each human individual becomes a minded being only through the emergence and development of conceptual powers that require the appropriation of what is itself an historical object, an intellectual tradition. This account is rather different in character from the kind of transcendental arguments we considered earlier, in the use it makes of the explicitly developmental notion of Bildung. I have explored one way we might explicate that concept by considering the socio-cultural influences on the development of a child’s mastery of concepts.
The sketch I provided aimed to bring out the kinds of social influences at stake in the Bildungsprozess. It will likely be argued that, however successful it is in that regard, it will never be more than a toy theory, even if enhanced and supplemented in the manner suggested in the last section. For it really to explain anything, it will need to be brought into dialogue with empirical research. It is one thing to observe that social influences are important, another to explain the mechanisms of their influence. For the latter we must turn to developmental psychology and cognitive science.29

Such a dialogue is beyond the scope of this book. Subsequent chapters will take up the no less important, elucidatory project defined above: exploring the central concepts in which a position like McDowell’s is framed—person, agency, freedom, mindedness, the space of reasons, rationality, and so on. Indeed, such exploration is needed to determine how good the prospects are of meaningful dialogue with empirical disciplines. McDowell remarks coyly that he does not ‘mean to be objecting to anything in cognitive science’ (1994, p. 121). The fact is, however, that he endorses a number of views that are anathema to much scientific thinking about the mind. He maintains, for example, that mental states and processes are attributes of persons, not of brains or sub-personal systems, and that the mental, the realm of thought, has to be understood by deploying a notion of mental content that has no application to sub-personal systems. Indeed, McDowell goes so far as to deny that thoughts are in the head. The idea is that mindedness must be understood as a property of the whole person engaged in interaction with the world.30 He writes:

Talk of minds is talk of subjects of mental life, in so far as they are subjects of mental life; … it is only a prejudice, which we should discard, that mental life must be conceived as taking place in an organ …

Where mental life takes place need not be pinpointed any more precisely than by saying that it takes place where our lives take place. And then the states and occurrences can be no less intrinsically related to our environment than our lives are. (1992/1998b, p. 281)

It is in light of such remarks that we need to understand McDowell’s view of concepts. When McDowell says a concept is an ability, he means it is nothing like a mental representation, as this is typically understood. It is not an entity of any kind, but a capacity of a bodily being, situated in an environment, which that being exercises in framing thoughts and manifests in intelligent action.31 This capacity can be realised in more or less refined ways, as my sketch was designed to bring out. The vocabulary we need to describe this ability is the vocabulary of thoughts, contents and meanings, and, as McDowell has it, this cannot legitimately be applied to the sub-personal systems that underlie thought and that are the legitimate focus of cognitive science.

We can think of Bildung as the process of coming to be moved by meanings. As McDowell himself observes, the metaphor of being moved by meanings is a mechanical one. But it would be a vestige of Cartesianism, he suggests, to think
that explaining how a natural being comes to be moved by meanings requires an account that conceives of itself as explaining the mechanisms of development:

The idea of a mind’s being moved by meanings involves a metaphor from the logical space of mechanical understanding, but it is an idea whose functioning needs to be understood in the contrasting space of reasons. Trying to take the metaphor literally is a form of the basic Cartesian mistake. (1999/2009b, p. 272)

This puts McDowell at some distance from the vast majority of cognitive science and empirical psychology, even those forms tolerant of the idea of the ‘extended’ or ‘embodied’ mind, and it makes a cognitive science of the Bildungsprozess hard to envisage. A good deal more reflection is required before we even understand the terms in which fruitful dialogue might be possible.

Before we continue to elucidate and develop the kind of position to which McDowell gives voice, I want to consider a more direct approach to the question of socio-cultural character of mind and one at odds with much of what McDowell has to say: social constructionism.

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at a conference at York University (Toronto) in honour of David Martel Johnson, author of How History Made the Mind (2003)—hence my title.
2 The person to whom I owe most is Felix Mikhailov, author of the notable book The Riddle of the Self (1964; 1980). It was he who introduced me to the work of Vygotsky and suggested that I focus my studies on the philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, who had died in 1979. Through Mikhailov I met a number of thinkers who generously discussed with me the history of Soviet philosophy and introduced me to the oral culture vital to its existence. Mikhailov also made it possible for me to give a number of seminars to a small group that included V. S. Bibler, V. A. Lektorsky and the psychologist V. V. Davydov. One such seminar, on the concept of a person, has been transcribed, translated and published (Bakhurst, 1995a). The participants’ responses to my paper stand as testimony to their oratorical skills and the liveliness of their philosophical world. I presented my research on Ilyenkov’s thought and its place in the history of Russian philosophy in Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy (1991) and many subsequent papers (e.g., Bakhurst, 1997; 2001a; 2005a; 2005b).
3 See Bakhurst and Sypnowich, 1995, for discussion of the ‘the social self’ in a variety of guises.
4 The rough convention is that the ‘rule-following considerations’ are at §§138–242 of the Investigations, with the private language argument proper at §§243–315. Other important sources include Wittgenstein’s Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (1978), which contains sustained discussion of rule-following, The Blue and Brown Books (1958), The Big Typescript (2005), and the various volumes on the philosophy of psychology. The literature on these arguments is vast. McDowell’s papers on Wittgenstein, collected in McDowell, 1998a, are especially good. I offer a more detailed discussion of Wittgenstein’s position in Bakhurst, 1995b.
5 As we saw, Davidson explicitly takes himself to be developing Wittgensteinian insights (especially in Davidson, 1992/2001).
6 When Baker and Hacker argue that there is no reason why a contingently solitary person cannot have language, they mean that there is no logical reason; that is, no reason that follows from the very nature of a language. They would happily admit that there may be empirical reasons why, say, a feral child could not develop language.
It can be countered, however, that although the purpose of Wittgenstein’s arguments is not to establish a constructive account of human beings as essentially social creatures, those arguments nevertheless serve, by removing certain deep philosophical misconceptions about the nature of mind, to draw attention to the significance of considerations about our natural history, including our status as social beings, in any satisfying account of the nature and origin of mind. If we understand Wittgenstein aright, such considerations cease to be merely contingent background factors of no interest to the philosophical imagination. Such a reading is relevant to the discussion of Bildung later in this chapter. I consider Wittgenstein on the first-person in Bakhurst, 2001b.

Davidson famously attempts to develop Alfred Tarski’s semantic theory of truth into a theory of meaning for natural languages. A Tarskian truth theory for a language L gives so-called T-sentences of the form ‘s is true if and only if p’, where ‘s’ picks out a sentence of L and ‘p’ states the conditions under which the sentence is true. The famous illustration is: (T) ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white’, where the sentence picked out is used to state its own truth-conditions. A theory that yielded a T-sentence for every sentence of L would amount to an extensional definition of truth for that language. Davidson’s insight is that, while Tarski helps himself to the notion of meaning and uses the theory to define ‘truth’, we can work the other way around: if we take the concept of truth as primitive, we can read T-sentences as pairing each sentence of L with its meaning. This strategy can work, however, only if we do not, in constructing such a theory, presuppose an understanding of the meaning of the sentences of L. Davidson therefore proposes that we see a theory of meaning as an empirical theory, constructed in a process of ‘radical interpretation’ by a theorist who has no prior knowledge of the meaning of the sentences of L or of speakers’ mental states. Davidson’s view is that radical interpretation is the appropriate model for all linguistic understanding. Every speaker must form a theory of meaning for the utterances of every other speaker with whom she interacts. Each such theory will be unique and speaker-specific. For that reason I call what such theories describe an ‘idiolect’ (the language of an individual speaker). Davidson argues that an account of mutual understanding does not need to think of idiolects as variations on a conceptually prior shared language (‘sociolect’). Indeed, we can do without the latter idea altogether. Hence his provocative conclusion that there is nothing of the kind that philosophers and linguists suppose a language to be. (Davidson’s early papers on truth, meaning and radical interpretation are collected in Davidson, 1984; the later papers are principally in Davidson, 2005.)

I am grateful to Julia Russell for her insightful remarks on the contrast between Wittgenstein and Davidson.


What sort of thing is a reason? A reason is a consideration that provides a ground for action or belief, a ground which may be cited to justify action or belief. Reasons are often contrasted with causes, but it is possible to think of reasons as a kind of cause (which perhaps we must if we are to speak of ‘rational determination’). We can say that citing a reason renders action or belief intelligible by revealing the ground that, through its recognition by the subject, caused her to act as she did or form the belief that she did. More on reasons in chapter 5 below.

Putting it this way (as McDowell does, for example, at 1994, p. 26) can mislead, suggesting that the content of experience is propositional in character, a view which is implausible and one that McDowell has recently disavowed. He now argues that perceptual experience presents us with content that is unarticulated. We should still think of this content as conceptual because it can be made discursively explicit in judgements, i.e., thoughts with propositional form. He writes: ‘Though they are not discursive, intuitions [i.e., perceptual experiences] have content of a sort that embodies an immediate potential for exploiting that same content in knowledgeable judgments. Intuitions immediately reveal things to be the way they would be judged to be in those judgments’ (McDowell, 2007a/2009a, p. 267).
To say, as McDowell does, that the world does not lie ‘outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere’ (1994, p. 26) is not to picture reality as a product of our conceptual activity (McDowell, 2007a/2009b, p. 139). His point is rather that perceptual experience yields content that can be articulated into a perceptual judgement that things are thus and so and ‘that things are thus and so’ is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are’ (1994, p. 26). In this way, thought can be at one with the world.

McDowell understands the world as all that is the case, the totality of facts. He portrays facts as ‘true thinkables’, and credits Frege with the best account of what a true thinkable is (McDowell, 2000b, p. 94). The image of the world as ‘all that is the case’, drawn from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, provokes the question of the compatibility of McDowell’s conception of reality with Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, of which he is much enamoured and on which he frequently draws. In response, McDowell is quick to deny that his conception of a fact is a metaphysically contentious one.

See, for example, the Miller translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* (1807/1977) and the Churton translation of Kant’s *On Education* (1803/2003).

Illuminating treatments of *Bildung* include Gadamer, 1975, pp. 9–19, and Geuss, 1999, ch. 2. Hegel’s conception is nicely discussed in Wood, 1998. Lövlie et al., 2003, is a valuable collection devoted to the significance of the concept to thinking about education; the introduction by Lövlie and Standish is particularly good. The articles by Beiser (2003), Mann (2003) and Munzel (2003)—all in Curren, 2003—provide a composite picture of the place of *Bildung* in German educational thinking. The excellent introduction to Blake et al., 2003, is helpful in locating the notion in educational philosophy more generally. Through the work of von Humboldt and others, the concept had a significant influence on the modern idea of the university, a fact discussed, together with much else of relevance, in the late Bill Readings’s book, *The University in Ruins* (1996). Bubner, 2002, is an interesting commentary on McDowell on *Bildung*; McDowell’s reply is instructive (2002, pp. 296–7).

See, for example, their respective contributions to Dearden et al., 1972. Lövlie and Standish, 2003, pp. 8–19, contains a good discussion of the London School, of the relation of the concept of *Bildung* to the idea of ‘liberal education’, and of the relevance of Michael Oakeshott’s thought.

It is important that McDowell appropriates the idea of *Bildung* without commitment to the kind of substantive, normative vision of culture, civilisation and progress that has often informed the notion’s use. Although McDowell is drawn to the evocativeness of the idea of *Bildung*, he does not sign up to everything it commonly evokes.

In the concluding section of a paper on the theory of meaning, McDowell applauds the German expressivist tradition for assigning ‘squarely to the philosophy of language’ the task of understanding a key aspect of *Bildung*; namely, ‘how the mindedness of a community, embodied in its linguistic institutions, comes to realize itself in an individual consciousness’ (McDowell, 1987/1998b, p. 107).

Sabina Lovibond comments: ‘[T]his proleptic or anticipatory mode of relating to babies and children is an essential element in the business of upbringing: we are enabled or helped to make the transition to a fully human mode of behaviour, sensitive to reasons “as such”, by the willingness of adults to use their imagination in treating us—sometimes at least—as being further along the path towards this mode of behaviour than is actually the case’ (Lovibond, 2006, p. 266; see also McGeer, 2001, p. 123). This is an expression of a thought central to the German idealist tradition. It was first given voice by Fichte, who, as Paul Franks puts it, ‘pioneers the idea that a person can come to be through an event of reciprocal recognition, in which a preexisting person summons a latent person to act, thus recognizing that latent person as a latent person, and in which the previously latent person becomes an actual person by responding to the summons—positively, negatively or even with indifference—and hence by recognizing both the other and him/herself as persons’ (Franks, 2005, p. 174). We shall return to this theme later in the book.
20 It is interesting to observe that although the term *concept* has a venerable pedigree in the history of philosophy and remains ubiquitous in philosophical writing, it does not show up much in everyday discourse. It appears in locations like, ‘That’s a weird concept!’ (prompted, for example, by a story about a time-traveller observing his earlier self), ‘He has a great concept for his bathroom’, ‘I can’t stand those 1970 concept albums’, or ‘The concept cars at the car show were terrific this year’. You are unlikely to hear one parent asking another, ‘Does your child have the concept of an aardvark?’ She is more likely to say, ‘Does your child know what an aardvark is?’ or ‘Does she know the meaning of the word “aardvark”?’ *Concept* is a technical notion.

21 In what follows, I am interested in stages in a child’s mastery of particular concepts. I am not pretending to delineate general stages in children’s conceptual or cognitive competence, of the kind familiar from, say, Piagetian theories.

22 There is arguably an intermediate stage at which the child is well aware that certain usages of a term are inappropriate but is unable to give reasons, merely laughing or declaring ‘That’s silly!’ in response to aberrant usage. I am grateful to Willem deVries for suggesting this possibility.

23 It might be argued that, since conceptual holism entails that the child only possesses the concept *horse* if she has a grasp on a range of inferential relations in which the concept figures, the skills described in stages one and two are at best proto-conceptual. In contrast, I prefer to think of these stages as genuinely conceptual in virtue of their role in the developmental process, because of what the child who has them will become. Take this as a reflection, at the level of theory, of the proleptic way we relate to children (see note 19 above). It is also important not to underestimate the holistic dimensions of the child’s understanding even at these early stages of development. For example, the child cannot learn to use the word ‘horse’ unless she has a whole repertoire of recognitional abilities (stage one conceptual skills) of a more general kind. Moreover, we must remember that the child’s use of particular words is premised upon a considerable passive understanding of language. So it would be a mistake to take the fact that children’s first words appear to emerge one by one to support conceptual atomism.

24 We need to take a similar approach to McDowell’s claim that the intentionality of perceptual experience depends on perceptual episodes being related to a wider world-view (see, e.g., McDowell, 1998c, pp. 435–6 [2009a, p. 7]), a view that also frustrates the idea that the discriminative and recognitional capacities at stages one and two can be described as conceptual. It would appear to follow that the infant’s orientation to her surroundings cannot be properly characterised as experience and that she is incapable of perceptual knowledge. McDowell makes light of this apparent problem. Even though the kind of knowledge afforded by perceptual judgement is ‘attributable only to rational animals’, we can think of the ability of infants and non-rational animals to ‘deal competently with their environments’ as manifesting knowledge, only knowledge of a different kind from that available to beings in the space of reasons. For a less easy-going treatment of such issues, as they manifest themselves in Sellars’s philosophy, and one informed by developmental literature, see Triplett and deVries, 2007. I return to McDowell’s notion of a world-view in chapter 7.

24 I reserve judgement on whether biological species are strictly speaking ‘natural kinds’. I simply want to venture the possibility that enquiry might reveal we are radically mistaken about what horses are. Our term ‘horse’ aspires to pick out a genuine kind whose members are united by a common principle of activity. But we might learn that that is not the case: our best genetic or biological theory might tell us that there are several types of animal here and recommend a different taxonomy from the oh-so-familiar one we are used to. And it might be that, in time, our familiar usage gives way to the more scientifically responsible one. Am I saying that we might discover that there are no such things as horses? Better to say that the term ‘horse’ might turn out not to be taxonomic. Whether and how the term would survive such a discovery would depend on various contextual considerations.
25 Some philosophers work with a sharp distinction between concept and belief at odds with the position I take here. They would typically adopt minimal criteria for concept possession, either because they embrace a representationalist view of concepts, or because they have an undemanding view of the abilities constitutive of concept possession, so that, for example, someone is said to possess the concept *horse* if she is able to identify and re-identify horses, or, more demandingly, if she can competently use the term ‘horse’ (or the equivalent in another language). On such an account, two people meeting these criteria would be said to share the same concept even if they had very different understandings of the nature of horses (say, because one is a vet and the other completely unschooled in biology). The difference in their respective understandings is cast exclusively as a difference in what they believe about horses and does not enter into their concepts. Holistic views of concepts, however, cannot sustain a tidy concept/belief distinction, since concepts are defined by their (for example, inferential) relations to other concepts and a subject’s grasp on those relations is expressed by her beliefs. Thus holistic views can support the extended view of conceptual development that I favour. Critics complain that holists cannot explain how people can be said to share concepts—differences in their beliefs, after all, will make for differences in their concepts, and disagreement about the nature of x will become impossible: if the disputants differ in beliefs, they will differ in concepts and will not therefore actually be talking about the same thing. I do not find this an impressive objection, in part because the holist can have recourse to overlap between belief sets to explain conceptual convergence and in part because of the significance of singular thoughts to the convergence of belief (i.e., thoughts that, as McDowell puts it, ‘would not be available to be thought or expressed if the relevant object, or objects, did not exist’ (1982a/1998b, p. 204)). There is, of course, a massive literature on these issues.

26 This last claim recalls Hilary Putnam’s famous thesis of ‘the division of linguistic labour’ (see Putnam, 1988, ch. 2).

I should make clear that even though I have been speaking of the child inheriting the meaning of words, a conception of the boundaries of concepts, standards of correctness in the game of reasons, and so on, I hold that whether something is a horse is not a matter of convention or social construction. What the child inherits are conceptual resources that aspire to be responsive to how things are independent of their exercise. However much weight we place on *Bildung*, what are *gebildet* are the powers that enable us to discern reality, not reality itself. I explore this theme further in the next chapter.

27 I am grateful to Paul Standish for pressing this point, and for invoking the example from *Hard Times*.

28 Theoretical and practical elements are so intimately interwoven in our ability to navigate the world that factoring them neatly into two kinds of knowledge is bound to be artificial, and a source of philosophical illusion. This is an issue of profound educational significance, since in many educational contexts we aspire to cultivate capacities where theoretical knowledge is embodied in practical activity. In nursing or physiotherapy, for example, this is not best seen just as a matter of applying theory, but as acquiring, as it were, ‘knowledge in the hands’. We are not helped in understanding this by the trend in contemporary educational theory that would respond to Gradgrind by extolling situated, local and embodied forms of knowledge, and disparaging theoretical knowledge as abstract and decontextualised. What we need, in contrast, is a suitably rich conception of how the practical and the theoretical interpenetrate. I revisit these issues in chapter 6. For an approach to conceptual development that tries to give credence to complex relations of theory and practice, see Ilyenkov’s conception of ‘the ascent from the abstract to the concrete’ (see Ilyenkov, 1956/1997, 1960, and the discussion in Bakhurst, 1991, ch. 5).

29 The relevant literature is vast. Frank Keil offers a particularly rich discussion of conceptual development, though, in keeping with many in the field, he maintains that change is the result of an endogenous process rather than external (environmental or social) factors (particularly
the key transition between concepts organised around characteristic features shared by instances of a kind and concepts organised around characteristics definitive of membership of the kind) (see Keil, 1989, esp. ch. 6). Other relevant classics include Carey, 1985; Perner, 1991; Astington, 1993; Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1996.

I discuss the ‘personalist’ conceptions of mind of McDowell and my Russians in Bakhurst (2008). McDowell’s views emerge from a long and complex dialectic, conducted largely in dialogue with analytic philosophers of mind and language. He is cautious about expressing his more outré conclusions, so, as with his conclusions about the significance of Bildung, far more time is spent on the journey than at its destination. Nonetheless, these are conclusions of the outmost importance, which deserve a good deal more consideration than they typically receive. I return to the issue in chapter 7.

One might say, contrary to what I said earlier, that, for McDowell, concept is not a psychological notion, at least as this is normally understood.