On the Incompleteness of McDowell's Moral Realism

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[8385 words]

Abstract of "On the Incompleteness of McDowell's Moral Realism"

This paper examines McDowell's support for moral realism. It is argued that the

support is promising, but crucially incomplete. Elaborating on a post-Kantian skeptical

argument it is argued that McDowell's response-dependent account of moral properties

leads to what could be presented as a dilemma: *either* accept a projectivist account of

moral properties *or* provide a theory about appropriate moral subjects and favourable

moral circumstances. It is shown that McDowell does not accept the first horn of the

dilemma, as it would force him to accept the disenchantment of nature. And it is argued

that, contrary to appearances, his account of the virtuous agent doesn't provide the

resources for the required theory about appropriate moral subjects and favourable moral

circumstances. The conclusion is a bit speculative: it is suggested that instead of the

required theory something else might be most important in moral matters: a sensitivity

to divergence and an enduring dedication to rational attempts to overcome divergence.

On the Incompleteness of McDowell's Moral Realism

1. Introduction

These are some of the things I should like to be able to say to my children:

"Finish your plate."

"Don't let the tap run while brushing your teeth."

"Don't hug someone who doesn't want to be hugged by you." (They are still young, my

children. No doubt this will eventually change in "Don't sleep with someone who

doesn't want to sleep with you.")

In saying these things I take it for granted that I'm right in expecting them to listen to

me. When they ask why (and they often ask why!) I occasionally reply "Because I say

so!", but that is of course not a philosopher's reply. If I am pressed I should be able to

come up with lots of good reasons why they should do the things I tell them. Some of

these reasons will introduce what I take to be moral facts, i.e. statements about the way

the world is that have moral significance. These moral facts seem to me to be the most

compelling reasons I have to offer, because in referring to them I provide my children

with the means to understand and grasp for themselves what I take to be convincingly,

and truly, valuable.[i] These moral facts are the reasons I will have to use to back up all

other reasons I could provide. They seem to provide evidence (the bedrock where "my

spade is turned", as Wittgenstein famously said[ii]), and this seems to me to be on a par with my referring to apparently more natural facts when my children ask me why they should believe that this toy is blue ("because it is!") or that Utrecht is a city in the Netherlands ("because it is!"). Such facts provide bedrock evidence — compelling reasons to form certain beliefs or perform certain actions.

Moral facts are extensively discussed in recent Anglo-American philosophy. Due to the ingenious and powerful arguments of expressivists such as Hare[iii], error-theorists such as Mackie[iv] and quasi-realists such as Blackburn[v] they've had a hard time. But John McDowell is one of their heroes, and his work on secondary qualities and more generally on the problem of experience has generated a very strong support for a realist account of moral facts.[vi]

In this paper I shall examine McDowell's support for moral realism. I shall argue that it is promising, but crucially incomplete. I shall argue that McDowell's response-dependent account of moral properties leads to what could be presented as a dilemma: *either* accept a projectivist account of moral properties *or* provide a theory about appropriate moral subjects and favourable moral circumstances. McDowell doesn't accept the first horn of the dilemma, as it would force him to accept the disenchantment of nature. And I shall argue that, contrary to appearances, his account of the virtuous agent doesn't provide the resources for the required theory about appropriate moral subjects and favourable moral circumstances. In the speculative conclusion, I shall suggest that instead of this required theory something else might be most important in moral matters: a sensitivity to divergence and an enduring dedication to rational attempts to overcome divergence.

2. McDowell on the reality of secondary qualities

The thesis that the reality of values is similar to the reality of secondary qualities does not obviously support an account of moral facts as compelling reasons for action. After all, in the Lockean tradition secondary qualities are subjectively, and more importantly, relatively real.[vii] The fact that something is red, for example, boils down to the fact that this thing looks red to certain subjects under certain conditions. And as long as the account doesn't specify the extension of the 'certain' used twice, there is an easy way out for those willing to accept the fact as true but unwilling to accept the fact as a reason for action. "Sure, dad", my children will reply, "it is a fact that from your point of view it is wrong to spoil water, but that's merely so from your point of view, not from ours." It is along such lines that facts about secondary qualities are supposed to contain a projective error; they are based on the systematic error to mistake features of an experience for features of the object experienced.[viii]

In his important article "Values and Secondary Qualities", John McDowell has developed a convincing argument against this interpretation of the reality of secondary qualities. According to McDowell the suggestion of a projective error flows from the failure to distinguish between two senses of objective. On the one hand, a quality can be objective "in the sense that what it is for something to have it can be adequately understood otherwise than in terms of dispositions to give rise to subjective states."[ix] In this sense, secondary qualities are not objective, because we cannot make sense of an object having a secondary quality (such as a the colour 'red') otherwise than in terms of the way in which such an object *looks* (i.e. is disposed to give rise to a subjective state

of perceiving a red object). Our story about a thing's possessing such a disposition should mention something about the way this thing would look; otherwise it would merely be a story about some microscopic textural property of its surface (that what makes it reflect light of a particular wavelength), but not about one of its secondary qualities. Secondary qualities are subjective in this sense, because of the conceptual connection between being red and being experienced as red.

But on the other hand, objective means "there to be experienced, as opposed to being a mere figment of the subjective state that purports to be an experience of it."[x] In this sense, secondary qualities are objective. They are properties of objects, waiting 'out there' to be experienced by anyone appropriately equipped to detect them in circumstances that are favourable to their being so detected. McDowell argues that there are no reasons at all, but misleading misunderstandings, for a shift from subjective in the first sense to subjective in the second sense. The fact that secondary qualities are essentially phenomenal (that there being what they are is conceptually connected to their having to be experienced as being such) does not imply that they cannot be "properties genuinely possessed by elements in a not exclusively phenomenal reality."[xi] The argument concentrates on what it means for experience to be both irreducibly subjective *and* open to objective reality. We need both in order to keep in touch, epistemically speaking, with reality at all; i.e. to be able to maintain a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. But accepting both implies accepting that part of reality is irreducibly subjective in the first sense. Some of the properties of the world are what they are experienced as being.

Having established a status for facts about secondary qualities that give these facts a role to play in the rationality of belief, McDowell continues by arguing that the

plausible parallel between values and secondary qualities can be understood now as giving moral facts a similar role to play in the rationality of evaluation. The attempt is not to directly secure a role for moral facts in the rationality of moral action, but, slightly less ambitious (and leaving the problem of moral motivation unaddressed[xii]) to secure a role for moral facts in the rationality of moral epistemology.

McDowell uses the phenomenon of fear as an intermediary between secondary qualities and values. Things are fearful if and only if they are disposed to elicit responses of fear. And although this means that any experience of fear implies that it's object is represented as possessing the property of being fearful, this does not imply that any object so represented really has a disposition to elicit responses of fear. We are familiar with a distinction between merited and unmerited responses of fear. We need not be frightened of small, innocent spiders, but we should fear an angry, armed serial killer pursuing us. Experiences of fear we come to judge as merited are the ones that rightly represent their object as being fearful, i.e. as really being disposed to elicit responses of fear.

The same applies to responses to secondary qualities such as colours. Here too we are familiar with a distinction between veridical and illusory experience. If the lighting conditions are unfavourable or the perceiving subject inappropriate (e.g. colourblind) we cannot conclude from the experience of grey to the possession of greyness by the object seen as grey. We might have some story about the causal mechanism involved, and this might give us an explanation of the distinction between veridical and illusory sense experiences that does not seem to be available in cases of fear, and (more seriously and more likely) in cases of value.

McDowell argues, however, that there are more kinds of explanation than merely causal ones. The fact that we cannot give a *causal* explanation of the distinction between merited and unmerited responses of fear, does not imply that we cannot give any explanation at all. It very clearly makes a lot of (empathetic) sense to call fear for small spiders unmerited, and fear for serial killers merited. And that is a style of explanation too.[xiii] We need such distinctions, McDowell claims, to "understand ourselves in this region of our lives".[xiv] This sense-making type of explanation, that is crucial to understanding the appropriateness of some of our emotions, figures characteristically too in the ways in which we distinguish between merited and unmerited evaluations. McDowell's conclusion is that, although he has not yet established a comprehensive picture of moral facts as compelling reasons for action, he has provided an argument that does justice to the cognitive phenomenology built into the idea of moral facts. There is no reason to think moral properties are merely projected onto the world. They are as real as secondary qualities, providing a rationale to the distinction between merited and unmerited evaluations in terms of the way the world is.

3. Maimon's Skeptical Challenge

The resulting picture gives moral properties a reality that is dispositional and response-dependent. The wrongness of hugging people that do not want to be hugged, is a dispositional feature of reality, genuinely waiting 'out there' to be detected by subjects equipped to produce the appropriate response. Although this picture gives moral

properties a reality independent of any particular experience of them, it is not a reality that allows for there to be no experiences of these properties possible at all. This is a far-reaching consequence that is easy to grasp in colour cases: nothing can be a real colour waiting 'out there' to be detected, unless it is the case that appropriate subjects in favourable circumstances would have an experience of it. If an object has a particular colour this implies a priori that every subject appropriately equipped to detect colours will have an experience of this colour if it has in favourable circumstances an experience of the object. Note that although there is an echo of Berkeley's famour dictum "esse est percipi" (in that the reality of secondary qualities is so closely tied to the reality of experiences), the idea is decisively realistic: the secondary quality is a property of an object that has a mind-independent existence. This object plays an important role; by being the object of an experience it entails, *qua* experienced object, the property experienced, if, that is, the experience of the object is the experience of an appropriately equipped subject in favourable circumstances.

How are we to understand this? What is the exact role played by the appropriate subject and the favourable circumstances in bringing it about that the experience of the object entails the experience of the property? Within the realist framework in which this question is asked, an obvious suggestion would be to say that there are many different experiences possible of one and the same object (differing in detail, in sense modality, in vividness, etc.), and that with respect to the object's colour we can distinguish at least three classes of experiences: (1) the experiences that are indeterminate about the colour, (2) the experiences that entail an experience of the object's proper colour, and (3) the experiences that entail an illusory experience of what is not the object's colour. I could hear our car, for example, in the street, and my radically colourblind neighbour could

see our car in the street, and this would be two experiences of our car that are indeterminate about its colour. But I could also see our car coming up the drive at noon on a beautiful day, an experience that entails that I see it's colour is golden (which, for better or worse, it is). And I could see our car standing under a street lamp that makes it look orange (which, I know, it isn't).

On this view the role of the assumption that only appropriately equipped subjects could detect a response-dependent property such as a colour, is to be able to distinguish between subjects capable of having experiences of type (2) and (3) and subjects merely capable of having experiences of type (1). The latter subjects are not appropriate (their experiences are *silent* on the response-dependent properties in question[xv]). This is not to say that the former subjects *are* appropriate. For there could be subjects merely capable of experiences of type (3), and never of type (2) — e.g. the ordinary colourblind male who cannot distinguish between red and green, but who is quite capable of experiencing most of the other colours. These subjects are inappropriately equipped because they somehow have unfavourable circumstances built into their capacities, or so one could suggest. This means that the appropriately equipped subjects are those capable of experiences of both type (2) and (3). And that is why we need also an assumption about the obtaining of favourable circumstances.[xvi] The role of this assumption, that appropriately equipped subjects can only detect a response-dependent property when they are in favourable circumstances, is to be able to distinguish experiences of type (2) from experiences of type (3). We need this distinction, because it is, by hypothesis, only the experiences of type (2) that are conceptually connected to the reality of the response-dependent property.

From a metaphysical point of view this is a coherent and convincing story. A world containing appropriately equipped subjects and favourable circumstances is a world containing response-dependent properties if these subjects in those circumstances have experiences in which certain objects appear as having these properties. We are, phenomenologically speaking, familiar with such experiences (i.e. experiences in which objects appear as having properties), and we should take them at face value, as McDowell argues, in order to guarantee that experience is open to the world. That is, we will have experiences of type (2).

Despite its metaphysical plausibility, this story gives rise to serious epistemological problems. For how are we to determine which subjects are appropriately equipped and which circumstances favourable? A naive answer would be to turn to the objects and their properties, and to claim that favourable circumstances and appropriate subjects are those that generate experiences that would make these properties look as they are. This is naive and also viciously question-begging, because, being response-dependent properties, part of what they are is how they look. And this means that one cannot turn to the objects and their properties prior to and independent of determining the appropriate subjects and the favourable circumstances. Which experiences are of type (2) is not something that we will be able to determine via the looks of the objects of experience. To identify these experiences we will need to know which subjects are appropriate and which circumstances favourable.

A better answer would be to go transcendental and to argue that the very possibility of genuinely experiencing these properties presupposes a priori knowledge about which subjects are appropriate (those that have experiences of these properties) and which circumstances favourable (those in which there are experiences of these

properties). This is a Kantian line of reasoning that has been revived in an adapted (and improved) form by philosophers working in a Wittgensteinian tradition such as Putnam, Rosenberg, and McDowell.[xvii] In its adapted form the starting point is not the real possibility of having experiences of response-dependent properties, but the real possibility of correctly applying response-dependent concepts to particular experiences. The idea is that one can only learn to apply a response-dependent concept (e.g. the concept 'red') correctly if one is generally appropriately equipped to detect the properties that fall under the concept and is usually in favourable circumstances. Children could not learn to use the colour terms correctly, unless they are normally capable of perceiving and distinguishing different colours, and they would not learn to use them correctly if they grew up in very abnormal lighting circumstances (e.g. in a cave where the only light available is red).

I think this line of reasoning is convincing as far as it goes. But it doesn't go as far as one would wish. For it is vulnerable to an argument already raised, in very different words, by Salomon Maimon against Kant.[xviii] I mean the skeptical argument which says that we know a priori merely *that* there are appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances, but this does not mean that we know (or even could know) a priori about any particular subject whether it is appropriate or about any particular circumstance whether it is favourable. The Kantian line of reasoning establishes that with respect to every response-dependent property of the world and every response-dependent concept that could be used correctly, it is the case that normal subjects are appropriately equipped and normal circumstances favourable. But what this reasoning does not establish — and this is where the Maimonian skeptic enters the stage —, is whether any particular subject is appropriately functioning on a given occasion and whether the

circumstances on that occasion are favourable. One could say that the skeptic points out that there is a crucial ambiguity in the term 'normal'. Although it could be used descriptively to identify the subjects and the circumstances we are familiar with on any particular occasion, we could not, on a priori grounds, shift from this descriptive use to a normative use in order to identify the subjects and circumstances that are appropriate and favourable to the detection of the response-dependent properties present in the occasion. It is established by the Kantian, so to say, that we could not learn to use the response-dependent concept of e.g. 'red' correctly if the circumstances in which we considered it right to use it were not normally favourable, and if our experiences of redness were not normally appropriate. This gives us a *formal* confidence in the reality of the response-dependent property 'red'. But this does not give us the right to maintain on a priori grounds that on any given occasion our usual experience of seeming to perceive redness *is* appropriate nor that the circumstances *are* favourable. And this gives us on every particular occasion in principle a reason to doubt whether the object we experience has the response-dependent properties we experience it as having.

I should like to emphasize that this Maimonian, or post-Kantian argument is not similar to the skeptical argument used by error-theorists and quasi-realists.[xix] The latter type of argument says that it makes no sense to distinguish between *claiming* that there are appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances, and *denying* this, because there are no response-dependent properties waiting 'out there' to be detected in the first place. Taking this latter skeptical line eliminates the problem of having to determine the appropriate subjects and the favourable circumstances altogether. But it establishes this by paying a high price: giving up the availability of moral facts in moral reasoning.

If the Maimonian argument is plausible, we could frame McDowell as facing a dilemma: *either* give up the availability of moral facts in moral reasoning *or* develop an account of appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances with respect to the detection of moral properties. I shall discuss McDowell's reasons against accepting the first horn of the dilemma in the next section. Thereupon I shall discuss, in section 5, McDowell's account of virtue as an unsuccessful response to the second horn. In the speculative conclusion, I shall make some remarks about the paradoxical nature of favourable circumstances.

4. Resisting the Disenchantment of Nature

Let me first recapitulate what I've presented as the first horn of a dilemma. As I've reconstructed it, this first horn arises out of McDowell's attempt to give a realist and response-dependent account of secondary qualities, and, by analogy, a realist and response-dependent account of moral properties. Such an account requires, as I've argued, an account of what makes a subject appropriately equipped to the detection of such properties and what makes circumstances favourable to such detection. But there seems to be a plausible skeptical argument against the possibility of developing such an account. As I've stressed, this argument — at least in its Maimonian version — supports the realism with respect to moral properties but emphasizes a cognitive underdetermination[xx] in each particular case. If, however, there is no way to counter this epistemic underdetermination in particular cases, it is tempting to generalize the doubt and question the realism itself. That is, one could think that this Maimonian, post-

Kantian type of skepticism boils down to the ordinary Humean variety that underlies moral error-theories and quasi-realism. Thus, one could think that McDowell's attempt to provide room for moral facts in moral reasoning is wrecked after all, despite the heroic detour into the reality of secondary qualities. Giving up on the realism easily answers the Maimonian skeptic: if there are no moral properties waiting 'out there' to be detected, there surely is no need to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate subjects nor between favourable and unfavourable circumstances. So why doesn't McDowell see this? Why doesn't he go along with Mackie or Blackburn and takes the easy way out?

This is the first horn of a dilemma, because this easy way out comes along with a price that is, according to McDowell, too high to be paid. It comes along with embracing "the disenchantment of nature".[xxi] What does McDowell mean by that, and why does he think it a disastrous alternative?

There is a whole range of notions used by McDowell over the years to characterize an account of nature that sits well with Hume's naturalism, with scientism, with the realm of law, and with the 'merely natural'. This account, McDowell argues, became prominent in modern times, due to modern science and its built in fact/value distinction. On this account nature is a reality in which there is no place for meanings; it is not a book containing messages and lessons for us.[xxii] This picture might seem only natural to us. Due to our being immersed in modernity, we are used to think there are no reasons in nature other than what can be extracted from subjective needs and interests. All that's going on in nature, we are used to think, is mere mechanistic processes governed by causal laws, and for the rest it's mere projection. Therefore we will be inclined, or so McDowell argues, to think Aristotle's conception of nature that could

serve as an Archimedean point for justifying ethics, is no longer available to us. For, as Weber famously put it, modern science disenchanted nature.[xxiii]

It is clear that McDowell's project of providing a role for moral facts in moral reasoning is incompatible with disenchanted reality. If there are in nature no reasons other than subjective needs and interests, moral facts are not going to be facts at all, or, if they *are* facts, they are not going to be 'moral' at all. For a Humean, or — for that matter — a commonsensical moral agent raised in the Anglo-Saxon world, talk about moral facts and their role in moral reasoning cannot be understood other than as an attempt to *enchant* the natural world, i.e. as an attempt to lure us into forgetting that values are projected onto the world. McDowell, however, tries to reverse this picture. According to McDowell the Humean, disenchanted conception of nature is not an a priori given, not a conception that is beyond any doubt. Quite the contrary, we have every reason, commonsensically speaking, to resist the modern tendency to think of nature as disenchanted. If we realize that, we will see that it is not obvious to think of Aristotle's conception of nature as actually consisting of a disenchanted world onto which we've projected our values and reasons. That is, defending a conception of nature along Aristotelean lines is, according to McDowell, not necessarily a matter of trying to deceive ourselves about the subjective origin of would-be moral facts that we desperately try to believe in unconditionally. According to McDowell, an Aristotelean conception of nature is much more natural than a Humean, disenchanted conception. And therefore there is no need for a moral realist to *enchant* nature, because there is no need for the moral realist, nor for anyone else, to buy the disenchantment of nature in the first place.

What argument does McDowell have for his claim that a conception of nature as 'merely natural' is not a natural conception, but in fact a conception that results from *disenchanting* nature? For, of course, he should have something to say to convince the commonsensical Anglo-Saxon moral agents of their seeing things the wrong way? McDowell's argument is highly original and suggestive, although I find his way of formulating it also rather complex and complicated. Basically the story is about our natural inclination to respond — in experience — to the world in a way that displays an all-encompassing and inevitable sensitivity to rational constraints. Experience involves of necessity the spontaneity to respond either this or that way, and, consequentially — indeed *by the same token* — a sensitivity to getting it right. This sensitivity does not merely belong to the social world of agency and interaction, but is "operative also in our perception of the world apart from human beings."[xxiv] We are very familiar with this inclination; it seems, indeed, to be *the* thing we do in learning a language, i.e. in learning to experience in a structured way, or even, as McDowell stresses, in learning to *experience* at all.[xxv] Very young children, in the process of acquiring their first language, remind us probingly, and intrusively, of this sensitivity to getting it right. They will endlessly continue to repeat the sound they associate with the object they experience until their parent, or any other more experienced person, confirms that they've got it right. And what they build out of these confirmations is not merely a way of getting along with those they depend on, but is a world-view, a coherent experience of the world that allows them, at least in principle, to dinstinguish between the contents and the objects of their experiences.

Being able to have experience *at all* — experience that is, in McDowell's phrase, both irreducibly subjective and open to objective reality — implies being subject to this

natural sensitivity to rational constraints. This means, as McDowell likes to put it, that in order to have experience one has to be located in the "space of reasons". This is not a space outside of nature, despite the phrase. We are natural creatures, and the way we are what we are is just by being sensitive to rational constraints. "Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals."[xxvi] Accepting that what marks us as living organisms is our rationally constraint experience, means accepting that reasons are part of human *nature*, and this implies that nature just cannot be equated with the realm of law.

Doing the latter would amount to disenchanting nature, but it would also amount to failing to appreciate what we are and how things are for us. Equating nature with the realm of law (as one could be lured into by the impressive image defended by modern science) amounts to alienating ourselves from our own human nature. Resisting this equation should appear to be only natural. McDowell's argument here would be most successful, as he stresses, if someone would respond by saying; "Of course! How can we have been enticed into forgetting how obviously right it is to say that a repertoire of conceptual capacities belongs to the acquired nature of a mature human being?"[xxvii]

It is in order to facilitate our correcting ourselves in this way that McDowell invokes the idea of second nature — an idea he presents as a mere reminder of something thin and obvious.[xxviii] I shall discuss the idea in its moral guise in the next section.

5. Virtue and Second Nature

The upshot of the previous section is that McDowell chooses to tackle the second horn of the dilemma. Since he refutes to do away with the response-dependent reality of moral properties, he is bound to provide an account of what makes subjects appropriate to the detection of moral properties and of what makes circumstances favourable to such detection. At first sight, one might think McDowell has such an account, or at least the beginnings of such an account. Indeed, one might think he already explored the contours of such an account quite a while before he came to think of response-dependent reality as a conception that would suffice to give moral facts a role to play in moral reasoning.[xxix] That is, one might think McDowell's work on virtue can easily be interpreted as an account, in one single stroke, of both what makes subjects appropriate and circumstances favourable. After all, who else would be appropriate to the detection of moral properties if not a virtuous person? And doesn't McDowell claim that posessing virtue means possessing knowledge, and that the virtuous person sheds a favourable light on the salient moral properties of the world around her?[xxx] Couldn't we take this as meaning that the favourable circumstances are, as it were, constituted by the fact that the virtuous person is paying attention, and that, because of this, the virtuous person is particularly well-suited to perceive the way the world is morally.

It might be plausible to maintain that this move is available to McDowell, and that it is the obvious move to make from his perspective if he felt the need to develop an account of what makes subjects appropriate and circumstances favourable to the detection of moral properties. Yet I think the move fails for three connected reasons. The first reason is a formal one, and seems to be recognized by McDowell.[xxxi] If what makes subjects appropriate is what makes circumstances favourable, we run the risk of being unable to distinguish between experiences of an object that entail an experience of

the object's proper moral property (experiences of type (2)), and the experiences of the object that entail an illusory experience of what is not the object's moral property (experiences of type (3)).The second reason concerns McDowell's account of the virtuous person in terms of her ability to *silence* the motivating force of what could have been inclinations to do otherwise.[xxxii] And the third reason concerns McDowell's attempt to think of virtue, and second nature more generally, as, what Putnam described as 'second naiveté'.[xxxiii]

My first reason against the McDowellian suggestion is formal and just states that one cannot define favourable circumstances in terms of the light shed on the world by virtuous subjects, on pain of not being able to distinguish between veridical and illusory experiences, i.e. on pain of not being able to distinguish between the content and the object of experiences. A charitable way of reducing the impact of this reason, is to take it as merely saying that the account is incomplete. That the subjects are virtuous, one might say, is a major factor in the circumstances being favourable to the detection of moral properties, but it is not the only factor. This comes down to acknowledging the obvious truth that virtuous persons could make mistakes in evaluation. Of course, McDowell would not wish to deny this[xxxiv]; consequently, he should be ready to supplement his account with a view of the favourable circumstances needed by the virtuous to be confident in having got it right.

My second reason is not that easy to accomodate. McDowell argues that the virtuous person is a person for whom the requirements imposed by virtue are such that they *silence* considerations that would have constituted reasons for action in the absence of the virtue.[xxxv] Now this may be an insightful characterisation of what makes a person virtuous (indeed I think it is), but it obviously presupposes an account of what are the

moral requirements. Given that we know the moral facts this characterisation of a virtuous person is quite telling, but that is very much the wrong way around for present purposes. In fact, this suggestion is viciously question-begging. It is after all clear that this account of virtue really doesn't stand a chance of being taken seriously as an account that is independent of, and comes prior to the determination of the moral facts. One cannot take it seriously, in a case in which we have to assume that it is not yet known what are the moral properties of a particular situation, that the subjects who only feel the motivational force of one particular requirement, and who have somehow silenced all other considerations that could have constituted reasons for action, are the virtuous ones. A disturbing way to make the same point is to refer to Eve Garrard's work on evil. Garrard argues that we could understand evil acts as acts done by agents who have *silenced* all considerations involving other people's entitlement to fundamental conditions of well-being and respect.[xxxvi] The hypothetical subjects only capable of illusory experiences of what are not an object's response-dependent (moral) properties, referred to in section 3 above, would on this proposal count as virtuous, because of their mental make-up that somehow silences all considerations except the ones that are, unknown to this subject, by hypothesis the wrong ones. This must be fatal to the suggested account.

Moreover, one might even wonder whether the formally appropriate subjects, i.e. those capable of experiencing both the veridical and the illusory response-dependent (moral) properties, would count as virtuous on this proposal. This would be a consequence of the fact that, on the charitable reading, the McDowellian account is still incomplete in not being an account of what makes circumstances appropriate. As sketched in section 3, however, the idea is that the formally appropriate subjects are a

priori right in favourable circumstances, and a priori wrong in unfavourable circumstances. This fits McDowell's story nicely, although in a way that emphasizes that the suggestion under consideration goes the wrong way around. For it fits the story in this respect: if we assume that the favourable circumstances are those circumstances in which the moral facts are determined independently of the responses of the virtuous, then we would be able to identify the virtuous by picking out those who get it right all of the time. To sum up: McDowell's account of virtue presupposes that the moral facts are determined, and therefore cannot be used to determine the moral facts.

My third reason against the idea that the virtuous agents would be the appropriate subjects to the detection of moral properties takes issue with McDowell's tendency to present virtue, or actually, and much more clearly, second nature[xxxvii] as something thin and obvious, something that is very much like a natural habit, or attitude, of which we only need to be reminded. That is, although virtue is acquired as second nature in moral education, McDowell does not seem to think of it as something that deserves the kind of serious, sensitive, critical and self-reflexive appropriation that we ordinarily associate with the process of acquiring the values that will be characteristic of our 'deep self'. Thus, although second nature is acquired through a contingent process, and therefore could have been different, McDowell does not seem to be inclined to think of it as something that deserves critical assessment. This strikes me as odd, to say the least.

Although it strikes me as odd, I think I can guess what makes the resulting picture tempting to McDowell. In the first place, thinking of virtue as a natural habit makes it more easy and plausible to think there is a perspicuous parallel between values and secondary qualities. After all, our inclination to respond correctly to experiences of, say, colours is also very much of a natural habit. To be sure, it is acquired in 'colour

education', but for all that, it does not seem to deserve any serious appropriation. Responding to colours as we do, is just part of our (acquired, second) nature. Likewise (or so one might understand McDowell's views), responding to moral properties as we do, is just like that part of our (acquired, second) nature.

Secondly, it is possible that McDowell (unconsciously or tacitly) fears that emphasizing the critical and self-reflexive nature of the process that leads to the appropriation of virtue could undermine his attempt to resist the disenchantment of reality. That is, if the acquisition of second nature allows for serious critical assessment, one could become vulnerable to the objection that the process, since it doesn't occur under the control of nature, is not all that natural after all. And that might persuade people to think of moral requirements as projected onto mere nature after all.

And thirdly, I wouldn't be surprised by a sociological explanation emphasizing the English upperclass background of Oxford students in the early seventies, a background in which particular and well-determined moral requirements as well as particular and well-determined virtues were very much, and very clearly, part of the furniture of a priviliged world.

The fact that the view is understandable doesn't eliminate the fact that it is odd, and implausible. What makes it odd, is that it seems, from the multi-cultural, seriously individualist and deeply liberal perspective that is characteristic of contemporary Western culture, very much alienated from prevailing moral practice. We need moral facts nowadays almost always in situations in which there are no incontested moral authorities, and no obvious moral requirements or directives. But apart from these contemporary cultural circumstances, there is a more theoretical internal reason to distrust an account of appropriate subjects that make them seem naïvely confident in the

inclinations they happen to have. This has everything to do with the claim that subjects appropriate to the detection of the moral properties of a situation should be able to distinguish between three types of experiences, the types discussed in section 3. However, in order to be able to distinguish between these three types of experiences a subject requires a discriminative sensitivity to the unacknowledged, yet obvious, less obvious, implicit, or perhaps even unconscious contribution of one's own perspective, one's *natural* perspective, to one's experiences of the way the world is morally. This is so, even if one wholeheartedly accepts McDowell's response-dependent account of moral properties, and thus embraces the claim that the cognitive phenomenology of moral properties cannot be entirely the result of the contribution of one's own perspective. The attempt, after all, is not merely to be able to distinguish between on the one hand experiences of type (1) and on the other hand experiences of types (2) and (3). The most important accomplishment will no doubt be to be able to distinguish experiences of type (2) from those of type (3). Making progress in moral reasoning is not primarily a matter of distinguishing between moral and non-moral facts, but a matter of distinguishing between the right and the wrong moral facts.

To be sure, the sensitivity I am talking about is a virtue. It is, in fact, the highest virtue according to Aristotelean standards,[xxxviii] but in a conspicuously modern guise.[xxxix] Yet, it is not because this sensitivity is a virtue that a subject that possesses it might be appropriate to the detection of the right moral properties. Moreover, although one could defend the view that this discriminative sensitivity is precisely the second nature we need to make progress in moral reasoning in the present era, it appears to be very unlike the kind of attitude McDowell favours in his attempt to resist the disenchantment of nature.

I conclude, therefore, that the prospects for an account of appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances in terms of McDowell's analyses of virtue and second nature are quite dim.

6. Speculative concluding remarks

Where does this leave us? I've argued that McDowell's response-dependent account of moral properties presents him with a dilemma: *either* give up the availability of moral facts in moral reasoning *or* develop an account of appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances with respect to the detection of moral properties. I've argued that McDowell's attempt to resist the disenchantment of nature forces him to tackle the second horn of the dilemma, but we've just seen that his work on virtue and second nature doesn't provide promising material for the development of a plausible account of appropriate subjects and favourable circumstances.

Let me, in the light of this disappointing result, conclude in a speculative mode, in an attempt to show we didn't end up with empty hands.

I want my children to really see for themselves that they should not hug people who do not want to be hugged by them. I see this myself clearly and vividly, and care about taking moral education seriously. And although I want my children in this respect to behave like me, to become like me, and to be disposed like me, I don't think I can teach them to learn this by using the indexical self-reference as determining the direction in which I want them to mature. I don't want them to be like me..., full stop, just like that.

I even cannot want them to be like me without straightforwardly beginning to tell a story about the way the world is morally. For I want them to be virtuous, to be moved by the moral properties of the world, the properties I perceive clearly and vividly (at least in this small area of hugging), and that I want myself to be moved by. This is the point and the import of moral realism. I need the moral facts because I need reference to them in order to be able at all to give my children an impression of what it would be to be like me.

This implies that, right from the start, I build in the possibility of a sensible and significant divergence of opinions between me and my children. After all, if I try to teach them to look for themselves to the moral properties of the world I'm perceiving, I'm creating a triangular situation in which both I and my children try to be moved by the facts, independently, at least in principle, of how the other is moved. In such a situation my getting it wrong, or my getting it right, is, in principle, independent of my children getting it right or their getting it wrong.[xl] This should be distinguished from those round games in which someone makes a gesture which the others are expected to imitate. In such a game it makes no sense if one of the imitators would complain and would observe that the leader makes the wrong gesture. In such a game right and wrong only apply to the imitations; the demonstrated gesture is beyond right and wrong, so to say.

Moral education, however, is very different, in this respect, and is, indeed, very different from learning to behave properly according to the requirements of etiquette, or any other closed system of regulations. That's at least what I take to be one of the main, and deeply correct, consequences of moral realism. The world is not a closed system. New, *radically* new, situations abound, and in such situations there will always be some

of us who will have to make a first step. They might feel pioneering like the child in the game who demonstrates to the others a new gesture. But they won't feel, *as by hypothesis*, beyond right and wrong. They will try to be moved, in this new situation, by the moral properties of the world. And this will mean that they will try to be sensitive to the direction of their natural moral inclinations.[xli] These are all they have, and they may feel very confident. But part of the game of moral reasoning is that they should feel disturbed in their confidence if someone else would tend to move in another direction. After all, they might have got it wrong, due to the unnoticed fact that the circumstances were not favourable in their case.[xlii]

I think these ponderings invite a disturbingly paradoxical picture. I think they suggest that the most favourable circumstances to the detection of the moral properties of the world are circumstances in which the natural moral inclinations of the people involved *diverge*. Why do I think that? I do, because what we need, as we saw in section 3, is the ability to distinguish between experiences of objects that entail an experience of the object's proper moral property (experiences of type (2)), and experiences of objects that entail an illusory experience of what is not the object's moral property (experiences of type (3)). But, obviously, if all experiences are similar we won't have the resources to distinguish between these two types! To be sure, if all moral experiences are similar, we won't of course have any problems in moral reasoning and might live a satisfying life, even though it might, from another point of view, be the life of a happy slave.[xliii] But this means that we need a situation in which not all moral experiences are similar in order to be able to determine which of the experiences are correct. Of course, we should not remain content in this situation of divergence. But it seems we need the divergence

in order to be able to gain a better insight in what makes circumstances unfavourable to the detection of the right moral properties. And we will have *earned* our confidence — our responses will be merited in a deeper sense — if we regain convergence by moving those of us who were in unfavourable circumstances to a more appropriate perspective.

One final observation.[xliv] There is, as noticed by McDowell[xlv], a strong connection between being sensitive to rational constraints and being free. The phenomenology of freedom now gives us two very different pictures that could be used in this context to illustrate the point I'm driving at. On the one hand a person is free if she dwells in confidence, feels at home wherever she goes, and has no concern whatsoever about the slightest possibility that she might have got it wrong. This is a Nietzschean figure, whose cheerful 'Selbstvergewisserung' silences every diverging inclination. But on the other hand a person is free if she has regained her confidence, if she succeeded in making up her mind in the light of the right reasons, after a serious struggle with ambivalence. This is an Augustinian figure, blessed by grace.

Both figures are appealing. And both pop up in moral education. Parents tend to be Augustinian, for better or worse, receiving their blessing, not by grace, but by observing that the Nietzschean figures who are their children do well, morally speaking.

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i After all, I don't want them to listen to me "because I say so", nor follow the rules "because they're the rules", but I want them to grasp the moral facts themselves. Cf. Bransen (1998) for a discussion of these distinctions.

ii *Philosophical Investigations*, 217.

iii Stevenson (1944), Ayer (1936), Hare (1952)

iv Mackie (1977), Schiffer (1990), Horgan & Timmons (1992)

v Blackburn (1993)

vi McDowell (1978, 1979, 1985, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998a). I shall refer to McDowell's papers by using the year of original publication. References to page numbers, however, shall in all cases be to the (1998a) collection.

vii McGinn (1983), pp. 8-10.

viii Cf. Mackie (1977), pp. 42-46.

ix McDowell (1985), p. 136.

x ibid.

xi ibid. p. 141.

xii McDowell deals with it in (1978) and (1995).

xiii McDowell implicitly appeals to the Verstehen tradition. See, for example, Taylor (1964), Von Wright (1971), Macdonald & Pettit (1981), Ch. 2.

xiv Ibid. p. 144. In footnote 43 (footnote 32 in the original paper) McDowell explicitly uses the very same words Taylor (1989) uses to argue for moral realism: "Explanatory indispensability is supposed to be the test for the *genuine* reality…".

xv This is McDowell's phrase. See McDowell (1978).

xvi We should have a problem with subjects capable of only type (2) experiences, because such subjects seriously run the risk of being unable to distinguish between the content of an experience and its object. See, for instance, the arguments developed by Pettit (1993) and Rosenberg (1980).

xvii See, e.g. Putnam (1981), Rosenberg (1980), McDowell (1994).

xviii Maimon (1790, 1794). See Bransen (1991), particularly Ch 4, for an exposition of the argument.

xix See Mackie (1977), Blackburn (1993). I discuss the distinction between Humean and Maimonian, or post-Kantian, skepticism in Ch 5 of Bransen (1991).

xx The basic idea here is that particular objects will have particular response-dependent properties, but that the experiencing subject does not know enough of the relation between the object and his experience of the object to know whether the experience veridically or illusorily entails an experience of the property. See also Wiggins (1976).

xxi McDowell (1994, 1996).

xxii McDowell (1996), p. 174. The metaphor is taken from Taylor (1975).

xxiii Weber, McDowell (1994, 1996).

xxivxxiv McDowell (1994), p. 72.

xxv McDowell (1994), pp. 10-13, 29f.

xxvi McDowell (1994), p. 78.

xxvii McDowell (1998b), p. 123.

xxviii ibid.

xxix It is in McDowell (1978, 1979).

xxx McDowell (1978), pp. 80-83.

xxxi McDowell (1979), p. 71.

xxxii McDowell (1978), p. 90-93.

xxxiii Putnam (1994), pp. 458f.

xxxiv McDowell (1979), p. 72-73.

xxxv McDowell (1978), p. 90.

xxxvi See Garrard (1998).

xxxvii But note that McDowell thinks of virtue as one kind of second nature. McDowell (1995), pp. 188-191.

xxxviii Contemplation. Cf. McDowell (1998c), pp. 46-47.

xxxix Awareness of the pervasiveness of perspectivism is strikingly characteristic of the contemporary, modern theoretical stance. Cf. Nagel (1986). Note that McDowell's account of virtues in terms of 'silencing' seems correct and insightful here. The virtue of being sensitive to the unacknowledged contribution of one's own perspective silences the naïve, but all too natural inclination to take the

correctness of one's own perspective for granted. Interestingly, this important virtue might seem to be self-defeating. Cf. Horkheimer & Adorno (1947).

[xl] Although there will be a correlation between the two, because both are dependent upon the same moral properties of the world.

[xli] They will try to follow the rules. See for the strong connection between the problematic of response-dependency and the Wittgensteinian problematic of rule-following Pettit (1990, 1991, 1993).

[xlii] See also Bransen (2001).

[xliii] Cf Geuss, 1982, p. 83, who talks about the citizens of *Brave New World* as happy slaves.

[xliv] I owe this to many discussions with Stefaan Cuypers on the phenomenology of freedom.

[xlv] McDowell (1994), p. 5.