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CHRISTIAN KNY

In Touch with the World?
Nicholas of Cusa's *Idiota de mente* and John McDowell's *Mind and World**

(I) "[B]y its own nature, sight does not discriminate but [...], confusedly and in a certain undifferentiated totality, it senses an intervening thing which gets in [sight's] way within the sphere of its operation, i.e., within the eye."[1]

In *Mind and World*, John McDowell claims that certain contemporary epistemological problems concerned with human reference to a thought-independent world are in fact not problems, but the consequences of an illusion. As a therapy, he suggests an account of experience in which human sensing is conceived as a receptive process with elements of spontaneity in operation, explaining how humans can take in how things are in a way that constrains epistemic spontaneity and makes the intake available for rational justification.

Now, what does Nicholas of Cusa's description of sensing in (I) have to do with McDowell's account of experience in *Mind and World*? Cusanus does not seem to be concerned with spontaneity. That I have just placed McDowell and Cusanus next to each other gives a rather clear hint: I will argue that there actually is significant common ground between the two. Not only are their main epistemological notions anti-deterministic; their accounts of sensing are also more closely related than it might appear at first sight. This establishes the basis for a discussion of the 'logical spaces' in *Mind and World* that utilises one of Cusanus' main suggestions: humans are conceptually creative beings. As there is good reason to take this suggestion seriously with regard to McDowell, his 'logical spaces' turn from something that is somehow just there into something made by hu-

* This paper makes some key thoughts of KNY, Christian: *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation. Menschliche Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus* (= BGPhThMA, NF 84). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2018, 367–407 available in English. While some passages are translations of the German text, most of this paper is a free and abbreviated adaptation of the book chapter tailored to the requirements of a journal article.

[1] Nicolaus CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente* (= Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita ²V). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 1983, c. 5 n. 82: "Nosti enim visum de sua propria natura non discernere, sed in globo quodam et confuse sentire obstaculum, quod sibi obviat intra sphaeram motus sui, scilicet oculum." Translations of the Latin texts are based on those provided by Jasper Hopkins (freely accessible at https://urts99.uni-trier.de/cusanus/content/uebs.php?ueb=3) and modified where a higher degree of clarity was possible.

mans, shedding light on how strongly he actually opposes key claims of the kind of naturalism McDowell is attacking in *Mind and World*.

To make these claims plausible, I will first give a short summary of how McDowell and Cusanus sketch human reference to the world in *Mind and World* and *Idiota de mente*. Then, I will briefly discuss Cusanus' account of sense perception to show that spontaneity is actually involved in his notion of sensing. Finally, I will analyse McDowell's logical spaces with Cusanus' concept of human creativity in mind.

1. Spontaneous Thinking and the Thought-Independent World

According to McDowell, "characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy"[2] manifest themselves in two unsatisfactory accounts of epistemic human interaction with the world—two accounts which, as they are unsatisfactory, lead to an oscillation.[3]

If human thinking about the world is conceived as a free and spontaneous activity, empirical thinking is in danger of not being in contact with the world it is supposed to be about. If I freely come up with statements about the empirical world, there does not seem to be anything in the world that justifies my statements. Thus it is tempting to try and constrain free human conceptual activity by introducing non-conceptual entities—something 'Given'—which serve as a stopping point of empirical thinking. Ultimately, I can point to this Given to justify my statements about the world. However, there is a problem. As this attempt to prevent a "frictionless spinning in a void"[4] employs a non-conceptual Given, it cannot be successful. While it may account for a causal influence of the Given on who it is given to, it does not and cannot explain how something non-conceptual could have a justificatory function in the realm of conceptual activity. "In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications."[5] The Given fails to do what it is supposed to. It turns out to be an epistemological myth.[6]

The realisation of this problem leads to a recoil. If it is not possible to have a non-conceptual Given justify empirical thinking, coherentism seems the way to go: as conceptual activity cannot conceptually employ a non-

[2] McDowell, John: *Mind and World*. With a New Introduction. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1996, xi.

[3] For key passages regarding the following description of McDowell's project cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, xi–xxiv; 3–23; 46; 66–67.

[4] McDowell: *Mind and World*, 11.

[5] McDowell: *Mind and World*, 8.

[6] The 'Myth of the Given' is introduced in McDowell: *Mind and World*, xiv. The expression is taken from Wilfrid Sellars—cf. Sellars, Wilfrid: *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. With an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1997, 13–14; 33–34 for two core passages.

conceptual Given, justification is only reasonably conceivable within the range of conceptual activity. A non-conceptual Given, while its causal function need not be denied, simply has no part in rational justification. Yet this reaction to becoming aware of the Given as a myth threatens to lead exactly into the frictionless spinning that made the employment of a non-conceptual Given look like a good idea in the first place. The oscillation is complete and it keeps running its course.

McDowell is not trying to show that either of the two alternatives can be conceptualised in a way that stops the oscillation. Instead, he argues that there is a third approach to empirical thinking rendering the oscillation obsolete. He uses Kant's terminology of receptivity and spontaneity to formulate this approach.[7] If experience is conceived as a receptive process which as such is already interwoven with elements of spontaneity, both demands motivating the oscillation can be accommodated: on the one hand, empirical thinking is constrained by the thought-independent world, as experience is a process of reception. The arbitrariness of unconstrained spontaneity and with it the loss of friction is avoided. On the other hand, the presence of spontaneity *in* experience makes room for contents—and not just causal influences—which can be rationally used for justificatory purposes. In experience, humans are in touch with the world in a way that grounds spontaneous rational activity. Understanding experiences as "states or occurrences in which capacities that belong to spontaneity are in play in actualizations of receptivity,"[8] neither blind intuitions nor empty contents threaten empirical thinking.[9]

Now, experience must be a natural process for McDowell as empirical thinking uses contents acquired in contact with the natural world. Therefore, he is confronted with two options which he usually discusses with regard to two logical spaces: the 'logical space of reasons' and the 'logical space of nature'.[10] McDowell could either (1) reject that normative mea-

7 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 9–13 for the first sketch of his suggestion. The passage he is alluding to is Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (= Akademie-Textausgabe 3). Berlin: De Gruyter 1970, A51/B75. It is not necessary to discuss his take on Kant here as the main points of *Mind and World* can be depicted without this discussion (which would lead away from what I am concerned with in this paper). For a critical examination of McDowell's take on Kant cf. Friedman, Michael: *Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition*, in: Smith, Nicholas H. (ed.): *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*. London: Routledge 2002, 25–57; Pippin, Robert B.: *Leaving Nature Behind: Or Two Cheers for 'Subjectivism'*, in: Smith, Nicholas H. (ed.): *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*. London: Routledge 2002, 58–75. For McDowell's reaction to these papers cf. McDowell, John: *Responses*, in: Smith, Nicholas H. (ed.): *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*. London: Routledge 2002, 270–277.

8 McDowell: *Mind and World*, 66.

9 For the most extensive discussion of this matter cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 66–76.

10 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, xivsq. for the introduction of these expressions. Sellars, who once again is the terminological source here, does not speak of a 'logical space

ning and law—the two core features associated with the respective logical spaces—constitute logical spaces *sui generis*. Based on this rejection, he could then hold some sort of naturalistic reductionism claiming that meaning can be reduced to terms of law.[11] McDowell could (2) distance himself from a notion of nature that identifies 'natural' with 'nomologically describable in terms of modern science'. Then, he could keep the logical spaces distinct as spaces *sui generis*. He opts for (2) and thus has to conceptualise nature in a way that is compatible with the logical space of reasons being *sui generis* as well as open to the thought-independent world through experience.

> (II) "We need to bring responsiveness to meaning back into the operations of our natural sentient capacities as such, even while we insist that responsiveness to meaning cannot be captured in naturalistic terms, so long as 'naturalistic' is glossed in terms of the realm of law."[12]

To do this, McDowell generalises an aspect of Aristotelian ethics: the initiation of human beings into ethical behaviour and its rationale through education as a natural element of human living.[13]

> (III) "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."[14]

Through education, McDowell incorporates the spontaneous conceptual activity of humans into a notion of (second) nature that reaches beyond mere nomological description. He thus creates a framework for his conception of experience as a co-operation between receptivity and spontaneity.

Mind and World is the attempt to show that experience can be conceived in a way that allows for empirical thinking to be at the same time a free, spontaneous activity and an activity constrained by a thought-independent world which can be alluded to in acts of justification. To make this attempt work, McDowell suggests a notion of 'nature' that goes beyond the modern scientific understanding of 'nature' as what is describable solely in nomological terms.[15]

of nature'. The expression is coined by McDowell as a counterpart to Sellars' 'logical space of reasons'.

[11] Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 72–77 for the depiction of this option.

[12] McDowell: *Mind and World*, 77. 'Realm of law' is used by McDowell as an alternative expression for 'logical space of reasons'. Cf. below in section 4 of this paper.

[13] Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 78–86.

[14] McDowell: *Mind and World*, 84.

[15] For a concise summary of the main thoughts and goals of *Mind and World* cf. also Putnam, Hilary: *McDowell's Mind and McDowell's World*, in: Smith, Nicholas H. (ed.): *Reading McDowell. On Mind and World*. London: Routledge 2002, 174–177.

In comparison with *Mind and World*, the thematic landscape in Cusanus' *Idiota de mente* differs significantly. Cusanus is not focussed on a single epistemological issue concerning empirical thinking. Rather, he presents a draft of the entire epistemic *condicio humana*, including the ontological background enabling human cognition.

According to Cusanus, humans are part of a complex world brought into existence by a freely creating, absolute origin—'god' in Christian terms. The world entails non-corporeal as well as corporeal entities and is hierarchically structured from the latter 'upwards' towards the absolute origin. Humans occupy a special place in the complex order of the world: they are border entities participating in the corporeal as well as the non-corporeal realm. Like all the other components of the world, the absolute origin has endowed humans with a purpose of being and the tools necessary to successfully pursue this purpose.[16]

The core features of humans are their epistemic activities and the capacities necessary to succeed in them. As they participate in the corporeal as well as in the non-corporeal realm, they can refer to the world through their senses as well as intellectually. The relation between the absolute origin and humans is depicted as one between an archetype and its living images. As *living* images, humans are characteristically creative entities, mirroring the creativity of the absolute origin by bringing into existence concepts and conceptual frameworks to epistemic ends, by improving themselves and by getting closer to their absolute origin in the process of doing so.[17] As *images*, they are confronted with a problem. They can fully grasp neither their absolute origin nor any of its creatures. The reason for this is that according to Cusanus, a full understanding of anything entails a full understanding of its origin. The images cannot fully understand the absolute origin as they would have to transcend their status as images and become this origin in order to do so. Therefore, the images cannot fully

[16] In *Idiota de mente*, this ontological framework is not presented in one specific passage or sequence thereof. It becomes visible in the conjunction of various short passages scattered across the text. Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 1 n. 57; c. 3 n. 72–73; c. 4 n. 74–77; c. 7 n. 99 for some of the more important ones.

[17] Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 2 n. 62–68; c. 5 n. 86–87; c. 13 n. 148–149. Regarding human creativity in the thought of Cusanus cf. KNY: *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, 57–72; LEINKAUF, Thomas: *Cusanus zu Kunst, Spiel und Denken. Über menschliche Produktivität*, in: BORSCHE, Tilman/SCHWAETZER, Harald (eds): *Können – Spielen – Loben. Cusanus 2014* (= Texte und Studien zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte 14). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2016, 301–319; SCHWAETZER, Harald: *Konjekturen zur coniectura. Zur Verschränkung von Selbst- und Welterkenntnis bei Nikolaus von Kues*, in: BORSCHE, Tilman/SCHWAETZER, Harald (eds): *Können – Spielen – Loben. Cusanus 2014* (= Texte und Studien zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte 14). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2016, 525–539; MANDRELLA, Isabelle: *Viva imago. Die praktische Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus* (= Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft 19). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2012, 231–236; VAN VELTHOVEN, Theo: *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität. Studien zur Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues*. Leiden: E.J. Brill 1977, 74–116.

understand anything created by the absolute origin either—again, they would have to fully understand the origin to do to so.[18] Epistemic human reference to the world is thus creative, asymptotic assimilation.[19] To avoid disconnecting humans from a world they cannot fully grasp, Cusanus describes them as 'complications' (*complicationes*):[20] humans contain—'enfold', in Cusanus' terminology—the archetypes of all the absolute origin's creatures in a dispositional way and are able to use these archetypes as an orientation when referring to the world.[21]

[18] Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 3 n. 69–70.

[19] For an extensive discussion of this motif in *Idiota de mente* cf. KNY: *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, 39–72. For important treatments of Cusanus' notion of human cognition cf. also MANDRELLA, Isabelle: *Selbsterkenntnis als Ursachenerkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus*, in: EULER, Walter A./GUSTAFSSON, Ylva/WIKSTRÖM, Iris (eds): *Nicholas of Cusa on the Self and Self-Consciousness*. Abo: Akademi University Press 2010, 111–133; EISENKOPF, Anke: *Zahl und Erkenntnis bei Nikolaus von Kues* (= Philosophie interdisziplinär 24). Regensburg: Roderer 2007; KREMER, Klaus: *Erkennen bei Nikolaus von Kues. Apriorismus – Assimilation – Abstraktion*, in: KREMER, Klaus (ed.): *Praegustatio naturalis sapientiae. Gott suchen mit Nikolaus von Kues* (= Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft. Sonderbeitrag). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2004, 3–49; HOPKINS, Jasper: *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: Banning 1996; SPRUIT, Leen: *Species intelligibilis. From Perception to Knowledge*. Volume Two: *Renaissance Controversies, Later Scholasticism, and the Elimination of the Intelligible Species in Modern Philosophy* (= Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 49). Leiden: E.J. Brill 1995, 20–28; MEINHARDT, Helmut: *Exaktheit und Mutmaßungscharakter der Erkenntnis*, in: JACOBI, Klaus (ed.): *Nikolaus von Kues. Einführung in sein philosophisches Denken* (= Kolleg Philosophie). Freiburg i.Br.: Alber 1979, 101–120; VAN VELTHOVEN: *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität*.

[20] Both ontologically and epistemologically, Cusanus works with the terms 'complicatio' and 'explicatio' to describe the relation between different kinds of unity and the plurality they are a unity of. The most extensive treatment of the topic can be found in MORITZ, Arne: *Explizite Komplikationen. Der radikale Holismus des Nikolaus von Kues* (= Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft 14). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2006. For briefer overviews cf. REINHARDT, Klaus: *Complicatio – explicatio*, in: RUSCONI, Cecilia (ed.): *Manuductiones. Festschrift zu Ehren von Jorge M. Marchetta und Claudia D'Amico* (= Texte und Studien zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte 8). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2014, 81–91; LEINKAUF, Thomas: *Nicolaus Cusanus. Eine Einführung* (= Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft 15). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2006, 102–110; MILLER, Clyde L.: *Reading Cusanus. Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe* (= Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 37). Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America 2003, 36–39; 72; 117.

[21] Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 4 n. 74–77; c. 9 n. 119–122. A key element of this orientation is what Cusanus calls the '*iudicium concreatum*'—an innate human capacity to judge the epistemic activity one is performing. Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 4, n. 77sq. The term 'dispositional' is a placeholder here: Cusanus, before introducing the *iudicium concreatum*, explicitly refuses to take (his notion of) a Platonic stance and hold that there are innate ideas which only have to be remembered after being forgotten for bodily reasons. However, humans are supposed to enfold the archetypes of everything created by god. To avoid a discussion I cannot pursue in this paper, I use 'dispositional', leaving open how exactly the human enfolding of archetypes is to be understood with Cusanus. Cf. KNY, Christian: *Messen ohne Maß? Nicolaus Cusanus und das Kriterium menschlicher Erkenntnis*, in: Das Mittelalter 23 (2018), 92–108 for an outline of this discussion.

In *Idiota de mente*, Cusanus portrays five modes of human assimilation: sensory, imaginative, rational, intellectual, and intellective. All of these modes are—Cusanus does not adhere to a faculty model of the soul—functions of one *mens* governing a human.[22] The differences between these epistemic modes lie in what they refer to, how reliable they are, and what products they lead to.[23]

Sensorily, the *mens*, governing the body, is confronted with information from outside. What the senses, looked at in isolation, gather, is blurred—they receive 'information, that', not 'information, what'.

Imaginatively, the situation is not much different. Imagination itself still grants little order. Firstly, as memory, it enables the working with or working on information about spatiotemporal entities that are not present at a given moment. Secondly, in contrast to the senses, it is not limited to a specific sensory domain like the visible or the audible. It can refer to sensory information regardless of its source.

Rationally, then, order is established. As *ratio*, the *mens* discerns and gives shape to sensory information, placing it in a conceptual framework. Arguments, judgements, definitions and the like belong to the rational realm. One of the main characteristics of rational human activity, according to Cusanus, is its uncertainty. The concepts and conceptual frameworks that are created rationally are created on the basis of information from and with reference to corporeal entities. Cusanus describes these entities as delimited by mental archetypes—like the absolute origin is the archetype of its images, pure forms are the archetypes of spatiotemporally materialised forms—which they can only partially materialise. Thus, they lack the stability of their archetypes, and this lack of stability is transferred to the concepts referring to them.

As intellectual activity takes place in the non-corporeal realm and is concerned with pure forms, it has the stability rational activity lacks—even if Cusanus does not drop the thesis that the epistemic activity in this context is asymptotic when it comes to grasping the divinely created objects this activity is about. The *mens* now is not active as an incorporated *mens*. It detaches itself from the material aspects of the corporeal realm and works on assimilating itself to pure forms, mathematics being the prime example Cusanus employs to describe intellectuality. A circle, in terms of pure form, is a geometrical shape in which every line from the centre to its perimeter is of exactly the same length. Though every drawn or otherwise materialised circle comes more or less close to the pure form of the circle, none can fully actualise it.

[22] Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 5 n. 80–81 for a list of these modes and their relation to the '*mens*' as the entity operating by means of them.

[23] For the following description of the epistemic modes cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 5 n. 82; c. 7 n. 100–106; KNY, *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, 41–57.

Intellective activity, eventually, takes place in the non-corporeal realm as well. Yet, while intellectually the *mens* detaches itself from the corporeal realm in a way that it can reattach itself to it, intellectively this reattachment is not possible. Pure forms relate to materialised forms as archetypes to their images. Intellectively, the *mens* assimilates itself to the absolute origin as that which makes pure forms in their respective shape possible in the first place. It tries to conceive this origin as the all-encompassing unity it has to be to qualify as an absolute origin, and this kind of unity would be broken up if difference, definition etc. were applied to it. As communication is characteristically a discerning, defining activity, the unity of the absolute origin, and thus what the *mens* is concerned with intellectively, simply cannot be communicated.

This brief epistemological comparison of *Mind and World* and *Idiota de mente* shows (1) two models of human reference to a thought-independent world. McDowell, in a narrower approach, argues that empirical thinking can be spontaneous as well as constrained by the thought-independent world if one adheres to an appropriate notion of experience. Cusanus, in a wider approach, portrays a complex model of human epistemic activity as creative, asymptotic assimilation. As McDowell, Cusanus does not depict human reference to the world on a deterministic background. Sense perception however, as briefly indicated above, does appear to be rather devoid of what McDowell would call spontaneity. The version of human reference to the world described by McDowell (2) is the more optimistic one. According to him, humans are in touch with the thought-independent world in a way that actually makes accessible how things are, even if only in aspects.[24] For Cusanus, on the other hand, reference to the thought-independent world is always an approximative process: asymptotic assimilation.

2. Sense Perception in *Idiota de mente*

Looking at this short comparison, the question raised in the introduction resurfaces: what exactly has McDowell's project in *Mind and World* to do with Cusanus' concerns in *Idiota de mente*? Sensory experience for the latter, as just described, suspiciously looks like a process devoid of spontaneity. If McDowell focusses on sensory experience only and if his notion of it stands in opposition to the stance Cusanus takes in this regard, the common ground for a productive conversation between the two seems to be rather limited.

[24] Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 26.

Let us have a look at the passages leading to the impression that Cusanus' notion of experience is devoid of spontaneity. First, there is the statement concerning seeing already quoted in the introduction:

> (I) "[B]y its own nature, sight does not discriminate but [...], confusedly and in a certain undifferentiated totality, it senses an intervening thing which gets in [sight's] way withing the sphere of its operation, i.e., within the eye."

A little bit later, when talking about the imaginative activity of the *mens*, Cusanus repeats this assumption:

> (IV) "For imagination, in the absence of perceptible things, is like a sense that is without the power to discriminate between perceptible things. For to perceptible things that are absent, imagination conforms itself confusedly and without discriminating one state from another."[25]

Sense perception, according to these descriptions, is characterised by two main aspects. First, it takes place in the form of corporeal obstacles getting in the way of the senses, bringing their motion to a temporary halt and thus leading to an occurrence of perception. Second, neither the senses nor the imagination discern what is sensed. Indiscriminate information is perceived, confusedly.

A quick look at these statements leads to the impression of spontaneity having no room in Cusanus' notion of sense perception. The senses are quite literally 'hit' by corporeal entities. Such hits result in sensory assimilation to the corporeal entities causing them, and this assimilation is an indiscrimiante one. When it has taken place, the *ratio* comes into play and orders the sensory contents. Cusanus, in McDowell's terms, seems to hold a version of the Myth of the Given: unstructured contents are sensorily received and only after their reception operated upon by the *ratio*.

Before showing that this is not the case, there is a terminological obstacle to address: the usage of 'rational' and 'rationality'. For Cusanus, as we have seen, rationality is one of many modes a *mens* can operate in, a *mens* being the entity conducting all epistemic activities humans are capable of. McDowell, on the other hand, is not concerned with the epistemic configuration of human beings as a whole. As he leaves open what rationality exactly entails—and as it is thus difficult to place his notion of rationality with regard to Cusanus—, it makes more sense to speak of 'spontaneity' instead. Free, conceptual activity, the main characteristic of spontaneity McDowell employs in *Mind and World*, also prominently features in Cusanus' notion of rationality and intellectuality—after all, he describes humans as epistemically creative. The question that has to be

[25] CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 7 n. 100: "Habet enim se imaginatio in absentia sensibilium ut sensus aliquis absque discretione sensibilium. Nam conformat se absentibus sensibilibus confuse absque hoc, quod statum a statu discernat."

answered, therefore, can be put as follows: can spontaneity be found in Cusanus' notion of sense perception?

Pointing out that, according to Cusanus, it is always *one* human *mens* that performs epistemic activities, from intellective to sensory ones, might seem promising in this regard. If a *mens* is able to spontaneously intellectualise or rationalise, and if the same *mens* is perceiving through the senses, then one could assume that sense perception is a spontaneous activity. However, simply transferring spontaneity from one mental activity to another is not valid, promising as it might seem on the surface. A *mens* is, as the short description of the epistemic modes above shows, able to perform very distinct epistemic activities. Corporeal and non-corporeal ones, uncertain and certain ones, discursive and non-discursive ones. Deriving the spontaneity of sense perception from the spontaneous character of other epistemic modes is therefore not feasible without further arguments.

A closer look at the passages in which Cusanus discusses sense perception makes it clear, however, that the detour via the one *mens* is not even necessary. Following up on (I), Cusanus adds:

> (V) "Hence, if in an eye vision is present without discrimination [...], then mind comes to the sensible soul just as discrimination comes to sight, by which it discerns between colours."[26]

Considering the passage quoted above together with this follow-up raises doubts about attributing a Myth of the Given to Cusanus. He does not claim that first, unstructured contents are received, and only after they have been received they are rationally operated upon. Rather, discrimination takes place *when* sensing occurs. To even see different colours, the *mens* has to be discerningly active in occurrences of visual perception. Distinction is closely tied to rationality for Cusanus, and he conceives rationality as a spontaneous activity. Thus, he seems to be doing more in this passage than simply stating the trivial claim that the human *mens*, which is the operator of every epistemic activity, also performs sense perception. He seems to hold that elements of spontaneity are involved *in* occurrences of sensing.

A second statement supporting this notion follows after a short digression on the discerning capacities of animals.

> (VI) "I have already said: just as sight sees but does not know what it sees without discrimination, which informs and illuminates and perfects it, so the *ratio* syllogises but does not know what it syllogises without the mind, which

[26] CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 5 n. 82: "Unde si adest visio in oculo sine discretione [...], tunc ita advenit mens animae sensibili sicut discretio visui, per quam discernit inter colores."

> informs and illuminates and perfects the reasoning, so that the mind knows what it is syllogising."[27]

Important here is not that the relation between the *ratio* and the senses is one considered structurally analogous to that between the *mens* and the *ratio*.[28] Important is (1) that Cusanus talks about distinction informing and enlightening the visual sense, and (2) that distinction is explicitly tied to the *ratio*. The latter confirms that it is the spontaneous *ratio* that is responsible for the distinction of what is sensed. The former strongly suggests that the *ratio*'s distinctive activity does not take place after, but when sense perception is occurring. If the senses are informed by the *ratio*; if—and there is no textual evidence that this should be the case—sensing is not conceptualised as a two-step process in which information is first taken in by the senses indistinctly and later on discerned when the *ratio* joins in; then, with the rational informing of the senses, elements of spontaneity are in operation *in* occurrences of experience.

In chapter 8 of *Idiota de mente*, Cusanus lets the philosopher present how contemporary medicine conceives sense perception.[29] The philosopher begins with an outline of the corporeal parts involved in it: the soul is immersed in a very fine-grained bodily spirit which in turn is immersed in the blood. The blood runs to the sense organs in its veins, and when a sense organ encounters an appropriate object obstructing its course, the soul performs assimilation via blood and bodily spirit.

> (VII) "[I]f there is an obstacle, then that spirit (which is the instrument of the senses) is impeded and the soul—as if impeded—apprehends confusedly through the senses the thing that stands in its way. For in and of themselves the senses demarcate nothing. That we, when we see something, impose a demarcation on it is not due to the sense but to the imagination, which is conjoined to the sense."[30]

[27] CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 5 n. 84: "Iam dixi, quod, sicut visus videt et nescit quid videat sine discretione, quae ipsum informat et dilucidat et perficit, sic ratio syllogizat et nescit quid syllogizet sine mente, sed mens informat, dilucidat et perficit ratiocinationem, ut sciat quid syllogizet."

[28] Cusanus uses '*mens*' narrowly for 'intellect' in this passage. If it was used in the broad sense of 'that which performs every human epistemic activity', the passage would not make sense—the *ratio* and the senses had to be separated from the *mens* which informs rationality while at the same time being epistemic activities performed by that very *mens*. Cusanus, as it becomes visible here, handles terminology in a rather flexible way. Cf. KNY: *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, 15–28 for the terminology of cognition in *Idiota de mente*. Cf. also HOPKINS, Jasper: *A concise introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*. Minneapolis: Banning, 13–14; HOPKINS, Jasper: *Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse*, in: EULER, Walter A. (ed.): *Nikolaus von Kues: De venatione sapientiae. Akten des Symposions in Trier vom 23. bis 25. Oktober 2008* (= MFCG 32). Trier: Paulinus Verlag 2010, 68–70.

[29] Cf. CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 8 n. 112–115.

[30] CUSANUS: *Idiota de mente*, c. 8, n. 114: "Unde fit, ut aliqua re obstante spiritus ille, qui sentiendi instrumentum est, tardetur et anima quasi tarda rem illam, quae obstat, confuse

Here, the imagination is placed 'between' the senses and the *ratio* as an intermediary with certain capabilities of distinction.[31] Yet again, distinction is not depicted as taking place *after* the senses have done their job. The tool the *mens* uses for distinction is used in conjunction with the senses. Looking at their specific epistemic contribution, it does consist in an indeterminate, confused input. But the deliverance of this input is not separated from the discriminating epistemic activities regarding perceived objects in the sense that, in a first step, reception is happening, and then only later distinction takes place. Rather, *while* receiving information, the *mens* discriminates through imagination or, with a higher degree of distinction, the *ratio*. The *mens* perceives not by simply being determined from the outside. It actively contributes to sense perception by having elements of spontaneity in operation while, in McDowell's terms, being impinged upon from the outside.[32] Cusanus' and McDowell's understanding of the senses, the kind of information they receive, and what sort of entities this information comes from may differ. Yet they both conceive perception as a process in which spontaneity and receptivity cooperate.

3. Cusanus, McDowell, And Logical Spaces

Thus, while McDowell focusses on a small part of the epistemic activities humans can perform in comparison with Cusanus, their notions of sensing are closely related in core aspects. This provides the basis for bringing them into a constructive conversation. Of the questions that could be discussed, I can tackle only one in this paper: what exactly are the logical spaces McDowell talks about, and what is the epistemological status of the logical space of nature?[33]

When McDowell introduces the logical spaces, the situation seems to be clear enough. The logical space of reasons is the realm of spontaneity and meaning: humans use concepts to reason, judge, and question—how

per sensus ipsos comprehendat. Sensus enim, quantum in se est, nihil terminat. Quod enim, cum aliquid videmus, terminum in ipso ponimus, illud quidem imaginationis est, quae adiuncta est sensui, non sensus."

[31] It may seem that in (VII) the imagination serves the purpose the *ratio* serves in the passages discussed above. At the end of the paragraph the quote is taken from, however, the thesis is repeated that the distinctive capabilities of the imagination are strongly limited (cf. Cusanus: *Idiota de mente*, c. 8, n. 114). It is still the *ratio* that is the main distinctive force with regard to corporeal entities.

[32] Cf. Kny, Christian/Silva, José F.: *Nicholas of Cusa on Rational Perception*, in: Bulletin de philosophie médiévale 59 (2017), 177–213 for an in-depth analysis of Cusanus' notion of sense perception.

[33] Other important questions are: does empirical content serve as a means of justification for Cusanus and if so, in which way? Are the strong ontological claims he makes a weakness of Cusanus or is the hesitancy to make ontological claims at all a weakness of McDowell? Cf. Kny: *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, 385–399 for the discussion of these questions.

(thought-independent) things are, in the case of empirical thinking. The logical space of nature, in contrast, is the realm of law: nomological descriptions of nature are given within it. Experience is commonly explained in terms the latter.[34] The logical spaces are *sui generis* with regard to each other:

> (VIII) "whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons. The relations that constitute the logical space of nature, on the relevant conception, do not include relations such as one thing's being warranted, or—for the general case—correct, in the light of another."[35]

While the description of the logical space of reasons as the normative realm of meaning and reasoning remains stable throughout *Mind and World*, the characterisation of its counterpart undergoes some changes. After its introduction in (VIII), the logical space of nature reappears when McDowell discusses the requirements his notion of experience exerts on what is to be understood as 'nature'. He sketches a modern, scientific standard view of nature as a disenchanted 'realm of law' and confronts his notion of experience with such a view.[36] In this context, he stops speaking of the logical space of nature and shifts to talking about the realm of law instead.[37]

This is important from a strategic point of view. McDowell has to conceptualise spontaneous activity within the logical space of reasons as natural to make his notion of experience work. If he kept talking about the logical space of nature as a logical space different in kind from the logical space of reasons, an equivocal and potentially misleading notion of nature would be the result. By shifting from 'logical space of nature' to 'realm of law', McDowell makes terminological room for the inclusion of human spontaneity into 'nature' by avoiding the expression in the description of what is supposed to be *sui generis* in contrast to the logical space of reasons.[38]

Thus, in the course of *Mind and World*, McDowell first introduces the logical space of nature as the commonly acknowledged framework of describing experience and as counterpart *sui generis* to the logical space of reasons. Experience is then moved into the logical space of reasons by characterising it as interwoven with spontaneity. That necessitates a different notion of nature, which leads to a renaming of the logical space of nature into 'realm of law'. Untouched by this terminological shift, according to McDowell, the latter remains *sui generis* with regard to the logical space of

34 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, xiv–xv.
35 McDowell: *Mind and World*, xv.
36 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70–77.
37 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70–72.
38 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 72–86.

reasons, aimed at revealing law-governed facts, and praised as an achievement of modern science.[39] This raises an important question: has the realm of law always been there to simply be discovered when modern science took over some centuries ago, or has it been created with or through the outlook on the world characteristic of modern science? McDowell talks about the realm of law in a way that suggests the former.[40] However, the question is not explicitly taken up in *Mind and World*.

At this point, it makes sense to take a step back and have a look at Cusanus. Describing human epistemic activity as conceptually creative, he is quite clear: humans create concepts and with these concepts conceptual frameworks—in the corporeal[41] as well as in the non-corporeal realm.[42] For Cusanus, the capacity to create concepts and conceptual frameworks is part of the natural outfit of humans. Actualising this capacity is merely a realisation of human potential. The parallels to what McDowell puts forward in terms of 'second nature' are striking. Humans are born with certain capacities, and by learning to realise these capacities they grow into, acquire, and work on certain, in this case epistemological, frameworks. Cusanus' response, were he confronted with *Mind and World* and asked where the realm of law stems from, seems clear: the realm of law is a humanly created conceptual framework designed to describe the thought-independent surroundings humans find themselves in. As such, this logical space has not always been there, only waiting to finally be discovered. It can be 'discovered' at most in the sense that being brought into existence entails being 'found'.

Even though such an answer to the question of where the realm of law originates from may seem to contradict what McDowell suggests in key passages, it is plausible. For, first, he holds that logical spaces are dynamic with regard to their contents. He would not have to consider experience a 'tribunal' for humans continually adapting their world-views by means of their spontaneous rationality,[43] if the contents of logical spaces were static. Second, McDowell describes entirely new logical spaces being opened. This can lead to interspatial dynamics, showing that, not only regarding their contents but also regarding their characteristics as logical spaces, these spaces are no static entities. The realm of law exemplifies this in *Mind and World*: a hard-won achievement of modern science, according to

39 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70–72.

40 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70, for example. Talking about the *rise* of modern science and the notion of nature it *makes available* suggests something being already there and finding a way into the open, not something being created or developed in the first place.

41 Cusanus: *Idiota de mente*, c. 7 n. 102: "[N]ostra vis mentis [...] facit mechanicas artes et physicas et logicas coniecturas."

42 Cusanus: *Idiota de mente*, c. 7 n. 104: [M]ens [...] exserit scientias certas mathematicales."

43 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, xii; 31–32.

McDowell, this realm causes ruptures by contesting the legitimacy of an up to that point unified logical space that does not distinguish between meaning and law in the shape of two distinct spaces *sui generis*. These dynamics within and between logical spaces make it plausible to take Cusanus' route: as the assumption that a potentially infinite amount of logical spaces is sitting somewhere only waiting to be discovered is not a particularly appealing one,[44] it makes sense to assume that they are created by humans.

Thus, the realm of law being a logical space, it is created by humans as a mode of accessing the world in terms of modern science. It is a logical space that has proven successful during centuries, its success being palpable in the technological products it facilitates, for example. However, even if that may be overlooked easily due to its stability in and importance for contemporary debates, it still is a logical space created by humans. As such, it can be extended, narrowed down, modified in other ways, or even abolished entirely.

Acknowledging that, follow-up questions concerning the realm of law and its relation to the logical space of reasons arise. If, first, the realm of law is created by humans and available for modification: to which degree is spontaneity involved in its creation and its inner workings? Both aspects of this question can be answered without much ado. Not involving spontaneity in the creation or modification of logical spaces is implausible. Spontaneous activities like arguing, justifying, etc. play an important role in it: the unified logical space preceding the separation into the logical spaces of reasons and law, to give an example, is criticised for its notion of nature, rejected, and replaced with two separate logical spaces whose properties are negotiated.[45] That the realm of law is marked by spontaneity internally as well is explicitly stated by McDowell: "Of course depictions of nature are linked by relations of justification. The point is that there are no such linkages in what is depicted."[46] Therefore it can be clearly stated: the logical space of reasons as well as the realm of law are products of human spontaneity. Activities performed within both logical spaces are marked by spontaneity as well. What discerns the spaces is what humans find (from) within them—meaning and normativity in one, law-governed entities and events in the other.

44 That would mean replacing the Platonic heaven of ideas with a McDowellian heaven of logical spaces. Looking at the way McDowell distances himself from 'rampant Platonism' (cf. for example MCDOWELL: *Mind and World,* 88), this is not a viable interpretive option.

45 Cf. MCDOWELL: *Mind and World,* 70–72.

46 MCDOWELL: *Mind and World,* 70 (footnote 1). McDowell does not state: "The point is that there are no such linkages in the *depictions themselves*". This could be interpreted as depictions devoid of spontaneity being produced within the realm of law and then transferred to the logical space of reasons to be linked spontaneously. Instead, McDowell draws the line between the realm of law as a logical space and the thought-independent world.

With that, second, the relation between the logical spaces comes into view. Given the ubiquity of spontaneity and the notion of nature McDowell suggests: does he quietly, and despite claims to the contrary, eliminate the realm of law as a logical space *sui generis* and establish a hegemony of the logical space of reasons? There seems to be textual evidence for an affirmative answer. To begin with, that the realm of law is devoid of spontaneity is explicitly stated at the beginning of *Mind and World*;[47] at later points, it is at least terminologically suggested.[48] Yet at the same time, McDowell matter-of-factly disposes of the notion in a footnote.[49] Furthermore, the lawfulness presented as a core feature of the realm of law turns out to be a feature not of the realm itself, but of the objects described in its terms. McDowell, when switching terminological gears, oscillates between using 'realm of law' synonymously with 'logical space of nature' and using it for the objects described in terms of that logical space.[50] This could be read as an indication that without this oscillation, there would not be much left justifying the *sui generis* character of the realm of law. Finally, the notion of nature suggested by McDowell could be interpreted as an expression of the hegemony of the logical space of reasons: by characterising spontaneity as natural and at the same time impossible to be captured in the conceptual repertoire of the realm of law, the latter even loses its unique object range—the natural. So if the realm of law has been created and established by means of spontaneity; if activities within the realm of law are marked by spontaneity; if the realm of law does not even have a specific object range; does that not mean that it is abolished?

The points just listed certainly can be interpreted as not just a cosmetic, but a serious treatment of the naturalism McDowell attacks. The realm of law, representative of this kind of naturalism in *Mind and World*, nonetheless—and this is the key point—remains a logical space granting a specific access to its object range that other logical spaces cannot. Taking a step back and looking at how Cusanus renders the epistemic activity of humans brings two suggestions into the discussion that are worth considering. First, that the realm of law—and logical spaces in general, for that matter—are humanly created conceptual frameworks that do not differ from each other by being artificial or natural, by being marked by spontaneity or not, but by granting access to an object range in a specific way. Second, that these different types of access are what justifies calling each logical space a space *sui generis*. While this might not meet the expectations of readers adhering to the kind of naturalism McDowell criticises in

47 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, xv.
48 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70–72.
49 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70 (footnote 1).
50 Cf. McDowell: *Mind and World*, 70–72.

Mind and World, it seems to be what follows from how McDowell treats the logical space of nature.

Abstract
At first sight, Nicholas of Cusa's Idiota de mente *and John McDowell's Mind and World do not seem to have much in common. Cusanus develops a model of the epistemic* condicio humana *both from an epistemological and ontological point of view. McDowell focusses on a specific epistemological issue: how sensory experience has to be conceived in order to avoid the fallacies of modern naturalism and coherentism.* Upon closer examination, *however, it turns out that both authors understand sense perception as a process which includes elements of both receptivity and spontaneity in operation. In my paper, I make use of this common ground to discuss the character of McDowell's 'logical spaces'.*