

HARD CASES. The belief in codification gives rise to a ‘deductive paradigm’. When we face hard cases, situations of conflicting obligation, of the clash of moral intuitions, reasons at some point comes to an end. Then we are liable to simply wave our hands and complain, ‘You just don’t see it.’ But if the deductive paradigm holds, then in fact we are simply not clever enough. We should in principle be able to see how to apply the moral principles we have learned to these cases as well. These cases can, therefore, be resolved, and they are not really ‘hard’ at all. If, on the other hand, they are genuinely hard, then perhaps they are not about a correct application of rules, and the deductive paradigm must be given up. 340

Past moralists were aware of such hard cases. But they usually assumed that the difficulty is in the richness of practical reality that is occasionally no match for the few short principles we have formulated for ourselves. They were thought to be like engineering problems. Though mechanics does not provide with directions how to construct a bridge, engineering rules, very great in number, can be thought of as ultimately based on the few principles of mechanics. But at least in the case of moral philosophy, McDowell urges us to abandon this prejudice that deductions can be found that would allow us to derive practical recommendations from a few moral principles.

The hard cases are those that are likely to show, if only momentarily, our dependence on the *familiar*, inculcated ways of reasoning and the inadequacy of those ways. To salvage the authority of those ways, we may then insist that it is really *our own* inadequacy that creates a hard case. Now suppose, on the other hand, that we give up the deductive paradigm. Then we should become aware that the familiar rules are inapplicable in the hard cases. These rules are not universal. They are just ‘rules of thumb’, shortcuts suitable for a few familiar cases. But not only that: also in the easy, usual cases, where the rules seem to serve us well, we are similarly dependent on the familiar, local, parochial rules that merely give an illusion of universality. 341

VERTIGO. This awareness of parochiality might give the feeling of ‘vertigo’. Nothing is certain any more, there is no ground to stand on, and all your beliefs are simply floating in the outer space, supported by nothing more than a common agreement among the people from the same community. What you find certain is simply a result of inculcation, a signal of habit—and nothing more than that. However, the vertigo is created by the illicit temptation to stand outside any particular perspective, to survey every claim and practice from the point of view of the eternity. The cure of the vertigo is to resist this temptation. We have to make peace with the fact that we necessarily remain, in our intuitions and judgements, very much within a particular way of life, a tradition. 339, 341

At this point you might object that even the awareness of your dependence on the tradition is impossible without adopting an external perspective. But this, McDowell need not be the case. I am not sure I quite understand his argument at this point. Perhaps the following thought may help. If awareness itself is a problem, then adopting an (illegitimate) external perspective is not the only way to create it. You can simply become aware of alternative ways of life, without at the same time abandoning the commitment to your own way of life. 341

NON-COGNITIVIST OBJECTION. This opens up a possibility of a non-cognitivist objection. Our resistance to the ‘foreign’ ways of life and our commitment to the ‘native’ ways is a reflection of our passions, rather than cognitions. There are two responses to offer. First, this objection may be based on the idea that we can sort the agent’s motives individually into passions and cognitions. This is unlikely: they come in a package, so to speak. 345ff

Second, the objector may simply point out that all cognitions and passions, even if not clearly separable, have human origin. This he would take to be a sign that they are able to deliver to us knowledge, including moral knowledge. McDowell’s response to this second version of the objection is simply to condemn it as an expression of scientism.