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An Unrealistic Account of Moral Reasons¹

Nierealistyczne ujęcie racji moralnych

Summary

In this paper I will analyze John McDowell's broad account of practical rationality and moral reasons, which he displays mainly in his articles "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" (1978) and "Might There Be External Reasons?" (1995). My main aim is to argue that from a philosophical perspective, no less than from an empirical one, McDowell's account of practical rationality is not a realistic one. From a philosophical point of view, I will argue that his intellectualist account is not convincing; and if we consider his virtue-ethical ideal of practical rationality in light of the model of human cognition, we also realize that moral behavior is not immune to cognitive biases and does not always flow from robust traits of character like virtues. At the same time, this puts at stake his strong thesis of moral autonomy – the idea that with the 'onset of reason' moral beings are no longer determined by 'first nature' features.

Keywords: John McDowell, practical rationality, moral reasons, virtue ethics, second nature

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule analizuję szerokie ujęcie praktycznej racjonalności i racji moralnych Johna McDowella, które przedstawia głównie w swoich artykułach „Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” (1978) i „Might There Be External Reasons?” (1995). Moim głównym celem jest pokazanie, że z perspektywy fi-

¹ This paper is a substantially extended and improved version of my previous paper "John McDowell on Practical Rationality – Is He (Really) Talking about Us?" (2018).

lozoficznej, nie mniej niż empirycznej, jego ujęcie praktycznej racjonalności nie jest realistyczne. Argumentuję, że z filozoficznego punktu widzenia jego intelektualistyczne ujęcie nie jest przekonujące; a jeśli jego ideał praktycznej racjonalności oparty na etyce cnoty rozważymy w świetle modelu ludzkiego poznania, zdamy sobie również sprawę, że zachowanie moralne nie jest odporne na kognitywne uprzedzenia i nie zawsze wypływa z wyrazistych cech charakteru takich jak cnoty. Tym samym podważa to jego mocną tezę autonomii moralnej – mianowicie ideę, że z „nadejściem rozumu” istoty moralne nie są już zdeterminowane przez cechy „pierwszej natury”.

Słowa kluczowe: John McDowell, praktyczna racjonalność, racje moralne, etyka cnot, druga natura

John McDowell's general aim is to find a way of reconciling the supposedly impervious realms of reason and nature, by enlarging and enriching the natural domain (thus criticizing the scientific, narrow conception of nature, which identifies it with the law-governed domain). The difficulties of locating normative thought within the realm of law are dismissed if one adopts a more sophisticated and expanded view of what is to be considered as natural. His goal is not so much to bridge the gulf between nature and reason, as to show, through a re-description of the notion of nature, that there is no gulf to be bridged. In general, I find this endeavor quite compelling and well-guided. Nevertheless, there are some blind spots in McDowell's well sustained project, regarding mostly his conception of practical rationality and his notion of rational autonomy. I shall point out and describe such blind spots, to the best of my awareness, and explain why I think them worth noting. This I will do from two different angles: first, from a conceptual point of view, by tracing some disturbing implications of his account, and then from an empirical point of view, by discussing psychological and cognitive elements that should be taken into account.

1. Moral reasons as external reasons

In what follows I shall try to give an account of John McDowell's conception of practical rationality, and the subsidiary concept of second nature, using for the most part his collection of articles *Mind, Value and Reality* (1998), as well as his *Mind and World* (1994). My overall aim is to argue that McDowell's conception of human practical rationality has both conceptual and practical implications that are, at best, very unlikely, and, at worst, highly problematic and counter-intuitive. I will argue that, on the one hand, McDowell's account leaves important questions unanswered and can't help us to cope with certain issues of practical rationality, such as akrasia; and, on the other hand, I will try to show that his conception of practical rationality is not in line with what we know about the way we think and act. Not being representative/typical of creatures like us, i.e., real agents, it is not, I will argue, a realistic conception, and this also makes it less interesting.

Some of his most important papers on practical rationality and, more specifically, on moral reasons, were written as responses to other important philosophers, such as Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, J. L. Mackie or Simon Blackburn. I will give particular attention to those papers in which McDowell argues against Philippa Foot and Bernard Williams: "Two Sorts of Naturalism" (1995), "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" (1978) and "Might There Be External Reasons?" (1995) (all of them collected in his *Mind, Value, and Reality*). In "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" and "Might There Be External Reasons?", McDowell tries to answer the following question: *What does it mean to say that someone has a reason to act in a specified way?* Williams (1979) famously argued that there are only internal reasons, meaning that one only has reason to do whatever practical reasoning, starting from one's existing motivations, may

reveal that one has reason to do.² It is not that one has only reason to do what in a way satisfies some element in one's subjective motivational set, but that those elements necessarily govern the deliberative reasoning leading up to the conclusion that one has reason to do something. Deliberative reasoning, according to Williams, should not be reduced to instrumental reasoning; it can assume different forms and, most importantly, it can correct our desires.³

McDowell, on the other hand, defends the notion that there are external reasons – that there are reasons to act which are unconnected with our existing motivations. How do people acquire such reasons? How does a subject start believing that there is a reason to act in a certain way, if there is no connection whatsoever with their motivational set? In order to constitute an external reason, that reason must have been there all along, so that in coming to see it, the agent must arrive at a proper consideration of the matter. How come we manage to get things right? Williams claims that if there were exter-

² It is important to notice that according to Williams' interpretation it is not required that the agent is actually motivated to do what he has reason to do. The belief and the motivation are not necessarily connected, since agents can be akratic.

³ In fact, Williams presents no restricted account of practical or deliberative reasoning – practical reasoning is more than the mere discovery that some course of action is the means to an end; it is “a heuristic process, and an imaginative one” (Williams 1979, p. 110). “A clear example of practical reasoning is that leading to the conclusion that one has reason to ϕ because ϕ -ing would be the most convenient, economical, pleasant etc. way of satisfying some element in S [the agent's subjective motivational set], and this of course is controlled by other elements in S (...). But there are much wider possibilities for deliberation, such as: thinking how the satisfaction of elements in S can be combined, e.g. by time-ordering; where there is some irresolvable conflict among the elements of S, considering which one attaches most weight to (...); or, again, finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment” (idem, p. 110). “Imagination can create new possibilities and new desires” (idem, p. 105).

nal reasons, there would be a procedure of *correct* deliberation that gives rise to a motivation, but that is not controlled by nor connected to the agent's existing motivations. McDowell searches for a different explanation.

Let's focus on a typical domain of practical rationality – the ethical domain. According to Williams, ethical reasons are internal reasons; according to McDowell they are external reasons. This means there are ethical reasons for us to do something even if we are not able to see them and there is no practical reasoning or deliberative path that can take us there – as McDowell puts it, “ethics involves requirements of reason that are there whether we know it or not, and our eyes are opened to them by the acquisition of ‘practical wisdom’ ” (McDowell 1994, p. 79). The questions are: How can we get things right, as a virtuous person would?⁴ How do we come to believe there is a reason for acting in a specified way and how can we acquire a new motivation by getting things right?

McDowell is not purely Kantian – he does not say that agents are able to get things right because they are able to deliberate correctly, i.e., through a pure rational procedure. He clearly states that “the transition to being so motivated is a transition to deliberating correctly, not one effected by deliberating correctly” (McDowell 1998, p. 107). As Pettit and Smith put it, McDowell is arguing that “agents have reasons that they don't have the capacity to recognize and respond to, and that, in order to develop the capacity to recognize and respond to their reasons, they would have to undergo a conversion” (Pettit and Smith 2006, p. 161). No pure rational procedure would make us consider the matter aright – for instance, seeing that we should give back the wallet some

⁴ McDowell follows Aristotle and his virtue ethics – he thinks the most important thing in ethics is to be a good person (a well-educated one). The virtuous person is the measure of the right action, and not the other way around.

passer-by has dropped. But that does not mean there is no reason to do that, and I would be able to see it if I were the right kind of person. If I had a proper ethical upbringing, I would have my eyes opened to some reasons I otherwise would not have been able to see. As with someone who did not have the benefit of an artistic education and hence cannot properly enjoy the experience of a work of art, someone who has not been properly brought up cannot see the reason why she should give back the wallet. But that reason exists (it is an external reason) – and “it might take something like a conversion to bring the reasons within the person’s notice”. (McDowell 1998, p. 107) McDowell brings back to life the Aristotelian conception of moral upbringing or moral education (or the more contemporary notion of *Bildung*). According to this conception, it is through initiation in a certain moral and social atmosphere that we get to acquire the intellectual and emotional maturation that allows us to manipulate concepts and to see reasons, namely moral reasons, to which we would otherwise be blind. The process by which the ethical character of an individual is formed, until virtue becomes a habit, in the words of Aristotle, receives the designation of *second nature*. McDowell interprets this Aristotelian point of view in the following manner:

Aristotle’s thought is that there is a right answer, and wrong answers, to the question what doing well consists in. And his usual remark about rightness on this kind of question is that the right view is the view of the person of excellence, or the person of practical wisdom. (McDowell 2009, p. 23–24)

Thus, the point of view of the virtuous person is a special point of view: she has particular parochial capacities that make her able to discover moral reasons and moral value. If her practical intellect has been properly formed, she will know on each occasion what the right thing to do is, because she will have her eyes open to the right reasons.

1.1. *The limits of a 'naturalized Platonism'*

This leads us to McDowell's most controversial theses. One of the problems of this view is that it is hard to tell what the criteria for defining what counts as a 'right reason' are. It is not simply a matter of behaving in conformity with rules of conduct. He clearly states that in moral upbringing, one learns "to see situations in a special light, as constituting reasons for acting; this perceptual capacity, once acquired, can be exercised in complex novel circumstances" (McDowell 1998, p. 85). But what could the criteria for correction be? How can anyone tell if one is seeing situations 'in a special light'? There is no such external criterion, because the fact that something is morally valuable – thus presenting us with reasons for acting – will depend solely on how human beings with the appropriate sensitivity and moral training see the situation in question.⁵ Nevertheless, reasons are to be understood as being 'there anyway', even if I, for instance – not having been subjected to a correct moral upbringing – cannot recognize them. That's why they are considered to be external reasons. This is not 'rampant Platonism', and neither is it Kantian universalism, but it is a form of 'naturalized Platonism'. Even if there is nothing unnatural in our responsiveness to reasons (being responsive to reasons belongs to our second nature), in the sense that reasons are 'there anyway', this is still Platonism. McDowell still has to explain how can there be external reasons, irrespective of our motivations and beliefs. As Charles Larmore puts it, the notion of second nature "does not tell us what reasons themselves are, if reasons are supposed to be, as he himself avers, 'there anyway', forming a possible object of knowledge". And we cannot simply assume, as McDowell does, "that such questions will evaporate, if only we take to heart the import of the

⁵ This is why McDowell is considered to be not an advocate of moral realism, but an advocate of a sensibility theory instead.

idea of second nature” (Larmore 2002, p. 196). On the contrary, these questions still have to be tackled.

It is not feasible, I think, to just consider that, for McDowell, this process is simply a socially-grounded process, that the validation of our ethical outlook can only be social or cultural (or that when we fail to recognize whatever reasons are ‘really’ there, for how we ought to act, this is not an individual perceptual fault, but a social one). McDowell makes room for individual reflective criticism – our ethical thinking is subject to refinement and reflective scrutiny – and he is not in favor of a social grounding of our moral practices.⁶ The problem is just that, according to him, the only possible sort of validation is a ‘Neurathian’ one: there is no way to take a step back and reflect on the standards that govern our ethical thinking; there is no way to take an external point of view, one can reflect only *in medias res*. As McDowell aptly puts it, “we have only our own lights to go on, in trying to ensure that the considerations that we are responsive to are really reasons for thinking one thing rather than another” (McDowell 2009, p 38). Actually, he goes even further, in the sense that he admits that looking for an external validation is no more than a “fantasy” (McDowell 1994, p. 82). On the other hand, if it is through initiation in a certain tradition and in a certain moral and social atmosphere that we get to acquire the appropriate conceptual capacities that enable us to discover moral reasons, it is hard to see what could be the role, in this process, of reflection and rational criticism. It seems that since the reflective scrutiny takes place

⁶ He is very clear about this in Lecture V of his *Mind and World*, where he rejects any form of ‘communitarian’ or ‘social pragmatist’ attempts to ground the normative domain: “If there is nothing to the normative structure within which meaning comes into view except, say, acceptances and rejections of bits of behavior by the community at large, then how things are (...) cannot be independent of the community’s ratifying the judgement that things are thus and so.” And this would be, according to him, “intolerable” (McDowell 1994, p. 93).

within the limits of the tradition in which one is embedded, the use of practical reason is limited. The fear is that, when facing disagreements or conflicts, the web of socialized value convictions and behaviors that constitutes the second nature is simply reproduced. The use of practical reason is limited in yet another way, which A. Honneth rightly acknowledges: if there is no deliberative way to make one aware of the moral reasons that are there, and it might take something like a conversion in order for those reasons to be unveiled, then

someone who has not been socialized in the appropriate ways will be moved through rational arguments into developing a moral sensibility just as little as someone closed to modern music will be persuaded into enjoying twelve-tone music. (Honneth 2002, p. 257)

Thus, moral reasons are there anyway, whether we are able to grasp them or not, and independently of our beliefs and motivations. But there is no deliberative path that can take us from our existing motivations and beliefs to those objective moral reasons or requirements. Thus, being able to grasp them or not seems to be just a matter of luck – only if we are lucky enough to have been provided with a ‘decent upbringing’, will we have acquired the necessary conceptual capacities allowing us to have our eyes opened to the right reasons. The ability of having our eyes opened to the right reasons is a conceptual ability – which results from the privilege of having had an adequate upbringing – but it is not constrained by rational principles at all (since we cannot accuse someone who does not grasp the right reasons of being irrational).

This picture is problematic, and Bernard Williams had previously pointed out what the problem is: How can one simply assert that there are some reasons out there, visible to only some of us, and independently of our motivations, cares and commitments, not connected to any process of deliberation

whatsoever? My general point is the following: even if it is true that the notion of *Bildung* “should eliminate the tendency to be spooked by the very idea of norms or demands of reason” (in the sense that these are no longer considered unnatural or supernatural), this is not enough to assume that “no genuine questions about norms” remain (McDowell 1994, p. 95).

*1.2. The virtuous and the non-virtuous person:
what distinguishes them?*

In fact, McDowell’s view on moral reasons raises yet another problem, namely, that appropriately developed conceptual capacities – which allow some of us to perceive situations ‘in a special light’ – are all it takes to get things right. Getting things right – figuring out which ethical reasons there are – is a matter of ‘tuning up’ our moral perception, which is only possible if our conceptual powers were correctly developed through education. And if that is the case, then what distinguishes a virtuous person (who can clearly see what should be done) from a non-virtuous one is not that the former has different motivations, preoccupations or cares – she simply *sees* things differently. As he states: “To a virtuous person, certain actions are presented as practically necessary (...) by his view of certain situations in which he finds himself.” And thus “a failure to see reason to act virtuously stems, not from the lack of a desire (...), but from the lack of a distinctive way of seeing situations” (McDowell 1998, p. 78, 87).

But if acting correctly is just a matter of seeing/perceiving correctly, any moral fault will be a cognitive fault, or, as Tim Thornton puts it, “moral actions are explained by a cognitive state alone; they are the result of a perception of the moral demands of the case” (Thornton 2004, p. 93). This means that if I am not able to do the right thing (for instance, to give back the wallet I just found), it is not because I lack motivation to do this, but only because I lack the knowledge that it is the thing

to be done. The difference between an honest and a dishonest person lies exclusively in their ways of perceiving their circumstances. Thus, it would not be possible for two people to have exactly the same understanding of the circumstances and yet see different reasons to act.

Briefly, then, according to McDowell, it is a person's understanding of how things are that gives her a reason for action. And if I were the right kind of person, I would see the right reasons to act.⁷ Moral reasons, in particular, have no direct link with the agent's existing motivations or interests; there is no need, in addition to her understanding of the relevant facts, for the agent to *care* about the situation, meaning that some desire would function as an independent and extra help in order to motivate her.⁸ For McDowell, to perceive the morally correct action in the appropriate way *just is* to be motivated to do it. Here is how he explains it:

Adverting to his view of the facts may suffice, on its own, to show us the favorable light in which his action appeared to

⁷ McDowell is a moral particularist: there is no rule or criterion to define what the right action is; it will always depend on the particular context. A virtuous person is the one who knows how to act in each occasion, who is sensible enough to distinguish the particular features of each situation. As I said before, the virtuous one is the measure of the right action.

⁸ As McDowell puts it: "A full specification of a reason must make clear how the reason was capable of motivating; it must contain enough to reveal the favorable light in which the agent saw his projected action. We tend to assume that this is effected, quite generally, by the inclusion of a desire. (...) However, it seems to be false that the motivating power of all reasons derives from their including desires" (McDowell 1998, p. 79). And McDowell is not alone in defending the view that beliefs have motivational powers on their own. This is how Thomas Nagel puts it: "That I have the appropriate desire simply follows from the fact that these considerations motivate me; if the likelihood that an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness. But nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations" (Nagel 1979, p. 29–30).

him. No doubt we credit him with an appropriate desire, perhaps for his own future happiness. But the commitment to ascribe such a desire is simply consequential on our taking him to act as he does for the reason we cite; the desire does not function as an independent extra component in a full specification of his reason, hitherto omitted by an understandable ellipsis of the obvious, but strictly necessary in order to show how it is that the reason can motivate him. Properly understood, his belief does that on its own. (McDowell 1998, p. 79)

In other words: “a desire ascribed in this purely consequential way is not independently intelligible” (McDowell 1998, p. 84), it is simply the motivational counterpart (or the motivational component) of his understanding of the relevant facts.

The problem is, of course, a Humean one – is it possible for a purely cognitive state (a view of how things are) to entail some disposition to act, or to make the action attractive to its possessor? Hume would put it like this: does reason motivate? McDowell would simply say that to assume that cognitive and conative/affective states have distinct existences is just a Humean dogma that we don’t have to accept. In fact, as Pettit and Smith put it, “what makes it possible for a virtuous agent to behave virtuously [according to McDowell’s view], is that she is capable of enjoying a distinctive kind of psychological state that is both belief-like and desire-like” (Pettit and Smith 2006, p. 163). Similarly, we don’t have to take for granted that the world is, in itself, “motivationally inert” – “the idea of the world as motivationally inert is not an independent hard datum. It is simply the metaphysical counterpart of the thesis that states of will and cognitive states are distinct existences, which is exactly what is in question” (McDowell 1998, p. 83). My worries about this view, I must say, have less to do with the worldview it presupposes than with the picture of humanity this view leaves us with. *Are we really like that?*

According to this view, there is no possible situation in which someone has the relevant understanding of the situa-

tion (say, that the thing to do is to give back the wallet) and is not motivated to act accordingly. As McDowell puts it: “we should say that the relevant conceptions are not so much as possessed except by those whose wills are influenced appropriately” (McDowell 1998, p. 87). Thus, believing that giving back the wallet is the thing to do necessarily entails wanting to do it (if the agent A thinks there is a reason to ϕ in a particular case Y, then she must be willing to ϕ in Y).⁹

My doubts about this intellectualist account are the following: *does that description really match the way people are, and act?* Is it really the case that I don’t give back the wallet just because I don’t know what the correct thing to do is (I just have the illusion that I know)? Closely related with this is the description McDowell presents of the virtuous agent’s moral psychology: the virtuous person simply does not need to weigh reasons, because once she sees what the thing to do is, every other contrary reason that she might have simply vanishes:

the dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale that always tips on their side. If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations that, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether – not overridden – by the requirement. (McDowell 1998, p. 90)

⁹ This is usually referred as motivational internalism: “The names ‘internalism’ and ‘externalism’ have been used to designate two views of the relation between ethics and motivation. Internalism is the view that the presence of a motivation for acting morally is guaranteed by the truth of ethical propositions themselves. On this view the motivation must be so tied to the truth, or meaning, of ethical statements that when in a particular case someone is (or perhaps merely believes that he is) morally required to do something, it follows that he has a motivation for doing it. Externalism holds, on the other hand, that the necessary motivation is not supplied by ethical principles and judgments themselves, and that an additional psychological sanction is required to motivate our compliance.” (Nagel 1979, p. 7)

It seems that McDowell has in mind some kind of *ideal* agent, not a real one.¹⁰ But it is a kind of ideal with no particular function attached, because there is no way to teach a non-virtuous person to become virtuous, and hence no definite way to get closer to that ideal. And what about *akrasia*? According to this view it seems impossible that someone may act contrarily to her best judgment. If the akratic person *knows* she is not acting as virtue demands, then most likely she conceives the circumstances of her action as the virtuous person would conceive them. But then, if acting correctly is just a matter of perceiving the matter correctly, there is no room left to *akrasia* – if someone conceives the situation as the virtuous person does, then she would know what to do and any other considerations that might constitute reasons for acting otherwise would simply be silenced. As McDowell admits, “one cannot share a virtuous person’s view of a situation in which it seems to him that virtue requires some action, but see no reason to act in that way” (McDowell 1998, p. 90).

The only solution available to McDowell is simply to posit that the incontinent and the continent person’s understanding of a situation does not match that of a virtuous person (his account of *akrasia* is discussed in the paper I cited above, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” and also in his “Virtue and Reason”, both in McDowell 1998). In McDowell’s own words: “The way out is to attenuate the degree to which the continent or incontinent person’s conception of a situation matches that of a virtuous person” (McDowell 1998, p. 92). But then, if his proposal is correct, we will have different psychological models attached to different moral characters: the virtuous person is not vulnerable to *akrasia* and that is because she “is capable of enjoying a distinctive kind of psy-

¹⁰ And he rightly acknowledges that: “This view of virtue obviously involves a high degree of idealization; the best we usually encounter is to some degree tainted with continence.” (McDowell 1998, p. 92)

chological state that is both belief-like and desire-like” (Pettit and Smith 2006, p. 163). For the virtuous person, possible opposing reasons to act are simply silenced. For the less than virtuous, opposing reasons are not silenced – “Their inclinations are aroused, as the virtuous person’s are not, by their awareness of competing attractions: a lively desire clouds or blurs the focus of their attention on ‘the noble’” (McDowell 1998, p. 92), – and that’s why such a person acts in an akratic way. But this means that her motivational structure is not the same as that of the virtuous person’s – vulnerable as she is to opposing desires; it is a Humean psychological structure (composed of a belief and desire) rather than a purely cognitive one. While the less than virtuous should be described as having either beliefs or desires, the virtuous one should be described as having a “besire” (Altham 1986), a hybrid kind of psychological state, a belief that is simultaneously a desire. This result – different moral characters or standpoints implying different psychological and motivational structures – seems quite disturbing.

In a nutshell, what I am arguing is that, while not being a pure Kantian, still, McDowell inflates the agent’s rationality by stating that if the agent thinks she has a (moral) reason to do X, then she wants/is motivated to do X. I think it is worth pointing out that *we are not like that*: sometimes, we really think that we must do X, or that we have reason to do it, but still we want to do something else. And the answer to this challenge cannot simply be: *we are not like that because we are not ideal agents*. That much we know; and an ethical theory – if we want it to be useful – must have something to say to us, real agents.

If Hume has a minimalist conception of practical rationality (it has only an instrumental role, of finding the right means to attain a given end), McDowell can be accused of the opposite excess, namely of assuming the intellectualist position that practical knowledge necessarily entails motivation to act; that the agent must want to do what she has a reason to do. Neither

of these seems to give an accurate account of how rationality and desire combine in order to originate action. If it is true, on the one hand, that we can rationally deliberate about ends and not only about means (that desires are subject to rational criticism), it is also true, on the other, that there is no guarantee that the agent's motivation will always align with the agent's reasons, or that the agent necessarily wants to do what she thinks is the best to do.

2. *Are human beings essentially rational?*

So far I've been arguing that McDowell gives an inflated account of practical rationality and thus he is not actually speaking about real agents, people like us.

Connected with that thesis, there is another way in which I think McDowell shows his alignment to that classical philosophical conception of humanity, according to which human beings are the exemplars of rationality and autonomy. In fact, McDowell thinks that the human beings are creatures that stand apart from animals by virtue of their powers of self-control, reasoning, and reflection – that there is a clear line that separates the human from the animal way of living. In his *Mind and World*, he clearly states that:

we do not fall into rampant Platonism if we say the shape of our lives is no longer determined by immediate biological forces. To acquire the spontaneity of the understanding is to become able, as Gadamer puts it, to 'rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world' (Truth and Method, p. 444) – that succession of problems and opportunities constituted as such by biological imperatives – into a 'free, distanced orientation'. (McDowell 1994, p. 115–116)

This is also because McDowell draws a very sharp distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual cognitive agents and thinkers. The problem is that this division is too abrupt, and

without intermediaries. There is a world of difference between mature human beings, inserted in the space of reasons, on the one hand, and infants or animals, on the other. Strictly speaking, infants and animals cannot have experiences (since any experience is conceptually structured), and thus the way infants or animals, for instance, feel pain, is not the same way in which mature human beings feel pain. According to McDowell, even our perceptual experience is permeated with rationality. In his own words:

our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world's impacts on our receptive capacities. The idea of the conceptual that I mean to be invoking is to be understood in close connection with the idea of rationality, in the sense that is in play in the traditional separation of mature human beings, as rational animals, from the rest of the animal kingdom. (McDowell 2009, p. 308)

To account for this distance between rational and non-rational creatures, he explores the metaphor of the rational wolf. Suppose we can pretend that wolves could acquire *logos* – how would a rational wolf act? What could the difference be (between a non-rational and a rational wolf)? According to McDowell, the differences would be substantial and fundamental. “A rational wolf would be able to let his mind roam over possibilities of behavior other than what comes naturally to wolves”, such that he is no longer determined by his natural tendencies, but “has genuinely alternative possibilities of action, over which his thought can play” (McDowell 1998, p. 170). A non-rational animal is not able to move away from its natural impulse, but our rational wolf, “having acquired reason, can contemplate alternatives; he can step back from the natural impulse and direct critical scrutiny at it” (McDowell 1998, p. 171). There is a world of difference between the deliberating wolf wondering what to do, and the non-rational animal which is not able to transcend its first nature traits; the way its needs

and motivational impulses impinge on its behavior has no parallel with the way our rational wolf is able to ‘transcend his wolfish nature’. In McDowell’s own words, “The concept of nature figures here, without incoherence, in two quite different ways: as ‘mere’ nature, and as something whose realization involves transcending that” (McDowell 1998, p. 173).

Thus, the main difference between human beings and (other) animals is that we “do not just inhabit an environment, but are open to a world” (McDowell 2009, p. 315). This means all our experiences are permeated with rationality (and this is what Dreyfus calls the ‘Myth of the Mental’). In fact, this abrupt leap, between creatures that have a world and creatures that merely cope with their habitat or environment, is correctly identified, for instance, by Crispin Wright, Jay Bernstein, and Hubert Dreyfus, the problem being that, according to them, the formation of the second nature is an all-or-nothing process, a kind of “magical process where we leap from meaningless chaos into the demands of reason without intermediaries” (Bernstein 2002, p. 222).

In what follows, I will try to tackle this issue, showing the limitations of McDowell’s proposal, through two different angles. First, from a conceptual point of view, I will argue that McDowell does not accomplish his ambition of overcoming dualism, he simply replaces it. He is not able to explain how the traces of our animality are to be present in the space of reasons (2.1). Second, from an empirical point of view, I will argue that the strong kind of rational autonomy that McDowell posits is both unrealistic and disconnected from what we know about how moral thinking works (2.2).

2.1. Animality and the onset of reason

McDowell strives to overcome the image of the human being as a bifurcated creature through the concept of second nature. Within the framework of second nature, reason or rationality

is no longer at odds with what is natural (as long as we accept that nature is not reduced to the realm of law). The touchstone is this idea that exercises of spontaneity are simply a way of realizing and fulfilling our human nature. But the problem is that even if we can agree that exercises of spontaneity are a way to actualize our nature as human beings, it is still true that we are *animals* who also possess reason, and he still has to explain how these aspects fit one another. My worries are double: on one side, I think he fails to overcome all dualisms, as he aspires to – he maintains a dualism within the broader redescription of the domain of nature; on the other side, because he thinks he need not explain how the traces of our animality inhabit the space of reason, he defends the unlikely theses that there is no continuum between animal dispositions and rational action, and that when we enter the space of reasons, all that belongs to our first nature is simply silenced or suspended.

Many of his critics think that McDowell is unable to overcome all dualisms. Bernstein considers that:

despite himself, in construing the space of reasons as *sui generis* and that of essentially free beings, McDowell operates with a dualistic scheme of a first nature subject to law (or that is appropriately “hard-wired”) and a second nature subject to the demands of (free) reason. (Bernstein 2002, p. 223–4)

Gaskin finds the exact same problem:

In permitting or recognizing the materials of second nature to be ‘natural’, we ‘overcome’ the dualism of reason and nature, but the victory is a pyrrhic one, for we are left with a distinction which is the same, in substance, as the one we started with, only now relabeled a distinction between reason and law. (...) If the original problem was how to fit reason into a world understood *naturalistically* (giving this word its traditional gloss, by adverting to facts of exclusively first nature), the redescribed problem is how to fit reason into a world understood *nomologically* (...) Merely assuring us that the rational,

as well as the nomological, ought to be regarded as—or is anyway—natural goes no distance at all towards addressing the underlying problem. (Gaskin 2006, p. 38)

And McDowell himself acknowledges that he should give some account of “how the law-governed and the free are related” (McDowell 2000, p. 102).

Giving us no clue as to ‘how the law-governed and the free are related’, he simply assures us that there is no continuum between mere cognitive agents that cope with their environment and thinkers, or rational agents that are able, for instance, to think in moral terms. As a matter of fact, he asserts that:

Moral education does not merely rechannel one’s natural motivational impulses, with the acquisition of reason making no difference except that one becomes self-consciously aware of the operation of those impulses. In imparting *logos*, moral education enables one to step back from any motivational impulse one finds oneself subject to, and question its rational credentials. Thus it effects a kind of distancing of the agent from the practical tendencies that are part of what we might call his first nature. (McDowell 1998, p. 188)

But if he is not able to explain how is it that the exercises of spontaneity are related with the more or less plastic routines that characterize higher mammals’ behavior – and thus our own behavior too –, how can he claim that those exercises of spontaneity constitute our way of actualize ourselves as animals? As Bernstein rightly puts it:

to agree that human forms of nurturing the young, for example, are not reducible to the behavioral patterns through which our nearest animal relations nurture their young is not, for all that, to accede to the claim that our nurturing is *sui generis*, wholly formed by the demands of reason. (Bernstein 2002, p. 223)

The problem is that McDowell simply asserts that rationality definitely separates us from our own animality once and for all, or as Dreyfus set forth, McDowell simply presumes that “all intelligibility is pervaded by rational capacities” (Dreyfus 2013, p. 15), instead of going with a more modest account of how rationality pervades our experiences. It seems quite disputable, given what we know about ourselves, to assume that we are *essentially* rational animals, rather than our rationality being just one aspect of human experience. In the later debate between McDowell and Dreyfus (McDowell 2008, 2009, 2013), the former takes substantial steps to mitigate the rationalistic and intellectualistic features of his view of human life in the space of reasons, but I think he still fell short of accomplishing his aim.

Continuing to think about the ethical domain, it's easy to see how McDowell is prone to recognizing the autonomy of any normative domain such as the ethical one. There is an is-ought gap and no communication is allowed (even if this is-ought gap is located within what McDowell claims to be a broader naturalism). It is true that, given his broader conception of naturalism, the space of reasons is no longer pictured as autonomous in the sense of being constituted independently of anything specifically human (as we have seen, responsiveness to reasons is not supernatural) – but it is still pictured as autonomous in the sense of not being determined or influenced by causal factors. This means that moral matters are purely conceptual and rational matters – thinking what we should do is a rational ability that only humans have, and any descriptive or psychological aspect of man is derived from that ability. I mean: the instinctive tendencies we share with other animals do not determine that conceptual and rational ability; and that rational ability cannot be explained in a way that is not itself rational. McDowell is convinced that reason produces such an alteration in one's make-up that ‘the authority of nature’ is put into question. In fact, if “nature controls the behavior of

a non-rational animal (...), reason compels nature to abdicate that authority” (McDowell 1998, p. 188). The ‘onset of reason’ “effects a kind of distancing of the agent from the practical tendencies that are part of what we might call his first nature” in such a way that “[its] dictates acquired an authority that replaces the authority abdicated by first nature” (McDowell 1998, p. 188).

My doubts are the following: is it really the case that when it comes to moral matters our ‘first nature’ traits are simply overridden? That we get rid of all of our natural determinations? That with the ‘onset of reason’, as McDowell puts it, the practical tendencies that are part of our first nature simply vanish? My opinion is that it is not very plausible to think, with McDowell, that there is an abrupt chasm between biologically determined creatures, on the one hand, and creatures moved only by reasons, on the other. Our rational and conceptual abilities do not simply override our animal nature.

More specifically: I believe our ‘second nature’ – the exercise of conceptual capacities acquired through training and education – allows us to grasp a layer of reality that it is not available to the rest of the animal kingdom, and I believe McDowell is correct when he claims that these capacities cannot be reduced or explained in terms of biological features. Moreover, if we adopt a broader naturalism, as we should, we need not aim at such biological reductionism. The problem, however, is that, if even in the context of a broader naturalism, he still holds on to a kind of discontinuity and autonomy, as if human beings are able to rise completely above their most basic determinacies, which seems to me to be out of place.

It seems clear to me that only rational beings are capable of elaborate moral systems and sophisticated forms of moral thinking. Sophisticated forms of moral thinking imply conceptualization and abstract reasoning. After all, besides being capable of feelings of outrage in the face of asymmetry and unfairness (this is an inequity aversion that we share with

non-human primates – cf. De Waal & Berger 2000 and Brosnan & De Waal 2003), we are also able to design sophisticated constructs such as theories of justice. The ability to morally evaluate, which characterizes us at this point in our development, involves the ability to pose what philosophers usually refer to as the ‘normative question’: to think about what should be the case, to question the assumptions and the consequences of action. Now, this is not an automatic behavior or an instinct. This fully developed ability to think in moral terms is what characterizes us as moral beings. What seems questionable is to conceive of there being no continuity whatsoever between one thing and another and to maintain that our ability to think in moral terms is of a fundamentally different nature, which keeps us irremediably apart from the ‘mere’ dispositions and feelings of non-linguistic animals. What seems questionable is the idea that being a moral agent has to do with an ability for conceptual thinking, but not also with the ability to repudiate certain asymmetries in certain situations. It seems plausible to say that there is a link between this fully developed capacity we exhibit today and the intuitions and dispositions probably exhibited by our ancestors. My point is this: because we are linguistic beings, capable of conceptual and abstract thinking, we have arrived at a level of sophistication in terms of moral thinking that allows us to think in terms of reasons, and to develop theories that allow the justification of moral positions before the members of the community who also have the ability to discuss them. But the fact that we have reached this level does not mean that the ability to assign value to items in the world, and perhaps the content of some evaluative positions, may not have been influenced and shaped by factors other than rational reflection. It seems to me legitimate to think that there was evaluation and value assignment before there was a rational capacity for justification. This basic capacity to experience items in the world as things requiring certain reactions or meriting certain reactions precedes a linguistically mediat-

ed reflective ability to pose the normative question. Thus, because we are sophisticated creatures, we can take a step back with respect to these primitive evaluative dispositions or intuitions and not follow them compulsorily; but the fact that we are reflective creatures who can take that step back does not entail that such dispositions cannot still influence our moral judgements.

2.2. How autonomous can moral thinking be?

This question can also be tackled from an empirical standpoint. I think such a standpoint should be taken into account, since it provides us with another way of seeing how difficult it is to believe McDowell's thesis that our rational and conceptual capacities are completely untainted by other aspects of our psychology. If we take a careful look, for instance, at some experiments on moral psychology (see, for instance, Haidt et al. 1993; Haidt & Bjorklund 2008; Greene et al. 2001), we may be able to see that it's not the case that our moral judgments always arise out of data manipulation and further rational deliberation. Rather, what we usually define as a moral judgment may after all have its basis in a "gut reaction" and may not be an expression of propositional knowledge. When faced with certain types of morally innocuous transgressions (like using a national flag to wipe the floor, or drinking a glass of water after having spat in it), people show the same kind of reactions that moral transgressions elicit (they are thought of as being universally wrong, of a non-contingent and mandatory nature, their wrongness independent from authority), even though they cannot find a reason to justify this. This appears to bring moral judgments close to a certain kind of affective response in which reflection over propositional contents plays little or no role at all (see also Nichols and Folds-Bennett 2003).

These experiments are in line with numerous experimental studies that represent the core of cognitive psychology, and

that rest on the hypothesis that most of our judgments result from the triggering of fast and frugal heuristics, and not from deliberative processes. It is not absurd to think that the same happens with moral judgments: they result from heuristics and many of them are automatic.¹¹ (This doesn't mean moral reasoning has no place, but it is possible to argue that its main function is that of a post-hoc rationalization – it is useful to justify previous intuitions or whenever a conflict between moral intuitions arises). In fact, in many different areas of research it has been found that people make evaluations (as to whether an event/object is good or bad, for instance) immediately, unintentionally and without awareness that they are doing it, so it may be the case that “what we think we are doing while consciously deliberating in actuality has no effect on the outcome of the judgment, as it has already been made through relatively immediate, automatic means” (Bargh and Chartrand 1999, p. 475). It is not absurd to think that the influences of heuristics and biases uncovered in recent cognitive psychology are widespread in everyday ethical reflection.

So, it might be the case that human beings are not paragons of rationality and autonomy. But if we stick to McDowell's theory of practical rationality, it is clear that the capacity that determines, in a given situation, what matters about that situation and that enables us to evaluate it, is a conceptual conscious ability that only rational animals possess (it is the result of being initiated into a 'conceptual space', as McDowell puts it). And it is also clear that the actions through which we manifest our moral character must be chosen; even if McDowell grants, following Aristotle, that virtuous action is the result of habit, we must not understand that as happening out of instinct or inertia – on the contrary, virtue requires that

¹¹ One of the simplest heuristics studied in this field is that which makes us immediately agree with and positively value what is said by people we like.

“specially human capacity for discursive thought”. (McDowell 1998, p. 39) But if we consider the virtue-ethical ideals of practical rationality in light of the model of human cognition now emerging, we realize that moral behavior is not immune to cognitive biases and that it does not always flow from reflectively endorsed moral norms or robust traits of character like virtues. Rather, we see that minor situational influences (such as ambient noise, or the fact that someone is in a hurry) determine moral behavior (see, for instance, Isen and Levin 1972; Darley and Batson 1973; Mathews and Cannon 1975). In fact, various experiments in social psychology have revealed that subjects were much more likely to help someone in need if they had just found a dime, or are not in a hurry, or if the ambient noise was at normal levels. Circumstantial and morally irrelevant factors influence moral behavior in a decisive way, and can also influence the way we perceive the situation as an occasion for ethical decision. And it is extremely relevant that those cognitive biases or response tendencies are beyond the reach of individual practical rationality.

Thus it seems as though not only McDowell’s conception of moral abilities but also his idea that it suffices to believe that X is the thing to do in order to be motivated to do it are not in line with what we know about the way we are and think. It is possible to simply argue that real agents are defective practical reasoners, but in that case we need to admit that there is a distance between the picture of human cognition that applies to virtuous people and the model of human cognition now emerging in the cognitive sciences that applies to everyone else. And how useful and illuminating can that be?

My point in this paper was just to argue that from a philosophical perspective, no less than from an empirical one, McDowell’s account of practical rationality is not realistic, since it seems to ignore features that are determinative of us as human agents.

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