

**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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**PERCEPTION AND KNOWLEDGE.** If virtue is a form of knowledge, then what kind of knowledge is it? Here we work with a practical syllogism which may be described as follows:

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*Major premiss* I desire  $\omega$ , and to get  $\omega$ , in any situation of the type  $\tau$ , I should  $\phi$ .

*Minor premiss* Here now is a situation of the type  $\tau$ .

*Conclusion (motion)* Therefore, I should  $\phi$ .

But if virtue is a form of perception, then its possession can at most enable the virtuous agent to know the minor premiss, to know what kind of situation he is in. It is strange to think that we know a general rule that is in the major premiss. The requirement, the ‘should’, is in the major premiss, and knowledge of this requirement is not analogous to perceptual knowledge.

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*Remark 1.* There is a large debate among the scholars about the precise form of Aristotle’s practical syllogism. It is not clear from the text which form McDowell endorses. My reconstruction aims to fit, as far as possible, McDowell’s claims about the syllogism.

**INADEQUACY OF RULE-FOLLOWING.** The objection just stated, McDowell argues, only holds if we are in the grip of a rule-following conception of practical knowledge. The major premiss in the syllogism above is a rule, an algorithm that is supposed to deliver clear answers in similarly clearly known circumstances. But Aristotle has already rebelled against claim. No matter how careful you may be in formulating your rule, there will always be exceptions.

In the light of these exceptions, unavoidable in principle, it is tempting to conclude that there is no practical rationality in the first place! This is because we think of rationality as obedience to universal principles. And if there aren't any principles that admit no exceptions, then there are no principles at all, and no rationality either.

*Question 2.* Connect the last claims to Kant's views on morality.

But this is merely a prejudice. To understand why, we need to examine Wittgenstein's argument against the concept following a rule.

Suppose we have a simple case where there is an explicitly formulated rule. For example:

(13-1) Beginning with the number, to any given number add 2.

Then we have the series: 2, 4, 6, . . . . And suppose we believe that a certain person has mastered the rule. Very well; but what does his mastery consist in? Perhaps just in this: when prompted by a number  $n$ , he writes down  $n + 2$ . But this is inconclusive: available finite body of evidence is compatible with continuing the series in *another* way. This other way may result simply from another rule. The person might be using not 'addition' but 'schmaddition': he might be adding 2 to every number less or equal to 1000, and, say, 4 to every number greater than 1000.

This is not just a matter of knowing how *others* use the rule. In your own situation, what guarantee do you have that you grasped addition, but not schmaddition? Wittgenstein's argument is supposed to show that, once you examine your own internal psychological evidence, you will not be able to find any one event that we could associate with 'grasping' the rule.

Still, the argument is not meant to be sceptical, in the sense of purporting to convince us that there is no ground whatsoever for expecting any one determinate answer. We do have confidence that the person's responses, and our own too, would follow a predictable pattern. We learn to project meanings from the contexts in which we have learned them to the further (future) contexts. But the root of this confidence is not the ability to grasp the rule, the meaning of the words or of actions. It is rather the shared ways of life, the shared practices that we engage in.

*Question 3.* Connect the notion of the 'form of life' to Hegel's ethical theory.

These meditations allow us to dispense with the 'prejudice' that only universal principles constitute knowledge, and that knowledge is necessarily 'codifiable'.

**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.

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.

**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.

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.

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**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.

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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.

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