

**RELIABLE SENSITIVITY.** The hypothesis that McDowell proposes to explore is that virtue is a form of knowledge. We say that a person behaves virtuously in a particular situation when his behaviour (his manifested responses) are reliably correct. This in turn means that he displays reliable sensitivity. A virtuous person knows that a particular situation calls for a display of a virtuous action. So, he *knows* that a situation requires kindness, temperance, or courage. (Of course, in addition, a virtuous person knows *how* to respond virtuously. So, e.g., he knows how to be kind, generous, or courageous. He must, in a sense, be an expert in dealing with the situation. But presumably this kind of expertise is not sufficient to distinguish him from someone who merely acts by blind habit or instinct.)

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Would it be right to identify this sensitivity with virtue? There must be a further condition—that the reliable sensitivity provides a complete explanation of behaviour (of ‘deliverance’). Otherwise there could be a case where a person acted on an external incentive (say, reputation). So virtue, on this view, necessarily issues in nothing but the right conduct.

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**UNITY AND REASONS FOR ACTION.** In every morally relevant situation a virtuous person must be aware of the moral requirements, with this awareness producing the right conduct. Very well; but where to draw the line between different requirements, hence different virtues? A person must be sensitive to every morally relevant fact about the situation. So, for example, when a person acts generously, he must be aware that certain acts of (apparent) generosity do not sit well with rashness. If he insists on performing these acts nevertheless, we should not call him generous.

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Thus we arrive at the Socratic/Platonic view of the unity of virtue. Moral knowledge is one, since to know how to act virtuously in a situation you have to be able to know every morally relevant aspect of it.

**TRANSLATION INTO ACTION.** So far we have identified virtue with sensitivity, a kind of perceptual awareness of a situation. And this awareness may also include a judgement that a certain action—a virtuous action—is appropriate. But couldn’t there be a person endowed with all these capacities, and yet still unable, or disinclined, to translate this perception into action?

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This is Aristotle’s problem of an incontinent man in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII. Socrates there (or Plato) is reported as claiming that knowledge itself possesses a decisive motivating factor. One cannot act against his best judgement, what *he* considers true. So if a person performs an evil act, this can only be by reason of ignorance, straightforwardly so.

Aristotle himself advances a different explanation (it is not actually clear which explanation he prefers). A person may still have the sensitivity of a virtuous person. Yet his judgement may be affected by all sorts of desires. In this way his ability to *translate* his perception into action would be impaired (i.e. his deliverances will fail).

**VIRTUE AND CONTINENCE.** We have described how a virtuous man can fail to act virtuously. Strictly speaking, we should speak of a nearly-virtuous man here. But it is important for McDowell (and Aristotle) to distinguish him from a merely continent man. This man would be characterised by the way his moral deliberation works. He is merely examining and weighing different ways of acting. However, in the case of a virtuous man, certain deliverances (ways of conduct) are not live options. Not that certain reasons are overridden or outweighed, but rather they are simply silenced.

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