

McDowell and the Challenge of Moral Relativism

By

David William Heath

Candidate registered at University College London

Dissertation submitted for the degree of MPhil

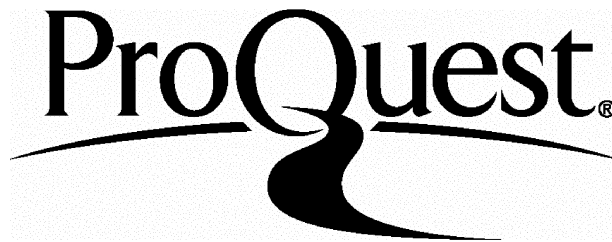
ProQuest Number: U644331

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest U644331

Published by ProQuest LLC(2016). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Abstract

In this dissertation, I investigate whether the moral philosophy of John McDowell gives rise to a form of relativism.

According to Simon Blackburn, moral relativism is engendered by the meta-ethical analogy that McDowell draws between moral properties and secondary qualities. In Chapter 1, I provide an explication of how and why McDowell makes the analogy. In Chapter 2, I lay out Blackburn's charge that the analogy gives rise to a form of relativism, show why such a relativism would be worrying, and then respond to Blackburn, both with criticisms adopted from the philosophical literature and with my own. The conclusion of this chapter is that, contra Blackburn, McDowell's secondary quality analogy does not engender a type of relativism.

In Chapter 3, I extend my exposition of McDowell's moral philosophy, showing how, through his position as a moral cognitivist, he brings together the meta-ethical view that moral properties are akin to secondary qualities and first-order virtue theory. I then argue that because of the specific shape McDowell's virtue theory takes, his moral philosophy does, after all, engender a type of relativism – viz. that both moral knowledge and moral action are relative to the particular set of virtues prevalent in a culture or society at any given time.

In the remainder of Chapter 3, I construct on behalf of McDowell several counter-responses to my accusation of relativism, all of which, however, I find to be problematic. In particular, I consider whether McDowell could avoid my charge by attempting to ground the virtues, *à la* Foot, in extra-moral facts about human nature. Notwithstanding the fact that McDowell would not approve of such an attempt, I conclude that it is flawed anyway, for the reason that it is not clear that the putatively extra-moral facts are not themselves informed by the virtues.

Table of Contents

<u>Title Page</u>		p. 1
<u>Abstract</u>		p. 2
<u>Table of Contents</u>		p. 3
<u>Chapter 1</u>		p. 5
	§1.1	p. 5
	§1.2	p. 6
	§1.3	p. 13
	§1.4	p. 17
	§1.5	p. 26
	§1.6	p. 30
<u>Chapter 2</u>		p. 32
	§2.1	p. 32
	§2.2	p. 33
	§2.3	p. 36
	§2.4	p. 43
		§2.4.1 p. 45
		§2.4.2 p. 49
		§2.4.3 p. 56
	§2.5	p. 58
<u>Chapter 3</u>		p. 59
	§3.1	p. 59
	§3.2	p. 60
	§3.3	p. 61
	§3.4	p. 63
		§3.4.1 p. 64

	§3.4.2	p. 65
§3.5		p. 67
§3.6		p. 70
	§3.6.1	p. 70
	§3.6.2	p. 71
	§3.6.3	p. 73
	§3.6.4	p. 75
§3.7		p. 78
<u>Bibliography</u>		p. 80

Chapter 1

§1.1 – Introduction

According to Simon Blackburn, a particular aspect of John McDowell's moral philosophy engenders a form of moral relativism. That aspect is the analogy McDowell draws between moral properties and the Lockean notion of secondary qualities.¹

This chapter comprises, therefore, an explication of how and why McDowell makes the analogy. As the eventual concern is whether McDowell's analogy gives rise to a form of relativism, that question forming the subject matter of Chapter 2, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a clarification and interpretation of his sophisticated and subtle account of the secondary quality analogy, rather than to engage with all the criticisms that have been made of it in the philosophical literature.

§1.2 consists of an account of why someone might be tempted to model moral properties on primary qualities, and why such an attempt is likely to be problematic.

In §1.3, McDowell's reworking of Locke's primary-secondary quality distinction is covered. A reinterpretation of that distinction is necessary if McDowell is to be successful in modelling moral properties not on primary but on secondary qualities, that model being the concern of §1.4.

§1.5 comprises an account of how, by glossing the perceptual analogy in terms of reason, McDowell is able to distance himself from, what he takes to be, the disreputable doctrines of Moral Intuitionism.

The chapter concludes with §1.6, in which the overall importance of McDowell's secondary quality analogy for his moral philosophy is summarised.

§1.2 – Motivation for, and Problems with, a Primary Quality Analogy

In his paper ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’², McDowell’s starting point is (what he takes to be) one of the key aspects of moral phenomenology, viz. that “ordinary evaluative thought presents itself as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world” (*MVR* p.131). In talking of ‘evaluative thought’, McDowell (as he makes clear in footnote 4 of *MVR* p.131) is drawing on a distinction that David Wiggins makes (in ‘Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life’: p.95) between such thought and ‘directive judgements’.

Examples of the former are:

- x is good
- x is bad
- x is right
- x is wrong
- x is cruel
- x is courageous
- x is just
- x is beautiful

Examples of the latter are:

- I must do y
- I ought to do y
- I should do y
- It would be best, all things considered, for me to do y

In talking of ‘the world’, McDowell (as he makes clear in his book *Mind and World* p.27) has in mind the Tractarian view that “the world is everything that is the case”, i.e. that the world is the totality of facts. Thus, the evaluative thought that, for example, what Jane is doing is cruel, in being a matter of sensitivity to an aspect of the world, is a

¹ Blackburn makes this charge, in effect, in various places, which are detailed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

matter of sensitivity to the objective worldly fact that what Jane is doing is cruel. The element of moral phenomenology that is McDowell's starting point suggests, then, the correctness of the meta-ethical position of moral realism.

(Not all conceptions of moral realism, however, trade on the notion of moral facts. For example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (in 'Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms' p.5) characterises all types of realism, and therefore the particular type which is moral realism, in terms of *truth*: the judgements or thoughts in question are truth-evaluable, and at least some of those judgements or thoughts are actually true. While this may seem to be a way of characterising moral realism that is only slightly different from the construal above, which talks of moral facts, the appearance is deceptive; for, although some analyses of truth do involve the notion of facts – for instance the Correspondence Theory of Truth (according to which a thought, judgement, or belief³, is made true in virtue of corresponding to a particular fact), and the Identity Theory of Truth (according to which the propositional content of a thought, judgement, or belief, is true in virtue of being identical with a particular fact) – a moral realist of the Sayre-McCord brand who subscribed to the Coherence Theory of Truth (according to which a thought, judgement, or belief, is made true in virtue of cohering with an overall set of thoughts, judgements, or beliefs) would make no use of the notion of a moral fact.)

For the moral realist, the thought that what Jane is doing is cruel tracks an aspect of the world which is there independently of the thought. And because this particular aspect of the world is the instantiation through Jane's action of the moral property of being cruel, the moral realist is a realist about moral properties.

However, moral realists are not usually left in peace with their conviction that moral properties are objectively real, but are, rather, presented with the challenge of saying something about the metaphysical status of such properties. And one way that philosophers (at least those writing since the time of J.L. Mackie) have met this challenge is by importing a perceptual model, in particular the philosophy of perception associated with Locke.

² All of McDowell's papers on moral philosophy mentioned in this dissertation can be found in his collection of essays entitled *Mind, Value, & Reality*, abbreviated here to *MVR*.

³ Theorists of truth differ in what they take the *bearers* of the truth-predicate to be: other candidates, in addition to those mentioned here, often appear in the philosophical literature.

As part of his theory of perception, which is heavily influenced by the work of the corpuscularian physicist Robert Boyle, Locke famously makes a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. That theory, and the primary-secondary quality distinction that is one of its key elements, can be summarised as follows.⁴ What one is directly aware of in perceptual experience is *ex hypothesi* an array not of material objects but of mental objects or *Ideas*. Beyond the domain of one's perceptual experience lies the external world, a world of independently existing material objects. These material objects are the cause of one's Ideas, and, acting as intermediaries between mind and world, one's Ideas represent those material objects. All material objects have the following properties: extension, shape, rest/motion, number, solidity, and texture (i.e. the minute undulations of an object's surface).⁵ These are the *primary* qualities. The result of a causal interaction between material objects and the sensory organs of a perceiver is that the perceiver comes to have Ideas of extension, shape, rest/motion, number, solidity, and texture. Material objects also have, in virtue of the primary qualities, powers to produce in a perceiver Ideas of colour, odour, flavour, sound, and heat/coldness. These powers are the *secondary* qualities. However, although all perceptual Ideas represent the qualities of material objects, they do not all do so in the same manner: Ideas of primary qualities represent those qualities by resembling them, whereas Ideas of secondary qualities represent but do not resemble those qualities. This is the primary-secondary quality distinction, and in effect it says that although a material object in itself possesses the property of, say, shape, it does not have the property of, say, colour, that is, anything resembling colour as it features in one's perceptual experience.

Few (if any) contemporary philosophers accept the details of Locke's theory, in particular because of metaphysical worries surrounding his notion of mental objects or Ideas, and the problem of scepticism resulting from what is in effect a *veil of perception* separating mind from world.

⁴ The summary is based on what Locke says in Book II Chapter VIII of his *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

⁵ This list is not uncontroversial. For example, in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege argues that *number* is a second-order property (i.e. a property of concepts) and so cannot be a (first-order) property of objects.

However, many have been impressed by the primary-secondary quality distinction, and, while not endorsing it in quite the form outlined by Locke, have retained at least the spirit of that distinction.

Of course, there is more than one way of doing this. Those more faithful to Locke will want to agree with him that, unlike being a particular shape, being a particular colour is not a genuine property of objects, and that tomatoes, for example, while being in themselves spherical, are not really red. As Mackie puts it (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* pp.19-20), “colours as we see them do not literally belong to the surfaces of material things”. That it seems to perceivers that tomatoes are objectively red is down to the peculiar workings of human perception: as the result of light bouncing off the surface of the object and then coming into contact with the human eye, this contact then setting in motion a chain of internal processes leading to stimulation of the brain, redness somehow gets projected onto the tomato itself. Any satisfactory account of this specific operation of projection, an instance of (in the words of Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* p.167) the mind’s “great propensity to spread itself on external objects”, would, of course, be highly complex; but defenders of the projective view can at least point to the phenomenon of optical illusions in order to lend credibility to the very idea of projection, for it does perhaps make sense to understand bent-ness as being projected onto what in reality is a straight stick in water, and length inequality as being projected onto the Müller-Lyer drawing of two lines that actually are of equal length.

According to this take, then, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is stark. Primary qualities (like shape) are there in the world in complete independence of human perception, while secondary qualities (like colour) are totally dependent for their existence on human perception.⁶ Only the former are genuine, objective aspects of reality. The latter are merely the upshot of projections onto a world which *really* is lacking in all such qualities. And because the result of projection is that when one talks in everyday discourse about, say, colour, it seems that one is ascribing an objective property to an object, knowledge of the theory of projection leads one to realise that

⁶ It will be noticed that one of the upshots of retaining the primary-secondary quality distinction, while eschewing Locke’s talk of mental Ideas and dismantling the ‘veil of perception’ engendered by his metaphysics, is that whereas for Locke colour, odour, flavour, sound, and heat/coldness, are not secondary qualities but rather the Ideas given rise to by secondary qualities, for those contemporary

such discourse is in error. Put more formally (following Mackie, *op. cit.* Chapter 1), the Theory of Projection holds that as a result of the projection process, one is led to endorse the position of Naïve Realism regarding colour; becoming aware of the Theory of Projection, however, leads one to subscribe to an Error Theory concerning Naïve Realism.

Presented with this interpretation of the distinction and asked to model moral properties on either primary or secondary qualities, the moral realist will obviously opt for the former. As far as he is concerned, moral properties, like primary qualities, are genuine aspects of reality and are not mere projections onto a world which in itself is free of such properties.

However, the moral realist who opts for the primary quality model encounters difficulties when he tries to accommodate another key aspect of moral phenomenology. This aspect is known formally as ‘morality-motivation internalism’; and what morality-motivation internalism states is that there is a highly intimate relationship between on the one hand subscribing to a moral thought or making a moral judgement, and on the other being motivated to act accordingly. In other words, holding a moral thought is, for the morality-motivation internalist, sufficient by itself to secure the motivation to act appropriately. Thus, the agent who judges sincerely that promise-keeping is right is *eo ipso* motivated to keep his promises whenever possible. Similarly, if Jill believes that Jane’s action is cruel, then *eo ipso* Jill has motivation to act accordingly, perhaps by verbally condemning Jane or by making a physical intervention. For the morality-motivation internalist, because making a moral judgement is intrinsically such as to motivate action, Jill needs no extra-moral element, such as the non-moral desire to secure praise for what she does, in order for her will to be engaged. (Morality-motivation externalists deny this.)

(Morality-motivation internalism can be of various strengths. A relatively weak version asserts no more than that subscribing to a particular moral thought is sufficient for securing the motivation to act accordingly, this motivation taking its place as just one motivation to act amongst many. A much stronger version is that endorsed by

philosophers of perception who subscribe to the distinction, it is colour, odour, flavour, sound, and heat/coldness *themselves* which are the secondary qualities.

McDowell (in ‘Virtue and Reason’), according to whom, the motivation to act engendered by making a particular moral judgement is one which *trumps* all other motivations to act, for instance the motivation, prompted by the desire to avoid the risk to life and limb which acting as morally required would pose, to just walk away from the situation and not get involved. According to this stronger version, then, the motivation which results from subscribing to a moral thought is such that, whenever it is present, it leads inevitably all the way actually to acting as required (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as his being physically prevented by others from so acting). The main challenge for morality-motivation internalists of this latter type is squaring their position with the existence of the phenomenon of *akrasia*, weakness of will, for the existence of this phenomenon does *prima facie* open up the possibility that one *can* subscribe to a moral thought and yet, through weakness of will, *not* act accordingly. The way McDowell reconciles this stronger version of morality-motivation internalism and *akrasia* is mentioned in §1.4 of this chapter.)

For the moral realist, moral thoughts or judgements track objective facts. And so, by also subscribing to morality-motivation internalism – at least, to the type of morality-motivation internalism advocated by McDowell – the moral realist is committed to saying that there is a highly intimate relationship between the appreciation of a moral fact and the engagement of the will.

If the moral realist models moral properties on primary qualities, then the existence in the world of moral properties is to be conceived of independently of any aspect of the human constitution, and so independently of the engagement of the human will. The problem is that while the adoption of the primary quality model does not rule out of court a satisfactory account, it does render it a mystery how moral properties, when apprehended, could nevertheless secure the engagement of the human will.

The only option, it seems, is to think of moral properties as having, in Mackie’s words (op. cit. p.40), “to-be-pursuedness” or “not-to-be-doneness” somehow built into them. But, as Mackie insists, building these prescriptive aspects into moral properties, while at the same time giving them the status of primary qualities, would render moral properties “entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from

anything else in the universe” (ibid. p.38): they would be a sort of Moorean non-natural quality, or entities akin to Platonic Forms. This is the metaphysical part of Mackie’s “argument from queerness” (ibid.).

There is also an accompanying epistemological part, concerning the nature of the apprehension of these ‘queer’ moral properties: if moral properties were non-natural and “utterly different from anything else in the universe”, then the faculty with which one came into epistemic contact with the properties would have to be “utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else” (ibid.), i.e. utterly different from the five natural senses. A suggestion as to what would afford one epistemic access to these ‘queer’ moral properties comes from classical Moral Intuitionism, or, as David McNaughton insists (‘Intuitionism’: p.270), from the classical *misconception* of classical Moral Intuitionism, according to which one is in brute acquaintance with moral facts and properties courtesy of a special moral faculty or sense or organ. Needless to say, the likelihood of there being such a ‘queer’ organ, an organ unknown to science, is considered low by most philosophers.⁷

Mackie’s own response to his two-part argument from queerness is to adopt the position of moral scepticism regarding the possibility of objective moral properties. In other words, there are, for Mackie, good reasons for doubting the existence of such properties. That ordinary moral discourse works with the, albeit implicit, idea that there are objective moral properties is, as with the case of colour, down to the mind’s ‘great propensity to spread itself on external objects’: “we can understand the supposed objectivity of moral qualities as arising from what we can call the projection or objectification of moral attitudes” (Mackie, op. cit. p.42). And so, while Mackie does not deny that the explicit idea that there are objective moral properties is a correct analysis of what lies implicit in ordinary moral discourse, the argument from queerness forces one to account for this supposed objectivity in terms of the projection of moral sentiment, and to subscribe to an error theory regarding that ordinary moral discourse.

⁷ In defence, it could be argued that the fact that the moral organ is unknown to science is only to be expected, given that science investigates the natural world and that the moral organ, if it exists, is wholly non-natural.

§1.3 – McDowell’s Interpretation of the Primary-Secondary Quality Distinction

McDowell (as he makes clear in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’ and ‘Projection and Truth in Ethics’) is persuaded by both parts of Mackie’s ‘argument from queerness’. However, whereas Mackie adopts the position of the moral sceptic (regarding the possibility of objective moral properties) and supports the error theory regarding ordinary moral discourse, McDowell seeks instead to uphold the correctness of that discourse, and therefore endorse the realist view that moral properties are objective aspects of the world. But he also wants to retain the morality-motivation view that the apprehension of moral properties is enough to secure engagement of the will. His way of accommodating these two key aspects of moral phenomenology is to reject that aspect of the moral realist’s position which is the cause of the ‘argument from queerness’, viz. the view that moral properties are akin to primary qualities, and to replace it with the idea that moral properties are best modelled on secondary qualities.

Of course, in order to work successfully with the secondary quality model, McDowell’s interpretation of the primary-secondary quality distinction will have to differ from Mackie’s, according to which secondary qualities like colour are nothing more than the upshot of projection.

The thrust of McDowell’s take on the primary-secondary quality distinction (in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’) is as follows. Primary qualities do not depend on any one particular sense organ in order to be perceived. They are what Aristotle, in ‘On the Soul’ Book II Chapter 6, calls ‘common sensibles’. For example, while the determinate shape of a cube can be pointed to in one’s *visual* field, it can also be picked out via the sense-modality of *touch*. More importantly, however, is the fact that, courtesy of geometry – or, as E.J. Lowe (*Locke on Human Understanding* p.57) puts it, “logico-mathematical terminology” – a perspective-less descriptive characterisation of a cube can be given, i.e. a characterisation that is independent of *any* perceptual point of view and of *any* visual or tactile presence of this particular shape. Such a descriptive characterisation might go: ‘a three-dimensional shape with six faces, each of which is

bounded by four straight edges'. In other words, primary qualities can be conceived of without making reference to human subjective experience.

Secondary qualities, however, as well as being what Aristotle calls 'special sensibles' (in virtue of their being qualities which are peculiar to specific sense organs), cannot be conceived of at all without making reference to human subjective experience. For example, the notion of an object being a certain colour is conceptually dependent on the notion of the subjective human visual perception of that colour. Wittgenstein captures this fact in *Remarks on Colour* §68:

When we're asked "What do the words 'red', 'blue', 'black', 'white' mean?" we can, of course, immediately point to the things which have these colours, - but our ability to explain the meanings of these words goes no further!

One cannot provide for any particular colour anything resembling the perspective-less descriptive characterisations that are available for particular shapes. One could, of course, in reply to the question 'What does "red" mean?', say that 'red' is the name of the colour of most London buses. But in order to grasp the meaning of the word 'red' from this descriptive characterisation, one would at some point have to come into direct experiential acquaintance with the colour of London buses. There is, then, where the meaning of colour terms is concerned, no way of by-passing the element of human visual experience.

This leads McDowell to endorse the familiar dispositional biconditional for colour:

x is red ↔ were x to be perceived by a normal observer S in standard conditions C, then x would look red to S

Of course, because the colour term 'red' appears on both sides, the biconditional cannot serve as a non-circular characterisation of 'red'. But that is not what McDowell is aiming to provide anyway. He is concerned merely with highlighting the internal relationship between the concept of *being red* and the concept of *looking red*, and thus between secondary qualities in general and human subjective experience.

The reference in the biconditional to a *normal* observer and to *standard* conditions rules out just anyone's perceptual experience of colour, and just any circumstances in which colour is perceived, as counting. This is important because without the reference to a normal observer, a scenario in which x looks red to human subject S₁ but green to S₂ would render x both red (all over) and green (all over); but it is not possible for something to be both red all over and green all over – 'red' and 'green' are *contrary* predicative terms.⁸ The presence of 'normal observer' in the biconditional allows one, however, to avoid being saddled with contrary predicates ('is red', 'is green'), as now one can say that, although x looks red to subject S₁, because S₁ is red-green colour blind and so is not a *normal* observer, x is really not red but green, which is the colour x looks to the normal (i.e. non-colour-blind) observer S₂. And likewise, without the reference to standard conditions in the biconditional, a scenario in which x looks black to S₂ (the normal observer) in circumstance C₁, but looks dark blue to S₂ in circumstance C₂, would render x both black (all over) and dark blue (all over); but again, 'black' and 'dark blue' are contrary terms – it is not possible for something to be both black and dark blue all over. This predicament can be avoided courtesy of the presence in the biconditional of 'standard conditions', for now one can say that, although x looks black to S₂ in circumstance C₁, because C₁ is the condition of something's being seen under fluorescent lighting, which is not considered a *standard* visual condition, x is not really black but dark blue, which is the colour x appears to S₂ in circumstance C₂, the standard visual condition of something's being observed in natural sunlight.

Accepting the above biconditional does not, however, commit one to the view that being red is to be understood projectively and that being red is not, therefore, a genuine objective aspect of the world. McDowell resists that commitment by pointing out that although there is a conceptual connection between x's being red and x's being such as to look red, the latter (and therefore the former also) is conceptually *independent* of x's "actually looking red to anyone on any particular occasion" ('Values and Secondary Qualities' *MVR* p.134).

⁸ That this is true is down to what Wittgensteinians call the 'depth grammar' of colour terms. I exploit the idea of a depth-grammatical investigation of colour terms in Chapter 2.

What McDowell is picking up on is the general character of dispositional analyses. For example, fragility is usually characterised dispositionally: what it is for *y* to be fragile is for *y* to be disposed to break given certain conditions. Thus:

**Tom's vase is fragile ↔ were Tom's vase to be dropped on surfaces of
specific hardness, then it would break**

But while there is a conceptual connection between being fragile and breaking, being fragile is conceptually independent of any particular actual dropping and breakage. And so, although Dick might actually drop Tom's vase and break it, the vase's fragility is conceptually independent of this particular event: i.e., the vase would still have been deemed fragile even if Dick had not dropped and broken it.

(What is doing the work here is, of course, the presence of the subjunctive 'were' in the dispositional biconditional, for subjunctives transcend the actual, as those philosophers who give the truth-conditions of subjunctive conditionals in terms of *possible* worlds, rather than in terms of the actual world, have long known.)

McDowell would insist, then, that although Harry experiences the tomato as being red, the tomato's being red, while conceptually dependent on human perceptual experience in general, is conceptually independent of Harry's particular experience. As he puts it more generally:

notwithstanding the conceptual connection between being red and being experienced as red, an [actual particular] experience of something as red can count as a case of being presented with a property that is there anyway – there independently of the [actual particular] experience itself.
(*ibid.*)

And for a property to be “there independently of the [actual particular] experience itself” just is for that property to be *objective*. That the conception of secondary qualities makes essential reference to subjective human experience is, therefore, no reason to conceive of secondary qualities non-objectively (when ‘objective’ is taken to mean something like ‘there independently of an actual particular experience’).

(One might be tempted at this point to construct a subjective-objective continuum, placing, say, the property of being funny close to the subjective end, the primary qualities at the objective end, and the secondary qualities somewhere in between, though closer to the primary qualities than to the property of being funny. These placements would reflect the view that while the secondary qualities are objective, they are not *as objective* as the primary qualities. McDowell, however, would not approve of this way of viewing matters: it would for him, betray an attitude of scientism, i.e. the attitude according to which science has cornered the market on what is ‘truly objective’. As far as he is concerned (in ‘Projection and Truth in Ethics’), we have no “reason to suppose that natural science has a foundational status in philosophical reflection about truth” (MVR p.165).)

McDowell’s understanding of secondary qualities renders it possible, then, for those concerned to accommodate the realist view that moral properties are objective features of the world, to model moral properties on secondary qualities.

§1.4 – McDowell’s Secondary Quality Analogy

If moral properties are now to be compared with secondary qualities, then just as secondary qualities are conceptually related to subjective human experience – or, as McDowell puts it in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’, are “understood adequately only in terms of the appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility” (MVR p.143) – so too must moral properties be similarly related.

When it comes to moral properties, the specific modifications of human sensibility in terms of which the properties themselves are to be understood are for McDowell (in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’): (i) evaluative attitudes, and (ii) states of will.

An example in terms of the former is admiration. What it is for something to be admirable (the evaluative or moral property) is conceptually dependent on the subjective evaluative attitude of admiring. The formal dispositional biconditional might read:

y is admirable ↔ were y to be encountered by human subject S, possessing reliable moral judgement, then subject S would admire y

As with the presence in the biconditional for the colour red of ‘normal observer’ and ‘standard conditions’, here too the presence of the phrase ‘possessing reliable moral judgement’ is important, for it rules out the possibility of just anyone’s subjective evaluative attitude of admiring constituting y’s being admirable. Without the phrase, the fact that subject S₃ admires, say, Hitler would be enough to render Hitler admirable. With the phrase in place, what can now be said is that because S₃ does not possess reliable moral judgement, his admiring Hitler does not make Hitler admirable.

McDowell is aware, though, of an important *disanalogy* between moral properties and secondary qualities. A moral property is “conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate “attitude” (as a colour is merely such as to cause the appropriate experiences), but rather such as to *merit* it” (ibid. *MVR* p.143). In other words, the relationship between *being* a particular colour and *looking* to be that colour is found in, to invoke Sellarsian terminology, the logical space of causal law, whereas the relationship between moral properties and specific modifications of human sensibility resides in the logical space of reasons. Thus, if x is red, then to a normal human perceiver (in standard conditions) x just will, automatically, appear red; whereas, if y is admirable, then a human subject (possessing sound moral judgement) sees that he *should* admire y. Spelling out formally this normative situation that the subject possessing sound moral judgement finds himself in is best done, I believe, by glossing the ‘admiration’ biconditional as follows:

y is admirable ↔ were y to be encountered by human subject S possessing reliable moral judgement, then S would take the existence of y to *call for or merit* a feeling of admiration for y

And:

y is ↔ were y to be encountered by human subject S possessing admirable reliable moral judgement, then S would see that he *should* admire y

As mentioned in §1.2, McDowell subscribes to a very strong form of morality-motivation internalism, such that it is not the case that subject S (possessing sound moral judgement) could see that he should admire y, and yet not be motivated to admire y and so not actually admire y. There would be for McDowell, therefore, no worrying gap between on the one hand the formulation of the ‘admiration’ biconditional in terms of S’s seeing upon encountering y that he should admire y, and on the other the formulation of the ‘admiration’ biconditional in terms of S’s actually admiring y upon encountering it. For McDowell, the latter would flow inevitably from the former. The important point to remember, though, is that the gap is bridged normatively rather than by causal law.

In this respect the behaviour of moral properties is more similar to the way the concept of fear operates than to the behaviour of secondary qualities; for it is the case both that what it is for x to be fearful is conceptually dependent on the subjective feeling of fear in the face of x, and that x’s being fearful merits that very feeling of fear. McDowell is well aware of this disanalogy: “a secondary-quality analogy for value experience gives out at certain points, no less than the primary-quality analogy that Mackie attacks” (ibid. *MVR* p.146). It is not a problem for his account, though, for the disanalogy does not detract from the important point of analogy, viz. that secondary qualities and moral properties alike are conceptually dependent on modifications of human sensibility. It is just that where secondary qualities like colour are concerned, the conceptual dependence is glossed in terms of causal law; whereas when it comes to moral properties and the property of being fearful, the conceptual dependence is glossed in terms of normativity and rationality.

An example has already been given of how moral properties are internally related to a modification of human sensibility when that modification takes the form of an evaluative attitude. McDowell is not explicit in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’ as to how the conceptual relationship between moral properties and a modification of human sensibility is to be understood when that modification takes the form of a state of will.

But an understanding of that relationship can, I believe, be constructed from what he says elsewhere.

Evaluative thought, as already mentioned, is for McDowell a matter of sensitivity to objective features of the world. In his paper 'Virtue and Reason', McDowell states that the "empirical data that would be collected by a careful and sensitive moral phenomenology... are handled quite unsatisfyingly by non-cognitivism" (*MVR* p.72). Having declared his allegiance to moral cognitivism, McDowell therefore construes the sensitivity to objective features of the world which is evaluative thought in *cognitive* terms: it is a "sort of perceptual capacity" (*ibid.* *MVR* p.51). Taking McDowell's invoking of perception as my cue, I construct his position as follows. Just as x's being red is internally related to x's looking red to S, i.e. internally related to an aspect of how x perceptually appears to S, so too is it that a moral property's being predicated of an action A is internally related to an aspect of how A perceptually appears to a subject of reliable moral judgement. What a subject of reliable moral judgement is perceptually aware of is "a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behaviour" (*ibid.*). And so, putting all this together gives us the following biconditional (taking as our instance of a moral property the property of being wrong):

Action A is wrong ↔ S, of reliable moral judgement, is perceptually aware of the behavioural response that is imposed on him given the wrongness of A

Such perceptual sensitivity is, for McDowell, clearly a matter of knowledge: "the deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge" (*ibid.*). Thus:

Action A is wrong ↔ S, of reliable moral judgement, is cognizant of the behavioural response that is imposed on him given the wrongness of A

And, as was done with the 'admiration' biconditional, the above biconditional can be glossed in the following way so as to bring out the normative element that is essential to McDowell's understanding of the situation the moral agent finds himself in:

Action A is \leftrightarrow S, of reliable moral judgement, knows that he *should* act wrong in the way required of him given the wrongness of A

As with the dispositional biconditional involving the secondary quality of being red, it should be noted that the above biconditionals neither can, nor are intended to, serve as non-circular characterisations of the moral property of being wrong, for the concept of wrongness appears on both sides. Rather, the purpose of providing the biconditionals is merely to bring out the internal relationship between the property of being wrong and a particular modification of human sensibility.

Interestingly, what the third of the above biconditionals brings out is that the two types of moral judgement distinguished in §1.2 – viz. evaluative judgement and directive judgement – are, after all, intimately related, in that the truth of the *evaluative* moral judgement that action A is wrong is internally related to specific knowledge, the content of which can be expressed in the form of the *directive* moral judgement that one should, or ought to, do such-and-such.

It is, then, in terms of normativity that McDowell distinguishes the relationship between the objective property of being wrong and the subjective cognitive response (with which the former is conceptually connected), the relationship between being admirable and admiring, and the relationship between being fearful and fearing, *from* the relationship between being red and something's appearing red to a perceiver.

Another way of capturing this normativity is to say that S takes the fearfulness of x to be his reason for feeling frightened in the face of x, that S takes the fact that y is admirable to be her reason for admiring y, and that S takes the wrongness of action A to be the reason he behaves as he does. As McDowell puts it: “that the situation requires a certain sort of behaviour is...his [the agent's] *reason* for behaving in that way.” (ibid.) (Emphasis mine.) This suggests yet another biconditional formulation. The property used this time is the moral property of being cruel:

Action B ↔ were human subject S to witness B and were S to possess sound moral judgement, then S would take the occurrence of B to be his *reason* for behaving in a way appropriate in response to an act of cruelty

is cruel

What form the behavioural response to an act of cruelty takes will, for McDowell, vary from context to context: it might consist of a verbal condemnation of the person who commits the act, or perhaps an attempt to intervene and stop what is going on. There can be no codification of the required behavioural response to an act of cruelty. Any generalisations about how one should behave “hold only for the most part”, for “cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong” (ibid. *MVR* p.58): behavioural requirements imposed on a human subject by particular objective features of the world are “not susceptible of capture in any universal formula” (ibid.). McDowell is therefore a ‘moral particularist’: what a specific objective situation gives one reason for doing is known “occasion by occasion”, by seeing “situations in a certain distinctive way” and “not by applying universal principles” (ibid. *MVR* p.73).

The emphasis on rationality in McDowell’s account is important for two reasons: (i) it allows McDowell to complete his story of how objective moral properties are internally related to states of will; (ii) it enables him to put distance between his meta-ethical position and that of the Moral Intuitionist.

I deal first with reason (i). It was mentioned above that, such is the strength of McDowell’s morality-motivation internalism, there are for him no gaps between a subject (possessing sound moral judgement) seeing that he should admire y, his being motivated to admire y, and his actually admiring y. The same holds for the cruelty example. The objective moral property of being cruel is internally related to a human subject’s knowing or seeing that a particular behavioural response is called for. From the fact that the behavioural response is called for, or merited, it follows, as illustrated in the biconditional immediately above, that the property of being cruel is internally related to a subject’s seeing that he has *sufficient reason* for actually behaving in the required way. Another way of putting this, for McDowell, is to say that the property of being cruel is internally related to the subject’s having motivation to act as required, this motivation

leading inevitably all the way to the subject's actually acting as required (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as his being physically prevented by others from so acting).

All this can be captured formally in the following biconditional:

Action B is cruel ↔ **were human subject S to witness B and were S to possess sound moral judgement, then S would regard the occurrence of B as providing motivation leading all the way to his actually behaving in a way appropriate in response to an act of cruelty (assuming the absence of any extraneous constraints on him)**

And what this biconditional illustrates is that there is, for McDowell, an internal relationship between objective moral properties and the engagement of the human will. McDowell has got to this point, according to the construction of his position offered here, via a seamless move from one biconditional to another, from a starting-point in terms of a subject's knowing what he should do, to the end-point of that subject's being motivated to act as required and, therefore, that subject's will being engaged.

A potential fly in the ointment, however, for McDowell's brand of morality-motivation internalism, is the existence of the phenomenon of *akrasia* or incontinence. The weak-willed person, it seems, knows that a particular situation obtaining in the world calls for a particular behavioural response, and yet, in virtue of his will being pulled in a different direction by, for example, a non-moral desire, does *not* do what is required of him. This suggests that there is a gap between on the one hand possessing certain moral knowledge, and on the other having one's will engaged. The akratic and the non-akratic agent alike possess this knowledge. What leads the non-akratic agent actually to do what is required of him must be, then, some extra non-cognitive, appetitive element, something analogous to hunger, say. And so, McDowell's seamless move from knowledge of what is required of one, given a certain situation obtaining in the world, to being motivated all the way actually to behaving as required, is not, it seems, justified. And so, McDowell's take on morality-motivation internalism is in jeopardy, for if it is

possible to know what one should do given the moral thought that action B is cruel, and yet not be motivated all the way to acting accordingly, then holding that moral thought is not sufficient for securing such motivation.

McDowell's response to this opposing argument is to account for *akrasia* as follows. He denies that there is some factor common to both the situation of the akratic agent and that of the non-akratic agent⁹ – viz. knowledge of behavioural requirements given a certain objective situation obtaining – which, if it is to lead all the way actually to behaving as required, must be supplemented by some extra non-cognitive element. For McDowell, possessing clear knowledge of behavioural requirements *is* a sufficient explanation of an agent's actually behaving in the required way. Akratic behaviour occurs only because the agent who fails to act in the required way is not in the same cognitive position as the fully moral agent who does so act: the akratic agent's "failure [to act as he should] occurs only because his appreciation of what he perceives is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise." (ibid. *MVR* p.54) The efficacious element in the non-akratic agent's situation, viz. clear knowledge of behavioural requirements, is not actually present in the situation of the akratic agent.

McDowell accounts for the phenomenon of *akrasia* using, also, the notion of *salience*. The non-akratic agent takes the fact that the situation obtaining in the world calls for a particular behavioural response as the salient one, where salience is understood by McDowell in terms of "seeing something as a reason for acting that silences all others" (ibid. *MVR* p.70). The akratic agent, however, because not silencing his desire to do other than what is morally required of him, does not see the fact that the objective situation calls for specific behaviour as salient.

McDowell's morality-motivation internalism is thus restored, for as long as one perceives clearly that action B is cruel, then, through an internal conceptual relation, one has knowledge of the behaviour required in response to the cruelty of action B, this knowledge in turn being internally related to possessing the motivation that leads all the

⁹ McDowell divides the category of the non-akratic agent into on the one hand the fully moral agent and on the other the continent agent. For ease of exposition, I am leaving the issue of continence out of the picture, and taking the non-akratic agent to be identical to the fully moral agent.

way actually to acting as required. The moral thought that action B is cruel is sufficient, therefore, to secure this motivation.

(The structure of McDowell's account of *akrasia* is similar to that found in his philosophy of perception. In 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', he argues that rather than attributing to illusion, hallucination, and veridical perception some common factor, which, if veridical perception is to be secured, must be supplemented by some other component, one should adopt a 'disjunctive' account, and start first with a conception of veridical perception, and then understand illusion and hallucination privatively, i.e. in terms of what they lack but which veridical perception possesses, viz. direct experiential contact with objective worldly facts.)

And so, there is an internal conceptual link between on the one hand a moral property, and on the other states of the will. And this is enough to deal effectively with the metaphysical part of Mackie's 'queerness' argument, which was the worry of how a moral property, which, on the primary quality model, is conceived of as something *not* internally related to knowledge of behavioural requirements and to being motivated to act as required, can nevertheless, when apprehended by a human subject, be seen by him as imposing such requirements and providing the motivation to act. The worry is dealt with because for McDowell moral properties stand in an internal, conceptual relationship with knowledge of behavioural requirements and with the engagement of the will, and so wherever there are moral properties so too is there, imposed by the presence of those properties, both knowledge of behavioural requirements and an engagement of the human will. This metaphysical conception of moral properties, as already mentioned, does not, however, entail the loss of their objective status. As McDowell puts it:

Shifting to a secondary-quality analogy renders irrelevant any worry about how something that is brutally *there* could nevertheless stand in an internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility. Values are not brutally there – not there independently of our sensibility – any more than colours are: though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular apparent experience of them.

('Values and Secondary Qualities', *MVR* p.146)

It might be thought that McDowell has provided what in the philosophical literature is called a ‘response-dependent account’ of moral properties, according to which moral properties are internally related to human subjective responses. To call it such would be, however, only a partial characterisation of McDowell’s position, for, when the response is both an evaluative attitude and a state of will, the response itself is internally related to the objective moral property. The subjective attitude of admiring, for example, can be individuated and identified only by conceiving of the attitude as that which one should adopt in response to what is (objectively) admirable. As McDowell puts it in ‘Projection and Truth in Ethics’, “there is no comprehending the right sentiments [e.g. the attitude of admiring] independently of the concepts of the relevant extra features [e.g. the concept of being admirable]” (*MVR* p.160). And, as is made clear in the above ‘cruelty’ biconditional, the subjective response of being motivated to behave in a particular way is individuated and identified in terms of the objective feature (the act of cruelty) to which the response is made. McDowell holds, therefore, a “no-priority view” (*ibid.*); and so his position is better characterised as one of ‘response-objective feature *interdependence*’, according to which there is an “interlocking complex of subjective and objective” (*ibid. MVR* p.166).

§1.5 – McDowell’s Distance from Moral Intuitionism

McDowell’s emphasis on rationality – both in the case where the modification of human sensibility (to which objective moral properties are internally related) takes the form of an evaluative attitude (the admiration example), and the case where the modification takes the form of a state of will – is, as mentioned above, important for a second reason, viz. that without this emphasis, McDowell’s position might prove difficult to distinguish from Moral Intuitionism, or at least from the popular misconception of Moral Intuitionism, and so fall prey to the epistemological part of Mackie’s ‘argument from queerness’.

The difficulty is brought about by the very analogy that McDowell employs to elucidate his meta-ethical account, viz. the analogy between moral knowledge and perception. In ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’, McDowell likens moral properties to secondary

qualities, and secondary qualities, for example being red, are *perceived*. In ‘Virtue and Reason’, moral sensitivity to the world is considered a sort of *perceptual* capacity.

Perceiving, however, requires perceptual organs: seeing, for instance, requires the organ of sight, viz. the eyes. Thus, any analogy made between moral cognition and perceiving would seem to point in the direction of the disreputable Intuitionistic view that there is a special moral organ.

Moreover, the truth of ‘x is red’ can be perceived directly, just through opening one’s eyes, looking at x, and seeing that x is red. One is in direct perceptual acquaintance with the truth of the matter. In such a situation, no further work is required on the part of the perceiver: rather, the truth just sits there self-evidently for him or her. The analogy between moral cognition and perceiving would once again point in the direction of Moral Intuitionism, for, as McNaughton points out (op. cit. p.281), it is a mark of this position that moral truths are “self-evident” to the moral subject. And, at least according to the popular misconception of Moral Intuitionism, the self-evidence of moral truths is accounted for by their being directly perceived by the moral organ.

In effect, Moral Intuitionism of this ilk seems to do no more than merely posit a metaphysical realm of Platonic non-natural moral truths, and then posit a special moral organ, the use of which affords one epistemic access to these truths.

Most philosophers would agree with McDowell (in his paper ‘Projection and Truth in Ethics’) that this brand of Moral Intuitionism is a “clearly disreputable position” (*MVR* p.154). The major point of criticism is that the position just helps itself to, rather than works for, the application of the notion of truth. As McDowell puts it (*ibid. MVR* p.155):

It is hard to imagine that anyone would explicitly deny that if truth in ethics is available, it needs to be earned. It seems clear, moreover, that one would be deceiving oneself if one thought that those vague analogies with perception amounted to earning it.

But, as has been shown, a feature of McDowell’s meta-ethical account too is an analogy with perception. And so, if he is to avoid the accusation of an “*unearned* appeal to the notion of truth” (*ibid. MVR* p.153), he must say more, for as he remarks (*ibid. MVR*

p.162), “Earning truth is a matter of supplying something that really does what is merely pretended by the bogus epistemology of intuitionism”. That ‘something’ is a satisfying epistemology, and although it is true that McDowell makes use of perceptual analogies in his moral philosophy, he goes out of his way to gloss that use in terms of an “epistemology that centres on the notion of susceptibility to reasons” (ibid.), the aim being to “give an account of how such [ethical] verdicts and judgements are located in the appropriate region of the space of reasons” (ibid. *MVR* p.163). And for McDowell, the giving of such an account constitutes “our *earning* the right to claim that some such [ethical] verdicts and judgements stand a chance of being true” (ibid.) (Emphasis mine).

This epistemology in terms of a susceptibility to reasons can be illustrated as follows. If Peter were to say, ‘Tibbles the cat is on the mat in front of the fire’, it is open to Paul to ask in reply, ‘Why do you believe that?’ or ‘How do you know that?’. Peter could respond in turn by saying, ‘Because when I popped my head round the living-room door a moment ago I *saw* that Tibbles was asleep on the mat’. At this point, any rational being should appreciate that the questioning in terms of ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’ can go no further: Peter’s citing of what he perceived brings the chain of reasons to an end.¹⁰

Moral Intuitionists of the W.D. Ross school hold that something similar is the case where moral judgements are concerned. A judgement such as ‘Promise-keeping is right’, because self-evident, requires no proof: as McNaughton puts it (op. cit. p.281), “understanding it is sufficient for being justified in believing it”. And what affords one access to the truth of self-evident moral judgements is “direct rational insight” (ibid. p.282). By talking about *rational* insight, the Rossian Intuitionist intends to distance his position from any which posits, disreputably, a special moral organ: it is in virtue of the faculty of reason that one accesses self-evident ethical truths. McDowell would approve of the move away from the highly dubious idea of a special moral organ towards putting the faculty of reason in the key role. But what McDowell would still find problematic with the Rossian account is the idea that having accessed this particular moral truth, no further justification is required and that the question ‘But why is promise-keeping right?’ has no place. For McDowell, by invoking rationality, one thereby commits oneself to

¹⁰ To be more precise, the chain of questioning comes to an end in *everyday* scenarios. A philosopher such as Descartes might go on to ask of Peter: ‘How do you know that you were not dreaming and that you really did see Tibbles on the mat?’. My concern, though, is to bring out the difference between *everyday* language of perception and *everyday* language of ethics.

the idea that what is known through reason can be located in the *appropriate region of the space of reasons*. Thus, one is committed to being able to say *why* promise-keeping is right. Similarly, whereas the Rossian Moral Intuitionist would say that the truth of ‘Action B is cruel’ and the truth of ‘The cruelty of action B calls for this specific behavioural response’ are known directly and that that is an end to the matter, McDowell would insist that such knowledge, if it is to count as rational, must in principle be surrounded by answers to questions like ‘Why is action B cruel?’ and ‘Why does the cruelty of action B merit this particular behavioural response?’.

McDowell would not deny that answering these questions could prove difficult. In general, following what Aristotle says in Book I of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, one reaches first the position of knowing ‘the *that*’, i.e. appreciating that, for example, ‘Promise-keeping is right’ and ‘Action B is cruel’ are true; but only later, after putting in much intellectual work, for instance the sort of work required to follow Aristotle’s course of lectures in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, does one acquire the practical wisdom necessary for grasping ‘the *because*’, i.e. the understanding of why ‘Promise-keeping is right’ and ‘Action B is cruel’ are true.

The comparison with fear is, once again, instructive. One acquires first the knowledge that something is fearful, and only later comes to see what it is about that particular thing that makes it fearful, i.e. one only later appreciates how, as McDowell puts it in ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’, a “fear response rationally grounded in awareness... of these “fearful-making characteristics” can be counted as being, or yielding, knowledge that one is confronted by an instance of real fearfulness” (*MVR* p.146).

McDowell can put, then, considerable distance between his position and that of the Moral Intuitionist; and his emphasis on the role played by the faculty of reason entails that, even though he makes use of a perceptual analogy, McDowell cannot be accused of endorsing anything like the idea of a special moral organ. McDowell does not, therefore, fall prey to the epistemological part of Mackie’s ‘argument from queerness’.

§1.6 – Conclusion

The analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities plays a pivotal role in McDowell's overall moral philosophy. The key analogous point is that both secondary qualities and moral properties are internally related to modifications of human sensibility.

One of the two types of modification of human sensibility to which moral properties are internally related is the knowledge of behavioural requirements imposed given a particular instantiation of a moral property, and therefore (via McDowell's morality-motivation internalism) the engagement of the human will to act as required.

Conceiving of moral properties as being internally related to modifications of human sensibility does not, however, render them non-objective, for colour too, in virtue of being a secondary quality, is internally related to a modification of human sensibility – viz. an object's looking to a perceiver to be the particular colour in question – and yet colour, on McDowell's account of the primary-secondary quality distinction, is objective nevertheless.

McDowell can, therefore, endorse the meta-ethical view of moral realism – that moral properties are objective aspects of the world – while at the same time, because of the internal relationship in which moral properties stand to knowledge of what is to be done given a particular objective situation and to being motivated all the way to acting accordingly, side-stepping the metaphysical part of Mackie's 'argument from queerness', which is the worry that objective moral properties with the ability, when apprehended, to impose such behavioural requirements and to furnish the motivation to act, would be very 'queer' entities.

Because moral properties are internally related to moral knowledge, McDowell is also able to use the secondary quality analogy to support his moral cognitivism. However, the danger is that a perceptual analogy will taint one's moral epistemology, for perception presupposes an organ, and so if moral cognition is akin to perceptual knowledge, then it too will require some sort of organ, perhaps the specifically moral

organ posited by some Moral Intuitionists. Many, though, find the idea of a special moral organ intolerable, and this is why an epistemology relying on such an organ is the focus of attack in the second part of Mackie's 'argument from queerness'. And so, to distance himself from any position which would seem to require the idea of a moral organ, McDowell glosses his secondary quality analogy in terms of rationality: the knowledge of behavioural requirements to which moral properties are internally related does not take the form of direct intuitions enjoyed courtesy of some special organ, but rather, is to be understood in terms of being susceptible to reasons. McDowell posits, therefore, nothing over and above the five natural senses and the faculty of reason.

It has been shown in this chapter that, such is the importance of the role played by the secondary quality analogy, having to dismantle it would be devastating for McDowell's overall moral philosophy. Chapter 2 addresses the possibility that discarding the analogy is, indeed, what McDowell ought to do.

Chapter 2

§2.1 – Introduction

A major critic of the analogy that McDowell draws between moral properties and secondary qualities is Simon Blackburn. One of Blackburn's tactics is to highlight ways in which the analogy fails. For example, in 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', he draws the reader's attention to, *inter alia*, the following points of disanalogy:

- (a) McDowell's analogy fails because the way in which moral properties supervene upon other properties differs from the way in which secondary properties supervene upon other properties. The thought here is that while both moral properties and secondary qualities do supervene upon other properties, where the latter are concerned, it is, as Blackburn puts it (ibid. pp.13-14), "not a criterion of incompetence in the ascription of secondary properties to fail to realize that they must supervene upon others", whereas when it comes to moral properties, "it is criterial of incompetence in moralizing to fail to realize that they must do so".
- (b) McDowell's analogy fails because moral and other evaluative terms are typically attributive, whereas secondary quality terms are predicative. That is, the terms 'good' and 'bad' are like 'large' and 'small', in that in order to know whether to apply any of these terms to x, one must first apply a noun phrase to x. Thus, whether x is large depends on whether x is thought of as a mammal or as an elephant, for what might be large for the class of mammals could be small for an elephant. Likewise, y could be bad as a book of philosophy but good as a soporific.¹ In contrast, one can be sure that x is red without being provided with a *comparison class*, for whether x is thought of as a tomato, a fruit, or as an item of food suitable for vegetarians and vegans, x is red regardless.²

Whether there are responses to these two points of Blackburn's is beyond the scope of this dissertation. But even if there are not, and the disanalogies have to be accepted, such failures of analogy need not worry McDowell, for he does not claim that moral

¹ This example is taken from Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* p.3.

² As mentioned by Foot (*Natural Goodness* p.2), point (b) originates with Peter Geach in his paper 'Good and Evil'.

properties are like secondary qualities in *every* respect. He acknowledges, after all, as mentioned in Chapter 1, that secondary qualities differ from moral properties in that whereas the former causally elicit the subjective responses to which the qualities are internally related, the latter merit or call for the subjective responses to which they are internally related. What this failure of analogy, and Blackburn's failures of analogy (a) and (b) above, do not detract from, however, is the key point of analogy, viz. that secondary qualities and moral properties alike are conceptually dependent on modifications of human sensibility. Thus, when I use the expressions 'McDowell's secondary quality analogy', and 'the secondary quality analogy', I am referring to the key point of analogy mentioned in the preceding sentence.

More pertinent to this dissertation, concerned as it is with the question of whether McDowell's moral philosophy is in any way relativistic, is Blackburn's charge that the secondary quality analogy gives rise to a type of moral relativism, and that, therefore, the analogy should be dropped.

§2.2 of this chapter clarifies Blackburn's 'relativism' argument. §2.3 explores why one should not rest content with the form of relativism said by Blackburn to be engendered by McDowell's secondary quality analogy. And §2.4 discusses ways (some taken from the philosophical literature, some original) of responding to Blackburn's argument, my view being that McDowell's analogy can be defended against Blackburn's charge that it gives rise to a form of relativism. §2.5 concludes the chapter.

§2.2 – Blackburn's 'Relativism' Argument

Blackburn makes his 'relativism' objection to McDowell's analogy in various places, viz. his papers 'Relativism', 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', and 'Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism'. The form of his objection differs slightly from paper to paper. One way of expressing it, though, is in the form of the following *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

- Assumption:** Moral properties are like secondary qualities.
- Premise (i):** Secondary qualities are relative to our perceptions of those qualities, in that the truth of the judgement ‘x is ψ ’ (where ‘ ψ ’ is a place-holder for a secondary quality term) is generated out of the “shared consensus” (amongst normal perceivers of x) that x is ψ .
- Premise (ii):** If moral properties are like secondary qualities, then moral properties are likewise relative, in that the truth of the judgement ‘y is ϕ ’ (where ‘ ϕ ’ is a place-holder for a moral term) is generated out of the “shared consensus” (amongst those moral agents considering y) that y is ϕ .
- Conclusion (i):** Moral properties *are* relative, in that the truth of the judgement ‘y is ϕ ’ (where ‘ ϕ ’ is a place-holder for a moral term) is generated out of the “shared consensus” (amongst those moral agents considering y) that y is ϕ .
- Conclusion (ii):** Conclusion (i) must be rejected, and with it the assumption that has led to it, viz. McDowell’s view that moral properties are analogous to secondary qualities.

Blackburn unpacks the notion that the truth of secondary quality judgements and moral judgements alike is generated out of a “shared consensus” or “shared response” (these expressions featuring in his paper ‘Relativism’ p.44), by providing the following examples.

In ‘Relativism’, Blackburn focuses on the secondary quality of smell, and contrasts the human predicament with respect to that particular secondary quality with the canine situation: “The dog inhabits, literally, a different world of smells from the human being.” (ibid. p.44) Thus, humans perceive object x as possessing the olfactory property P; whereas to dogs, x smells Q. And, for Blackburn, “there is no saying that just one of us is “right”.” (ibid.). In other words, the theory of secondary qualities “looks as if it has to allow for a plurality of truths” (ibid.), such that secondary quality judgements are the bearers not of the absolute truth predicate – ‘is true’ – but the relative ‘true-for-X’, where ‘X’ is a place-holder for, at least in this example, a particular

species of animal. Thus, 'Object x has the olfactory property P' is true-for-humans, and 'Object x has the olfactory property Q' is true-for-dogs.

Blackburn goes on to argue that, because the truth of judgements being relative to a shared consensus or response "is how we do think of it in the case of secondary qualities" (ibid.), and that secondary qualities, on McDowell's view, are akin to moral properties, if one accepts McDowell's analogy, then one is committed to the view that the shared consensus among the Taliban that women are inferior beings generates the very truth (for the Taliban) of the judgement that women are inferior beings. That the shared consensus in, say, Europe and North America, is that women are not inferior beings, just shows that there are different "whirls of organism" (ibid.), some whirling the Taliban way, some the Western or enlightenment way. But as with the case of smell, here too "there is no saying that just one of us is "right" ", for the analogy that McDowell draws between moral properties and secondary qualities makes it "very hard to see why these individual communities of shared response are not generating their own truths" (ibid.). Thus, that women are treated as inferior beings is right-for-the-Taliban, wrong-for-Westerners; or, to put it another way, for those who would prefer to relativise the truth-predicate, that it is right that women are treated as inferior beings is true-for-the-Taliban, false-for-Westerners.

In his paper 'Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism', Blackburn opts for the secondary quality of taste: "If most of us come to taste phenol-thio-urea as bitter, then that is *what it is* for the stuff to become bitter" (ibid. p.174). Subscribing to McDowell's analogy would, therefore, commit one to the view that were most of us to find wanton violence admirable, then wanton violence would *be* admirable. Using the relative truth-predicate, this can be put as follows: that phenol-thio-urea is bitter would be true-for-humans-who-taste-it-to-be-so, and that wanton violence is admirable would be true-for-the-community-which-finds-it-so.

In 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', colour comes under the spotlight, this particular secondary quality being relative to human perception in the following way:

if we were to change so that everything in the world which had appeared blue came to appear red to us, this is what it is for the world to cease to contain blue things, and come to contain only red things.
(ibid. p.14)

Given McDowell's analogy, one would have to accept that everyone's coming to think that it is permissible to maltreat animals therefore makes it the case that maltreating animals *is* permissible. In other words, that the world contains blue things is true-for-humans-at-time-t₁, false-for-humans-at-time-t₂; and that it is permissible to maltreat animals is false-for-humans-at-t₁, true-for-humans-at-t₂.

If Blackburn's *reductio* argument is to be successful, then two things must be the case. One, there must be good reason why conclusion (i) cannot be accepted. Two, it must be the case that the only way to resist the relativism detailed in conclusion (i) is to reject the analogy drawn between moral properties and secondary qualities.

In §2.4, it is argued that there are ways of steering clear of this type of moral relativism which do *not* entail rejecting McDowell's analogy. In §2.3, meanwhile, I address the issue of why the type of moral relativism supposedly engendered by the analogy is unacceptable.

§2.3 – Criticisms of Moral Relativism

If Blackburn's argument is successful, then anyone who subscribes to the analogy that McDowell makes between moral properties and secondary qualities is thereby committed to a form of moral relativism, viz. one in which the truth of moral judgements (and of any other moral truth-bearers, such as moral thoughts, beliefs, utterances, opinions, etc.) is generated out of, and so relative to, a shared consensus or response. Another way of putting this is to say that the truth of 'y is ϕ ' (where ' ϕ ' is a place-holder for a moral term) is relative to an agreement in opinion (amongst those considering y) that y is ϕ . On such a view, then, 'y is ϕ ' is the bearer not of the absolute truth-predicate 'is true' but of the relative truth-predicate 'is true-for-X', where 'X' is a place-holder for a social group the members of which are in agreement as to the

moral value of y , the agreed-upon opinion being that y is ϕ . Were this agreement in opinion to dissipate, the judgement ' y is ϕ ' would no longer be true-for- X .

In 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' and 'Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism', Blackburn highlights the unacceptability of the relativist position above by stating that this is just not how things are with moral judgements. Thus: "if everyone comes to think of it as permissible to maltreat animals, this does nothing at all to make it permissible: it just means that everybody has deteriorated" ('Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' p.14); and: "If most of us come to find wanton violence admirable, that is not what it is for wanton violence to become admirable: it is what it is for most of us to deteriorate, in a familiar and fearful way" ('Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism' p.175).

There is for Blackburn, then, a gap between on the one hand the truth of a particular moral opinion, and on the other any agreement that may obtain where that particular opinion is concerned. One reason, then, for us to resist the type of moral relativism under discussion is, believes Blackburn, that it is just not in keeping with an accurate phenomenology of morality.

However, it is also clear that for Blackburn, over and above the phenomenological fact that the truth of moral judgements is not relative to an agreement in opinion, such moral relativism would be highly undesirable, a "threat" and a "danger", as he negatively characterises it in 'Relativism' (p.44).

The remainder of this section of the chapter is taken up with exploring why the type of moral relativism which, according to Blackburn, is given rise to by McDowell's secondary quality analogy, should be thought of in such negative terms.³

First, though, it is important to distance the type of moral relativism supposedly engendered by the secondary quality analogy from, what Bernard Williams has called (in 'An Inconsistent Form of Relativism' p.171), "possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy". In its "vulgar and unregenerate form",

which is, after all, “the most distinctive and the most influential form” (ibid.), this type of moral relativism goes as follows. It opens with what Meiland and Krausz (in their ‘Introduction to ‘An Inconsistent Form of Relativism’ and ‘The Truth in Relativism’ ’ p.168) call the “one feature which makes a doctrine a form of relativism”, i.e., the doctrine “alleges something to be relative to something else”. What in particular it alleges is that the truth of moral judgements is relative to particular societies, or that the moral predicates themselves (e.g. ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘just’, etc.) are to be understood as being relative to particular societies. So far, then, there is little difference between “vulgar relativism” (Williams op. cit. p.174) and the type of moral relativism outlined in §2.2, for the latter like the former alleges that the truth of moral judgements, or the moral predicates themselves, are relative to something else (though in vulgar relativism it is not necessarily the case that what the truth is relativised to is an *agreement in opinion* within a particular society). What does, however, do the work of distancing the moral relativism of §2.2 from vulgar relativism is what the latter goes on to say, viz.:
R: It is wrong for one society to cast judgement on or interfere with the moral practices of another society.

The moral relativism of §2.2 says nothing comparable to R, and with good reason too, for, given the fact that moral predicates are always relativised to particular societies, R is incoherent. This is because R makes use of the moral predicate ‘is wrong’. According to relativism, this must be understood as ‘wrong-for-X’, where X is a place-holder for the particular society putting forward R. It is, therefore, only wrong-for-X to cast judgement on or interfere with the moral practices of another society. And yet, the relativist recommending R surely wants his judgement to catch more in his net, and his proposition to be applicable to all societies. His intention, in other words, is to put forward not a relativist moral statement, “but rather an absolute principle of toleration, or something like it” (Williams: ‘Ethics’ p.566). Vulgar relativism, which incorporates both the doctrine that the truth of moral judgements, or the moral predicates themselves, are always relativised to particular societies, and proposition R, is therefore self-undermining. If the former doctrine is true, then R cannot say what the vulgar relativist wants it to say, viz. something which is true universally and absolutely. If the

³ I do not mean to suggest that what I say in the rest of this section should be taken as Blackburn’s reasons for viewing the type of moral relativism under discussion disparagingly.

vulgar relativist insists that R can say what he wants it to say, then the doctrine concerning the relativised nature of moral judgements cannot be correct.

What has perhaps led the vulgar relativist to this self-undermining position is the fact that it is easy to slide from the formulation ‘wrong-for-X’ to the formulation ‘for X, it is wrong’, and then, by losing sight of the ‘for X’ at the beginning of that latter formulation, be fooled into thinking that one is dealing with an absolute moral predicate rather than one which is relativised to X. Be this as it may, though, vulgar relativism is clearly a disreputable doctrine and should not be endorsed. The moral relativism of §2.2 is not, however, of this vulgar type. For *it*, there are other reasons why the relativism should be resisted. The rest of this section concerns itself with spelling out those reasons.

In certain parts of the world Sharia law holds sway, according to which it is lawful and morally right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death. Let it be assumed, for the sake of argument, that a certain society – society A – is governed according to Sharia law, and that the members of this society agree in the opinion that it is right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death. According to the type of moral relativism outlined in §2.2, the truth-maker of moral judgements is an agreement in opinion, and so it follows from the agreement in opinion found in society A that it is right-for-society-A that women who commit adultery be stoned to death, or, to relativise the truth-predicate instead, the judgement ‘It is right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death’ is true-for-society-A.

Society B, however, is not governed according to Sharia law, and there is not, amongst members of this society, an agreement in opinion that it is right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death. According to moral relativism, it would therefore follow that ‘It is right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death’ is not true-for-society-B.

In this example, then, the one moral judgement ‘It is right that women who commit adultery be stoned to death’ takes two different truth-predicates, viz. ‘is true-for-society-A’, ‘is not true-for-society-B’. That this outcome is problematic and worrying can be shown as follows.

Moral judgements are not a matter of mere theoretical speculation, for, as was mentioned in Chapter 1, they are (according to the doctrine of ‘morality-motivation’ internalism) intrinsically action-guiding, and, in the strongest version of ‘morality-motivation’ internalism, moral judgements are such that holding them in sincerity leads inevitably all the way actually to acting as required (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as his being physically prevented by others from so acting).

Thus, if, in society A, a woman is found guilty of committing adultery, then, given the agreement in opinion amongst members of society A that what she has done renders her worthy of being stoned to death, it will be right-for-society-A that this woman be stoned to death. Moreover, because of the intrinsic action-motivating force of moral judgements, society A will be moved actually to go ahead with the stoning.

Let it be the case that at this time, a group of Western aid workers from society B are present in society A. Amongst these aid workers, the consensus of opinion is that this woman should not be stoned to death for committing adultery. It is, therefore, right-for-them that this woman should not be stoned to death, and, given ‘morality-motivation’ internalism, they will be motivated to act accordingly, i.e. to try and stop the stoning from going ahead. The way they actually go about trying to stop the stoning will depend on the resources at their disposal. It may be that they are pushed to their last resort, and attempt physically to restrain those charged with doing the actual stoning.

What will ensue, therefore, will be some sort of conflict in action, with one party – members of society A – attempting to stone this woman, and another – members of society B – trying at all costs to stop it.

(For ease of argument, the issue of how a society is to be individuated is not fully explored here. But for anyone concerned to defend the type of moral relativism under discussion, the question of how one society is to be distinguished from another would be of the utmost importance. Is a society constituted by members all of whom are in agreement regarding particular moral judgements? Or, is a society individuated

independently of such moral agreement (maybe in terms of the geographical location of a people and its descendants), the moral judgements which are true-for-that-society then being those which enjoy the greatest degree of consensus? If the latter, then some members of a particular society, viz. those who are not in agreement with the majority, will be at the mercy of pure luck, for let us imagine that had they been born, say, just ten miles to the east, then they would be members of a different (geographically identified) society, where the majority view just happens to be in line with their own opinion regarding a particular moral judgement; and so the moral opinion which is currently false-for-them would be, courtesy of a mere accident of birth, true-for-them. That luck does play a part in matters of morality is not in general an outrageous idea – many philosophers (e.g. Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams) do, after all, view the topic of moral luck seriously enough so as to write about it⁴ – but whether the particular form of moral luck I am addressing here is an outrageous absurdity, and thus one which makes a mockery of the type of moral relativism from which it flows, is another matter. The type of moral relativism under discussion also has to address the issue of the status of the aid workers. In my thought experiment, it has been assumed that the moral judgements still true-for-the-aid-workers are those judgements which in their native country command a consensus of opinion; but it could be argued that since they are now residing in society A, what is right-for-the-aid-workers is whatever is right-for-society-A.)

The worrying thing about the type of moral relativism outlined above is that one of the consequences of it is that there is no *rational* way in which this conflict can be resolved. One of the aid workers from society B may scream out to those about to do the stoning, in the hope of bringing the stoning to a halt, ‘What you are doing is not right’. Someone from society A may reply ‘No: stoning to death a woman who has committed adultery is right’. Were the moral predicates ‘is right’ and ‘is not right’ to be understood in *absolute* rather than relative terms, it would follow that only one of the above interlocutors could have said something true, for it is no more possible for a single judgement – here, that women who commit adultery should be stoned to death – to take both the (absolute) predicate ‘is right’ and the (absolute) predicate ‘is not right’ than it is for a single object to be both blue and not blue all over, or for that object to

⁴ Both in papers entitled ‘Moral Luck’.

be both round and not round. If both parties are fully rational, they will realise that necessarily, one of the courses of action is not justified, in that it follows on from an incorrect moral judgement. It will, of course, be difficult for the parties to decide which of the two conflicting courses of action is the one which is justified. But at least rationality is on the side of the conflict being resolved, for any fully rational agent must realise that the conflict in action can occur only at the price of discarding the cornerstone of rationality, viz. the law of non-contradiction: $\neg(P \ \& \ \neg P)$.⁵ And so, given that contradictions are anathema to the rational mind, the felt need of fully rational agents to eliminate any contradiction provides the motivation for the two parties to engage in debate and resolve the conflict.

According to the type of moral relativism currently being addressed, however, when one party shouts out ‘Stoning to death a woman who has committed adultery is not right’, and the other ‘Stoning to death a woman who has committed adultery is right’, no contradiction is generated. This is because the predicate ‘is not right’, as occurring in the first utterance, really means, *ex hypothesi*, ‘is not right-for-society-B’, whereas the predicate ‘is right’, as occurring in the second utterance, means ‘is right-for-society-A’. And these two predicates are no more contradictory than are the predicates ‘is blue’ and ‘is not round’. When moral predicates are relativised in this way, rationality cannot intervene and point out that it must be the case that one of the parties, because basing their action on an incorrect judgement, is not justified in acting as they do. And so, allowing the conflict to go ahead is not in violation of the law of non-contradiction, the cornerstone of rationality.

Even more worrying about this type of moral relativism is that it seems to render all argumentative discussion nonsensical, thus leaving no room at all for any discursive resolution of the conflict. The nature of a debate is such, surely, that at the very least, there must be a subject being discussed by two or more debating parties, each party trying to attribute to the subject at hand a particular property, a property which can be predicated of the subject only by denying that the properties put forward by the other debating parties can be predicated of it. The topic of the debate might be, for example,

⁵ To call this law the cornerstone of rationality does not seem an exaggeration, given that even Intuitionistic Logicians, while rejecting the law of excluded middle, $P \vee \neg P$, retain the law of non-contradiction.

whether this item of clothing is black or dark blue, whether that plate is round or oval, or whether this work of art is beautiful or ugly. But the very attempt to argue and debate whether stoning to death women who commit adultery is right or wrong, when one party to the debate is armed with the relative moral predicate ‘right-for-Society-A’ and the other ‘right-for-society-B’, would be as successful as one party ‘arguing’ that x is red in the face of another ‘countering’ with ‘No, it’s round’. Such parties would be forever talking past each other.

These, then, are (some of) the reasons why the type of moral relativism supposedly engendered by the analogy drawn by McDowell between moral properties and secondary qualities, is to be viewed disparagingly.

§2.4 – Reply to Blackburn

If one accepts the view of §2.3 and regards as unacceptable the type of moral relativism according to which the truth of a particular moral opinion is generated out of, or is relative to, that particular moral opinion’s being agreed upon amongst members of a society, then, according to Blackburn, one must reject the analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities.

The purpose of this section is to show that one can regard as unacceptable this type of moral relativism, and yet hold on to the secondary quality analogy. To show that McDowell’s secondary quality analogy does not give rise to the moral relativism detailed above is, of course, to defeat Blackburn’s *reductio* argument. And the way of defeating it is to show the falsity of premise (i) and/or premise (ii):

Premise (i): Secondary qualities are relative to our perceptions of those qualities, in that the truth of the judgement ‘x is ψ ’ (where ‘ ψ ’ is a place-holder for a secondary quality term) is generated out of the “shared consensus” (amongst normal perceivers of x) that x is ψ .

Premise (ii): If moral properties are like secondary qualities, then moral properties are likewise relative, in that the truth of the judgement ‘y is ϕ ’ (where

‘ ϕ ’ is a place-holder for a moral term) is generated out of the “shared consensus” (amongst those moral agents considering y) that y is ϕ .

In what follows, the falsity of *both* premises is argued for. The first two counter-arguments put forward deal with premise (i), only the second of which I consider to be successful. The third counter-argument is concerned with premise (ii): I take this argument to be sound.

First, though, a comment must be made regarding the examples that Blackburn uses in his ‘relativism’ arguments. The particular secondary quality he focuses on differs from paper to paper. When philosophers discuss secondary qualities, they tend to take just one particular species of secondary quality as representative of the whole genus, and the species usually opted for is *colour*. While focusing on one particular species of secondary quality makes for a more elegant and streamlined discussion, it has the disadvantage of eliding important differences that may exist between the different species, between, that is, colour, flavour, odour, sound, and texture. Blackburn’s arguments for relativism, by taking off from considerations of *three* of the species of secondary quality – viz. colour, odour, and flavour – set him apart from most philosophers, and, moreover, in a way which must be considered praiseworthy. However, when drawing his original analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities, McDowell takes as representative of the genus the species of colour. Perhaps, given the potential important differences between colour and the other species of secondary quality, McDowell should have drawn his analogy not so much between moral properties and secondary qualities *in general*, as between moral properties and the specific secondary quality *of colour*. To ensure, therefore, that Blackburn’s argument against McDowell and the counter-arguments made here on McDowell’s behalf face each other head on, the focus will be on the ‘colour’ example that Blackburn provides in his paper ‘Errors and the Phenomenology of Value’. (It matters less which of Blackburn’s moral examples are focused on, but for simplicity’s sake, the one he gives in that same paper is opted for, viz. the one regarding the permissibility or otherwise of maltreating animals.)

§2.4.1 – Counter-Argument no. 1

This argument focuses on premise (i). Behind this premise is the view that “the effect which something is disposed to have on us will depend on, and may vary with, *our* condition no less than that of the object” (Crispin Wright: ‘Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities’ p.8). For example, because of some change in human sensibility, object x ceases to have the same effect on us, such that x looks no longer blue but red to us. And if x looks no longer blue but red to us, then object x ceases to *be* blue and becomes red. As Blackburn puts it:

if we were to change so that everything in the world which had appeared blue came to appear red to us, this is what it is for the world to cease to contain blue things, and come to contain only red things.
(‘Errors and the Phenomenology of Value’ p.14)

The truth of the colour judgements ‘x is blue’ and ‘x is red’ are, then, relative to the current state of human sensibility, *whatever that may be*.

According to Wright, however, this is not quite true. Blackburn may call on the familiar dispositional biconditional for colour in support of his position:

**x is Ω (where ‘ Ω ’ \leftrightarrow were x to be perceived by a normal observer S in
is a place-holder standard conditions C, then x would look Ω to S
for a colour term)**

But, insists Wright (op. cit. footnote 22), the presence in the biconditional of the phrase ‘normal observer’ or ‘normal perceiver’ blocks Blackburn’s colour relativism hypothesis, i.e. the view that the truth of colour judgements is relative to the current state of human sensibility, *whatever that may be*. What Wright can be taken to be claiming is that this phrase should be understood as functioning ‘rigidly’, by which it is meant that in all possible worlds, including the one in which objects that once looked blue now look red, ‘normal observer’ refers to what is considered a normal observer in the *actual* world. And in the actual world, the claim that objects which once looked blue now look red would not be considered the claim of a normal observer, no matter how many observers made this claim. Of any observers making this claim, it would be said

that they were not able to detect a colour which is there anyway, independently of their perceptual experience. Thus, that all objects which once looked blue now look red would entail, not that objects which once *were* blue now *are* red, but rather that objects which *are* blue now *look* red to this group of observers.⁶

It is important to be clear about the precise nature of Wright's account. He is, in effect, still offering a relativistic account of colour. Where Wright differs from Blackburn, however, is in his view that the truth of colour judgements, in being indexed to human sensibilities as they are in the actual world, is counterfactually invariant.

Wright's point is supposed to work against premise (i) as follows. That premise is true as long as the phrase 'normal perceiver' is understood as Wright understands it. Blackburn does not seem to understand the phrase in that way, and so on his rendering, premise (i) comes out false.

What Wright takes to be the justification for the above is "our ordinary understanding" (ibid.) of secondary qualities and the way they are taken to operate. Presumably, then, Blackburn passes over that ordinary understanding when he claims that in the scenario described objects once blue would now *be* red.

However, even if one agrees with Wright regarding 'our ordinary understanding' of the secondary quality of colour, this is not, I believe, enough to block the moral relativism which Blackburn claims will ensue given an analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities: that is, even with Wright's observation in place, the way is still clear for the truth of the moral opinion that maltreating animals is permissible to be generated out of an agreement in opinion that maltreating animals is permissible.

That I believe this to be so is explained by the following. What both Wright and Blackburn have in common is the view that the secondary quality of colour is conceptually related to a particular agreement in human response. Thus, that object *x* is green is internally related to an agreement amongst normal human observers that *x*

⁶ Although Wright, as mentioned, is to be credited with making this point, I have amended what he says in various places (but not so much that the spirit of Wright's original point is lost), so as to render the criticism of Blackburn more cogent.

looks green. Wright differs from Blackburn in that for the latter, there seem to be no restrictions on which agreements in response are constitutive of x's being, say, green, whereas for Wright, only that agreement in response which obtains in the actual world is to be considered constitutive of x's being green. Thus, for both Wright and Blackburn, because in the actual world the agreed-upon response amongst normal observers is that grass looks green, grass *is* green. If, however, it were the case that grass started to appear pink to most observers, then for Blackburn this would be enough to make it the case that grass is no longer green but pink, whereas for Wright, this scenario would be one in which the majority of observers were not able to detect the true colour of grass. As Wright puts it, regarding secondary quality ascription in general,

it is, ultimately, *we human beings*, equipped with the capacity for the range of experiences which we **actually** have, who, by our responses under optimum conditions, determine which such ascriptions are true.
(op. cit. pp.21-22) (Bold type: my emphasis.)

As far as Wright is concerned, then, that there is agreement in the actual world as to how grass appears in colour, viz. that it appears green, entails that those perceivers to whom, for some bizarre reason, grass started to appear pink, would not be seeing the true colour of grass. Wright is surely correct in believing that grass suddenly appearing pink, and objects which once looked blue now appearing red, is not to be expected in the actual world, governed and individuated as that world is by certain laws of nature.

However, limiting the agreement in response which is constitutive of x's being a certain colour to the agreement in response which obtains in the actual world does not stave off the moral relativism under discussion, for Blackburn could in response to Wright point out that the way secondary qualities behave in the actual world differs from the way moral properties do so. That is, Blackburn could highlight the fact that although the colour of entities such as grass, snow, and sand, remains constant in the actual world, the same cannot be said of the moral properties ascribed to particular types of action. It is, in other words, not uncommon in the actual world for a particular type of action to be considered right at time t_1 , wrong at t_2 , or vice versa. Philippa Foot is refreshingly honest about the changes the moral views of her generation have undergone:

And in our own lifetime extant moral beliefs about various sexual practices have come to many of us to seem mistaken; we have re-evaluated old beliefs about the baneful influence of, for instance, masturbation or homosexuality, and so revised former evaluations.

(*Natural Goodness* p.109)

And so, although the truth of colour ascriptions remains constant because as a matter of fact we do not change in our sensibility so that grass ceases to look green and starts to look pink, because our moral sensibility does in the actual world change over time, and with it the moral opinions we subscribe to, those moral opinions which enjoy a consensus will likewise change over time, and so those moral opinions which are to be considered true will also vary.

Wright seems to think that it is merely Blackburn's misinterpretation of premise (i) that gives rise to the type of moral relativism deemed unacceptable, and that given a correct understanding of the phrase 'normal perceiver', one can accept both premise (i) and McDowell's analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities, while at the same time resisting moral relativism. As has been shown, however, moral relativism ensues even on Wright's interpretation of premise (i).

Wright would probably not be too worried by what I have said. After all, he does relegate his point about colour and the actual world to a footnote, reserving for the main body of his text a different argument against Blackburn's charge that the secondary quality analogy gives rise to a form of moral relativism, an argument which targets premise (ii) of Blackburn's *reductio* and which is assessed in §2.4.3 of this chapter.

However, there is, I believe, a successful way of blocking Blackburn's argument at the stage of premise (i). This involves locating the common ground shared by Wright and Blackburn with respect to the truth of colour ascriptions, and then showing where both of them go wrong. §2.4.2 consists of just that.

§2.4.2 – Counter-Argument no. 2

What both Wright and Blackburn agree on is that the truth of the ascription ‘x is the colour Ω ’ is generated out of an agreement amongst normal human observers that x looks Ω . (What they disagree on is, as already mentioned, how ‘normal observer’ is to be understood.) Thus, what makes it true that grass is green is the fact that to each member of the set of normal human observers $S_1 - S_n$, grass appears green. That is:

grass is green \leftrightarrow **grass looks green to S_1**
 grass looks green to S_2
 grass looks green to S_3
 ...
 grass looks green to S_n

Expressing the position of Blackburn and Wright using the above biconditional brings out that the secondary quality of colour is not only response-dependent (i.e. dependent on how things appear to human observers), but also consensus-dependent (i.e. dependent on an agreement amongst human observers as to the colour things appear).

And the biconditional also serves to bring out how, by subscribing to the secondary quality analogy, one could find oneself committed to moral relativism, for if the truth of moral opinions is modelled on that of colour ascriptions, then it would seem to follow that the truth of the moral opinion ‘Maltreating animals is permissible’ is generated out of the agreement amongst those with sound moral judgement that maltreating animals is permissible. That is, what makes it true that maltreating animals is permissible is the fact that each member of the set of humans with sound moral judgement $A_1 - A_n$ is of the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible. Thus:

Maltreating \leftrightarrow **A_1 is of the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible**
animals is **A_2 is of the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible**
permissible **A_3 is of the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible**
 ...
 A_n is of the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible

Where both Wright and Blackburn go wrong, however, is in their understanding of the relationship between a true colour judgement and a consensus of human response. This can be shown as follows.

For Blackburn and Wright, the obtaining of the agreement amongst normal human observers as to how grass appears is a contingent matter. There is, in other words, an *external* relation between grass's looking green to S_1 , and grass's looking green to S_2 , and grass's looking green to S_n . If the agreement happens to obtain, as it does (in the actual world) regarding grass's looking green, then 'grass is green' is true.

How grass appears to observers $S_1 - S_n$ gets expressed at the verbal level with, for example, the declarative sentence 'Grass is green'. In uttering this sentence, observers $S_1 - S_n$ can be taken to be expressing their opinion as to the colour of grass. And because each observer is of the same opinion regarding the colour of grass, it becomes a fact that grass is green.

If Wright and Blackburn were right in their understanding of what makes ascriptions of colour true, then the analysis of a scenario in which one normal-sighted person says of a particular flower seen in good light 'it is red', another 'it is blue', and a third 'it is yellow'⁷, would yield the conclusion that although the criterion for the truth of any one of the statements is not satisfied (that criterion being an agreement in opinion), each person can still be regarded as expressing their own opinion or judgement as to the *colour* of the flower.

This, though, as the later Wittgenstein (in *Philosophical Investigations*) points out, is just what the three people *cannot* be regarded as expressing. As he puts it:

There is in general complete agreement in the judgements of colours made by those who have been diagnosed normal. This characterizes the *concept* of a judgement of colour.
(*PI* p.227) (Emphasis mine.)

⁷ This scenario is a slight modification of one described by Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations* p.226).

In other words, it is in the nature of the *concept* of a colour judgement that there could not be the degree of disagreement in opinion posited in the above scenario: it could not, that is, be the case that one person opines ‘the flower is red’, another ‘it is blue’, a third ‘it is yellow’, and for those people *still to be using concepts of colour*. The people involved here may seem to be using recognizable English-language colour words, but what renders a bit of language a term of colour is not any surface similarity to our colour words, but rather the way this bit of language is used: that is, what counts is not the surface vocabulary, but the ‘depth grammar’. The Tractarian Wittgenstein would express this point by highlighting the difference between *sign* and *symbol*. A sign is individuated in terms of aural phonemes, if spoken, and in terms of the shape of the marks on the page, if written. A symbol, however, is individuated in terms of its role in a language. Thus, ‘den’ is a single sign, but functions at the symbolic level very differently depending on whether it is encountered in the English language or in the German. In the former, ‘den’ is a noun denoting a small private room or hideout; while in the latter it functions as the definite article (in the masculine accusative singular). And so, “one and the same sign (written or spoken, etc.) can be common to two different symbols – in which case they will signify in different ways” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proposition 3.321). The three speakers in the scenario above are certainly using the same signs as those which speakers of English use in colour discourse, but by tending to the contours of the actual use that these three speakers make of these signs, i.e. by examining the language-game in which they are embedded, one realises that the symbolic function of these signs is very different from their symbolic function in the hands of speakers of English. For the speakers in the imagined scenario, therefore, the bits of language they are using are not terms of colour.

It is no use suggesting that in the above scenario the three people *are* using concepts of colour but unfortunately also suffer from colour-blindness; for as Wittgenstein also mentions (*PI* p.227), “There is such a thing as colour-blindness and there are ways of establishing it.” What he is alluding to here is that not just any abnormal use of ostensible colour terms can be put down to colour-blindness. Colour-blindness is a phenomenon with familiar patterns of manifestation. The most common pattern of manifestation is the inability to distinguish well between red and green. And so, there could be a scenario in which one person hesitantly opines ‘x is red’ while another hesitantly opines ‘x is green’ (or both throw up their hands in despair at having to judge

the colour of x) *and* it be the case that both are operating with concepts of colour. However, a pattern of utterances in which one person boldly states 'x is red' while another boldly states 'x is blue' and a third 'x is yellow', is not an established pattern of manifestation of the phenomenon of colour-blindness. The 'depth grammar' of the concept of a colour judgement thus makes no room for the degree of disagreement found within this group of utterances. In this scenario, then, concepts of colour are not in play at all.

The agreement amongst observers as to the colour of an object x is not, therefore, a matter of contingency and something external to the concept of a colour judgement, but, rather, is a matter of necessity and something *internal* to the concept of a judgement of colour. The 'depth grammar' of the concept of a colour judgement dictates the high degree of agreement that must obtain, for beyond a certain degree of disagreement (circumscribed by established patterns of manifestation of colour-blindness) a judgement cannot be thought of *as* a colour judgement at all.

There is, then, a relationship between a true colour judgement and a consensus of human response, but it is not the relationship envisaged by Blackburn and Wright. That is, it is not the case that the agreement in colour judgements amongst human observers generates the truth of that particular colour judgement. Instead, without the agreement, the judgement could not be a judgement of colour, and so *a fortiori* could not be a true colour judgement. Another way of putting this is to say that for a colour judgement to be true, it must already be the case that the judgement in question *is* a colour judgement; and so, the agreement that is pertinent to colour judgements is at a level logically prior to that at which colour judgements are assessed as to their truth or falsity. This logically prior level is the home of what Wittgensteinians call 'norms of', or 'preparations for', or 'means of developing', descriptions, judgements, and opinions proper.

Wittgenstein captures all this when at *PI* §241 he lays out an imagined dialogue between himself and an opposing interlocutor (represented by the question in inverted commas):

"So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.

And so, if, as has been shown, it is not the case that the truth of a colour ascription is generated out of an agreement in opinion as to the colour of object x, then even if moral properties are likened to the secondary quality of colour, there is no reason to insist that a moral judgement is made true by a convergence of opinion on that particular moral judgement.

The first thing to be said about my line of argument above is that it is surprising that Wright himself does not make it, given that he makes a similar comment about the concept of a colour judgement when he says, “the appearance of such disagreement [about the application of secondary qualities] would be regarded, rather, as ground, for example, for suspecting a *mistranslation*” (op. cit. pp.9-10) (Emphasis mine). Of course, in order to follow this observation through in the way I do so above, Wright would have to remove from his understanding of the secondary quality of colour any suggestion that the truth of the colour judgement ‘x is ψ ’ is generated out of an agreement amongst normal human observers (in the actual world) that x appears ψ .

Regarding the assessment of my argument, it must be said that when one invokes Wittgenstein as part of a line of argument, one cannot help but take on board much of the whole Wittgensteinian enterprise, i.e. his conception of what philosophy is, his methodology, his view that to understand a particular concept one should examine the everyday use that is made of that particular concept-term, etc.. And so, any thorough defence of my argument would involve an engagement with, and explication and critical discussion of, virtually all aspects of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Doing this, of course, would be well beyond the scope of this dissertation. All that there is room to do here is provide a relatively sketchy line of defence of my argument.

When one does philosophy in the spirit of Wittgenstein, one adopts his ‘look and see’ method of ascertaining the context essential for a concept to be the very concept it is. I like to call this methodology ‘linguistic phenomenology’: it is phenomenology in that things are being *looked at*, with the aim of drawing our attention to the larger context, i.e. to that which is already there before us but which for the most part we pass over in

ignorance; and it is linguistic because this phenomenological enterprise is directed at bits of language.

An important aspect of Wittgenstein's linguistic phenomenology is the fact that he attempts to convince his readers that the depth grammar as he sees it (of the particular bit of language he is concerned with) is correct, by comparing and contrasting this depth grammar with the depth grammar of other bits of language. The depth grammar is the way the bit of language is actually used in "the language-game which is its original home" (*PI* §116), a language-game being defined by Wittgenstein as follows: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'." (*PI* §7) And so, we find, for example, Wittgenstein warning the reader (*PI* §290) that although one says 'I describe my state of mind' and 'I describe my room', one needs "to call to mind the differences between the language-games".⁸

Bringing this aspect of the Wittgensteinian methodology to bear on the depth-grammar of 'a judgement of colour', it should be pointed out that the degree of disagreement allowed by the very concept of a colour judgement is comparable to the degree of disagreement allowed by the concept of a judgement of shape: that is, regarding one particular object, it does not make sense for three observers to know the meaning of shape terms and yet for one of these observers to be saying 'x is a circle', another 'x is a square', and the third 'x is a triangle'. (The degree of disagreement allowed by the concept of a shape judgement is, in fact, even slightly lower than that allowed by the concept of a colour judgement, for where shape is concerned there is no equivalent to colour-blindness.)

The degree of disagreement allowed by the concept of a colour judgement is, however, lower than that allowed by the concept of a judgement of humour, for it is possible for one person to opine 'that joke is hilarious', another 'it is mildly funny', and a third 'the joke is not funny at all', and for all three to be operating with concepts of humour.

⁸ The contrasts and comparisons he directs the reader to make will, Wittgenstein hopes, constitute a form of therapy, helping the reader to resist the usual pitfalls philosophers fall into. Thus, the distinction Wittgenstein wants the reader to call to mind in this case should help him to see as flawed one of the main pillars of classical Cartesianism.

One way, then, for someone, out to criticise my argument against the Blackburn/Wright understanding of colour judgements, to proceed is to find fault with what I take to be the correct accounts of the depth-grammar of 'a judgement of colour', 'a judgement of shape', and 'a judgement of humour'.

Another key aspect of Wittgenstein's methodology is his highlighting of the problems that beset any views opposed to his own. For example, when considering in *Philosophical Investigations* the issue of meaning and of what it is to follow a rule, Wittgenstein shows that pursuing the idea that meaning is to be construed in terms of either Platonic or psychological entities will lead one down a philosophical cul-de-sac.

And so, another way of bolstering my argument against Blackburn and Wright is to show what ensues from a rejection of my position.

If one rejects the account offered above of the depth grammar of a judgement of colour, insisting instead that there could be a degree of disagreement to the extent that one person judges 'x is red', another 'x is blue', a third 'x is yellow', and for all three to be using concepts of colour, then it is hard to see how one could at the same time claim that colour is a truly objective property of material objects; for the easiest way to account for this degree of disagreement regarding the colour of x is to think of each observer as being in direct perceptual acquaintance with some sort of colour impression private to him or her. It would be "as if we detached the colour-impression from the object, like a membrane" (*PI* §276).

What colour terms name, i.e. what gives colour words their meaning, would be, therefore, some sort of private object. And so, in getting their meaning from such private objects, colour words would be words not from a language which is genuinely public, but from one which is radically private.

All this can be expressed in formal terms as follows:

- 1) If the concept of a colour judgement allows for major disagreement, then observers are in direct perceptual acquaintance with private objects.
- 2) If observers are in direct perceptual acquaintance with private objects, then observers are using a private language.

From these two premises we get (by means of hypothetical syllogism):

3) If the concept of a colour judgement allows for major disagreement, then observers are using a private language.

But, as Wittgenstein goes to great length in *Philosophical Investigations* to show, a private language is not possible.⁹ Thus, the consequent of conditional (3) must be negated. And so, by taking proposition (3) and the negation of the consequent of that proposition as the premises of a modus tollens argument, the negation of the antecedent of proposition (3) can be asserted in conclusion: i.e. it is not the case that the concept of a colour judgement allows for major disagreement.

§2.4.3 – Counter-Argument no. 3

This argument can be called upon in the face of reluctance to take on board the Wittgensteinian baggage necessary for accepting counter-argument 2.

Counter-argument no. 3 is directed at premise (ii), and so, if true, leaves one, therefore, in the position of being able to accept the relativism of secondary qualities, and the analogy drawn between moral properties and secondary qualities, while at the same time rejecting the type of moral relativism detailed above.

Wright points out that “there will be, in any full dispositional account of moral qualities, constraints imposed on the *kind* of subject on which they are disposed to work their distinctive effects” (op. cit. pp.8-9). The dispositional characterisations of moral properties that were spelled out in Chapter 1 feature the sort of constraint Wright has in mind, as can be seen by my italicised emphasis:

y is admirable ↔ were y to be encountered by human subject S, *possessing reliable moral judgement*, then subject S would admire y

⁹ This unfortunately is the moment in my defence where all that space allows is a nod in the direction of Wittgenstein’s (often tortuous) path towards establishing that there can be no such thing as a private language.

Action A is \leftrightarrow S, of *reliable moral judgement*, is cognizant of the wrong behavioural response that is imposed on him given the wrongness of A

Wright completes his argument by suggesting that a necessary condition of being a subject of sound or reliable moral judgement is that “they do not differ in their moral evaluation of a practice or act unless holding differing beliefs about circumstances, manner, or other effects, etc.” (ibid. p.9).

What Wright is bringing out here is the fact that it is criterial of a genuine change in moral opinion that the change be *merited* and not a matter of mere whim. In the example we have been considering, the shift in consensus from the view that maltreating animals is impermissible to the view that maltreating animals is permissible is not accompanied by “differing beliefs about circumstances, manner, or other effects, etc.”. The shift is not, therefore, a merited shift in opinion, and so cannot be considered a sound or reliable change in moral opinion.

On Wright’s view, then, the judgement that maltreating animals is permissible should not be considered a sound moral judgement, and so the consensus surrounding the opinion that maltreating animals is permissible is *not* constitutive of the truth of that opinion. And because there is now this gap between on the one hand the shared consensus that maltreating animals is permissible, and on the other the truth of that particular opinion, it can be said of those holding this opinion that their moral sensibilities have undergone a major deterioration.

That moral opinions must be merited is, as was established in Chapter 1, a key aspect of McDowell’s account, and so he has the means necessary for blocking Blackburn’s *reductio* at the point of premise (ii).

More interestingly, however, is the fact that Blackburn himself seems to endorse something like the ‘merit’ point. He tells us in ‘Errors and the Phenomenology of Value’ p.14, and as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that “it is criterial of incompetence in moralizing to fail to realize that [moral properties supervene upon natural ones]”. Now, while this is explicitly a remark about moral properties and

supervenience, it does not seem far-fetched also to read it as an endorsement of something like the 'merit' point outlined above.

I accept as correct Wright's phenomenological observation that for an opinion to be genuinely moral, that opinion must be merited. And given that, moreover, Blackburn himself seems to make something like the same observation, it is difficult to see how Blackburn could defend premise (ii) of his *reductio* against the counter-argument of this section.

§2.5 – Conclusion

This chapter has shown why we should resist the type of moral relativism according to which the truth of a moral judgement such as 'Maltreating animals is permissible' is generated out of an agreement in opinion that maltreating animals is permissible.

This type of moral relativism is a consequence, says Blackburn, of the analogy McDowell draws between moral properties and secondary qualities. And so, Blackburn concludes, to resist the moral relativism, one must reject the analogy. This chapter has shown how to resist Blackburn's conclusion.

If one is not of a Wittgensteinian persuasion, one can opt solely for counter-argument no.3, which allows one to endorse the analogy, be a colour relativist, and yet resist moral relativism.

If, however, one is prepared to subscribe to the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, one has the luxury of being able to supplement counter-argument no.3 with counter-argument no.2, which acquits the analogy of giving rise to moral relativism by showing that colour is not relative to an agreement in opinion.

Chapter 3

§3.1 – Introduction

It was argued at the end of the preceding chapter that one of the ways in which McDowell's secondary quality analogy can be rescued from Blackburn's charge that the analogy gives rise to a form of moral relativism, is to play up the role in the 'morality' biconditionals of the phrase 'of reliable moral judgement':

Action A is wrong ↔ S, of reliable moral judgement, is perceptually aware or cognizant of the behavioural response that is imposed on him given the wrongness of A

In this chapter, it is argued that because, for McDowell, the person of *reliable moral judgement*, i.e. the person who knows what to do given a particular situation obtaining in the world, just is the person of virtue, his moral philosophy does, after all, engender a type of moral relativism.

My point is not so much that Blackburn is right in believing the secondary quality analogy to entail moral relativism, as that the relativism is engendered by McDowell's marrying his meta-ethical secondary quality analogy to first-order Aristotelian virtue theory.

The argument of this chapter trades on key elements of McDowell's position as a virtue theorist, viz. the view held by most virtue theorists that what counts as 'right' or 'wrong', and 'good' or 'bad', is dependent on a point of view informed by virtue concepts, and the less commonly held theses that virtue is knowledge and that the individual virtues form a unity. Each of these elements is explained as the argument proceeds.

§3.3 comprises a general account of virtue theory. It is preceded by §3.2, which, in order to act as clarification of virtue theory by means of contrast, details very briefly how the notions of right action, good states of affairs, and virtuous character, are

related and ranked by the two other main types of first-order ethical theory, viz. consequentialism and deontological ethics.

In §3.4, McDowell's specific take on virtue theory is addressed, with sections devoted to clarifying the two Socratic theses he subscribes to, viz. that virtue is knowledge and that the virtues form a unity.

§3.5 consists of my explicit argument that McDowell's virtue theory gives rise to a form of relativism; and §3.6 comprises four counter-responses that I construct on behalf of McDowell, all of which, however, I show to be problematic.

§3.7 concludes the chapter and the dissertation.

§3.2 – How Should One Live?

In answer to the first-order ethical question 'How should one live?', there are typically three main types of response, each distinguished from the others according to how it ranks the three key notions of first-order ethical theory, viz. the notions of: a good state of affairs, right action, and virtuous character.

A *consequentialist* emphasises the notion of a good state of affairs. For him, the notions of right conduct and virtuous character play a secondary role, in that what makes an action right is the degree to which the consequences of that action are good, and what makes a person virtuous is the extent to which the consequences of that person's deeds are good ones. (What actually makes for good consequences or a good state of affairs varies from one consequentialist theory to another. Some philosophers, following G.E. Moore, suggest that there is a plurality of things which constitute a good state of affairs, e.g. pleasure, friendship, knowledge, beauty. However, according to the most famous species of consequentialism, Utilitarianism, there is only one thing which is good in itself, viz. the state of affairs in which *happiness* (in some versions *pleasure* or *satisfaction*, in others *welfare*) is maximised.)

A *deontologist*, meanwhile, stresses the importance of right action or correct conduct over the notions of a good state of affairs and virtuous character. For her, it is important to develop principles of right action, such principles having conceptual independence from any assessment of the consequences of action undertaken in line with those principles. And what makes a person virtuous, according to the deontologist, is just the disposition to act in accordance with those principles, i.e. the disposition to act rightly.

§3.3 – Virtue Theory in General

Virtue theorists (for example McDowell), however, come to a conception of right conduct and good states of affairs *via* the notion of a virtuous person. An action is right if it would be performed by a virtuous person, and a state of affairs is good if it is typically what the virtuous person aims to bring about. As McDowell puts it in ‘Virtue and Reason’:

although the point of engaging in ethical reflection still lies in the interest of the question “How should one live?”, that question is necessarily approached via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out.
(*MVR* p.50)

Of course, in making virtuous character the prime ethical concept, virtue theorists need to say more about what in general a virtue is.

Listing specific virtues is not of course to answer the question ‘What in general is a virtue?’, but it is a helpful first step towards doing so. For the ancients, the virtues were temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom. In the Middle Ages, Christian philosophers added the (theological) virtues of faith, hope, and charity (or love). Other virtues that have over time been added to this list are: benevolence, gratitude, patience, prudence, compassion, loyalty, nobility, honour, resoluteness, humility, and dignity. And for some, there are further intellectual virtues of impartiality, love of truth, curiosity, and accuracy. Vices include cruelty, despair, immoderation, and (for some) intellectual scepticism and dogmatism.

As presented above, the virtues and vices take the linguistic form of an abstract noun. To get closer to what virtues and vices actually are, however, they are best observed in their adjectival guise, e.g. 'courageous', 'just', 'benevolent', 'cruel'. This suggests that virtues and vices are properties: being courageous, being just, being benevolent, being cruel. But in order to ascertain of what sort of thing virtue theorists primarily take virtues and vices to be properties, a purely grammatical observation is not of much help, for both an act and a person can be called, say, courageous or benevolent or cruel; and being just is something that can be ascribed not only to a person or an act, but also to a state of affairs. Traditionally, however, virtue theorists have taken virtues and vices to be properties of, primarily, *persons*.

'Virtue' derives from the Latin 'virtus' which in turn translates the Ancient Greek 'aretē'. This latter term can also be rendered 'excellence'. And so another way of saying what the virtues are, is to say that they are excellent characteristics of persons. But while being an excellent personal characteristic is necessary for something's being a virtue, it is not sufficient, for not all excellent personal characteristics are virtues. Virtues are those characteristics which are *morally* praiseworthy. Thus, although certain physical characteristics of a person such as being strong and healthy, and particular mental characteristics such as having a long memory, can be considered excellent, they are not worthy of moral praise. Likewise for skills and talents. Carpentry skills and a talent for playing the piano are undoubtedly good things to have, but such skills and talents do not appear in an inventory of the excellent features of a person's *moral* character. Socrates is singled out for moral praise because of his possession of the virtue of wisdom, Coriolanus because of his possession of courage, and it is Heliogabalus' embracing of the vice of cruelty that makes him morally damnable.

To move yet further towards a general characterisation of a virtue, it needs to be remembered that what makes a person worthy of moral praise or moral condemnation is not what he or she *can* do but the manner in which he or she is *disposed* to conduct him- or herself. One's aptitude for mental arithmetic remains a (non-moral) excellence even though one may not be moved to execute that aptitude. But to possess the morally praiseworthy characteristic of being benevolent, one must be moved or disposed to do good for others and to feel fondly about them; and to possess the

morally damnable characteristic of being cruel, one must be moved or disposed to cause suffering in others and to experience pleasure at doing so.

As has been emphasised throughout this dissertation, it is important that when it comes to philosophical discussions of morality, the concepts employed are ones which do not automatically commit us to the space of causal law. Thus, although talk of dispositions can be understood in causal terms – as should be done in the case of colour, where an object is a particular colour if it is disposed to look that colour to normal perceivers in good light; and in the case of fragility, where an object is fragile if it is disposed to break relatively easily; and in the case of solubility, where a substance is soluble if it is disposed to dissolve upon coming into contact with water – it makes sense to praise or blame an agent in the manner mentioned above only if the dispositions which are key to virtue theory are glossed in terms of volition. Hence, virtues in general are volitional dispositional states of character, and one is virtuous or vicious according to how one's will in general is engaged.

§3.4 – McDowell's Virtue Theory

McDowell, in line with most virtue theorists, accepts this general characterisation of a virtue, but, as he makes clear in his paper 'Virtue and Reason', and as is discussed in §3.4.1, he also subscribes to a deeper and more contentious characterisation, viz. the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge. McDowell also insists that the virtues form a unity: this thesis is examined in §3.4.2. Given that my eventual intention is to show how McDowell's subscribing to these two Socratic theses engenders a form of moral relativism, my concern in sections §3.4.1 and §3.4.2 is not so much to *defend* the theses McDowell endorses (though in §3.4.2 I do go some way towards defending the idea that the virtues form a unity), as it is to *explain* them.

§3.4.1 – Virtue is Knowledge

Since the virtues are, according to the characterisation above, volitional dispositional states of character, possessing the virtues issues in specific behaviour (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as his or her being physically prevented by others from so acting), and so possession of the virtues *explains* why an agent behaves as he or she does.

It will be recalled from Chapter 1 that McDowell also provides another explanation of a moral agent's behaviour. This other explanation revolves around the notion of a moral agent's sensitivity to objective features of the world, this sensitivity being glossed by McDowell as a kind of seeing, or a knowing, what is behaviourally required of one given a particular situation obtaining in the world.

For the fully moral non-akratic agent, this knowledge is not clouded by the impact of a desire to do otherwise, and so is enough to issue in the actual behaviour required of her given particular objective circumstances (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as her being physically prevented by others from so acting). In other words, being cognizant of the behaviour required of her (given a particular worldly situation) is an *exhaustive explanation* of the non-akratic agent's actually behaving in the required way.

And so, given that what explains the behaviour of a fully moral non-akratic agent can be glossed now as the possession of virtue, now as the possession of knowledge, McDowell concludes that virtue *is* knowledge.

In 'Virtue and Reason', McDowell illustrates the thesis that virtue is knowledge, i.e. that to be of excellent moral character is a matter of getting things right, with an example involving the virtue of kindness. That someone who encounters a friend in distress responds by comforting this friend is fully explained by his possessing the virtue of kindness, i.e. by his being a kind person. However, the explanation can also be glossed by saying that this person offers comfort because he sees that the distress of his friend calls for such behaviour. To be kind, then, is to be cognitively sensitive to those

worldly situations which call for, or merit, acts of kindness; that is, being kind is to see the distress of a friend as a reason for responding with kindly behaviour.

And so, to be virtuous in general is to be cognitively sensitive to those worldly situations which call for, or merit, virtuous behavioural responses; that is, being virtuous in general is to see the obtaining of a particular worldly situation as a reason for responding with virtuous behaviour.

§3.4.2 – The Unity of the Virtues

In the same paper, McDowell extends the example involving the virtue of kindness to illustrate and support his Socratic view that the individual virtues form a unity, i.e. that “no one virtue can be fully possessed except by a possessor of all of them, that is, a possessor of virtue in general” (*MVR* p.53).

This Socratic thesis can be argued for as follows. (The following thought experiment is not McDowell’s, but it is derived from what he says in this part of his paper.) Matthew is upset. Mark offers comfort. This would seem to be a clear case of the behavioural manifestation on the part of Mark of the virtue of kindness. However, Matthew is upset because he has been admonished for committing a gross misconduct. Given this further fact, it is no longer clear that Mark should offer comfort, for part of the moral process is, surely, that Matthew be left alone to contemplate his wrongdoing. And so, the right thing to do here, it seems, would be to refrain from comforting Matthew and to leave him alone instead. And because for virtue theorists like McDowell, “a virtue issues in nothing but right conduct” (*ibid.* p.52), Mark’s comforting Matthew in these circumstances cannot be considered virtuous behaviour at all, and so *a fortiori* cannot be considered the manifest behaviour of the particular virtue of kindness.

To get things right in this example, Mark would have to possess not just the virtue of kindness, but also the virtue of justice or fairness, for, because it is in the circumstances a just outcome that Matthew is upset, in formulating the right view of the situation, “we

cannot disentangle genuine possession of kindness from the sensitivity that constitutes fairness” (ibid. p.53).

Although this particular example of being virtuous, i.e. being disposed to do the right thing, is rather simple, involving as it does just two particular virtues (viz. kindness, and justice or fairness), it is McDowell’s belief that the pattern can be extrapolated so that in principle, examples could be constructed that were complex enough to incorporate a role for all the virtues. As he puts it:

And since there are obviously no limits on the possibilities for compresence, in the same situation, of circumstances of the sorts proper sensitivities to which constitute all the virtues, the argument can be generalized.
(ibid.)

Thus, such complex examples would then support his view that the particular virtues are “not a batch of independent sensitivities”, but rather are “manifestations of a single sensitivity, which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognise requirements that situations impose on one’s behaviour” (ibid.).

It might be wondered whether the above argument is not so much an argument *to* the unity of the virtues as one *from* such unity. That is, could one not insist that the virtues can be prised apart such that in the thought experiment above Mark’s offering comfort to Matthew, while maybe not the just or fair thing to do, is nevertheless a kind thing to do?

It is, I believe, difficult to say much more here without being open to the same charge – viz. that one is merely arguing from, rather than to, the unity of the virtues – but the following may help to clarify why I think McDowell is right to endorse this Socratic thesis. It surely cannot be denied that it is important that Matthew be cognizant of the fact that his feeling upset is perhaps entirely appropriate, given the bad deed he has committed. Rushing in to comfort Matthew could well interfere with this process of moral awareness that has been deemed desirable for Matthew to experience, and which is, moreover, in Matthew’s best interests to experience. Thus, by offering comfort, Mark is, from a moral point of view, *not helping Matthew*, and it is difficult to see how an act which does not help Matthew, and which is, perhaps, even injurious to him, could

be considered a kind one. (Derived from considerations of this kind is, I believe, the proverb ‘You’ve got to be cruel to be kind’, for it captures the idea that virtuous behaviour often calls for action which, looked at from a very narrow (and thus an incorrect) point of view, would seem to be vicious. In a fuller context, however, the action is seen to be thoroughly virtuous; and so, while the proverb’s invoking of the vice of cruelty provides rhetorical force, strictly speaking, any agent who was, in a particular situation, acting kindly could not *eo ipso* be acting cruelly.)

§3.5 – The Relativism Engendered by McDowell’s Virtue Theory

Having now laid out the three key elements of McDowell’s virtue theory – viz. the view that what counts as right action and good states of affairs is dependent on the point of view of a virtuous person, and the theses that virtue is knowledge and that the virtues form a unity – the accusation that McDowell’s moral philosophy gives rise to a form of relativism can now be made.

What informs the behaviour of a fully moral agent is a type of knowledge, viz. the knowledge of those behavioural requirements that are imposed on one by particular worldly situations. To possess this knowledge constitutes what it is to be a virtuous human agent. One is virtuous only if one possesses all the individual virtues, the total set of virtues. The total set of virtues thus shapes the knowledge of behavioural requirements possessed by moral agents. And because such knowledge is sufficient for a moral agent actually doing what is behaviourally required of him (assuming of course the absence of any extraneous constraints on the agent, such as his being physically prevented by others from so acting), the total set of virtues shapes what actually gets done by moral agents.

But the set of virtues remains constant neither across societies separated by time nor across different cultures found on the planet in the present day. One set of virtues can differ from another either by comprising individual virtues not found at all in the other set, or by consisting of individual virtues which, while found in the other set, are not ranked as high.

For example, in medieval times, the set of virtues at large included the virtue of chivalry, a virtue which has all but vanished from the set of virtues in play in the western world circa 2000. Victorians would have listed as part of their set of guiding virtues the virtue of chastity, but this too is unlikely to feature in any standard set of contemporary virtues. Such virtues die out because the ways of life which embody those virtues die out. Indeed, it is interesting to note regarding the virtues of chivalry and chastity that were someone to try and live chivalrously in this day and age, he would in all likelihood be considered sexist, and were someone to try and live chastely in this day and age, she would in all likelihood be considered unnecessarily prudish and uptight about her sexuality. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say, therefore, that the ways of life which once embodied virtues would now be taken to embody vices. The virtue of honour, while arguably still a member of the set of contemporary western virtues, is ranked much lower than it would have been by Europeans circa 1800. Two contemporary societies which are often contrasted are the Japanese and the American. High on the list of Japanese virtues is the virtue of deference, a virtue that contrasts starkly with one of the key American virtues, viz. self-assertiveness.

The important point is that given that the total set of virtues shapes what actually gets done by moral agents, and that the total set of virtues can vary from culture to culture, what actually gets done by virtuous agents in one culture can vary from what actually gets done by virtuous agents in another. And of course, two differing courses of action can come into contact with one another, one of the possible outcomes of this contact being violent conflict.

Of course, the fact that one culture employs virtue concepts different from those employed by another does not in itself entail that one culture cannot use the virtue concepts in its repertoire to condemn the culture it is in violent conflict with. That is, there is no hint here of that illegitimate 'vulgar' relativism which states that one should not hold moral opinions about ways of life different from one's own.

The relativism inherent in McDowell's philosophy is such, therefore, that what counts as right and wrong is relative to the set of virtue concepts which shapes the knowledge possessed by moral agents in a particular society.

Why this relativism is problematic is that even if two conflicting cultures should decide to talk rather than fight, that which was the source of the conflict in action, viz. the differing sets of virtue and vice concepts, is going to infect the dialogue as well. The assessment of the situation made by one of the warring parties will employ ethical concepts different from those employed by the other. As Bernard Williams remarks ('Ethics' p.564):

That is why it does not go far enough to point out that relative to a given concept such as cruelty, there may be no 'alternative' to thinking that a given act was cruel; this overlooks the alternative of not thinking in terms of cruelty at all.

Thus, it may well be difficult to dispute that the cruelty of action A constitutes a reason for a particular behavioural response. But if one does not view the world in terms of the concept of cruelty, then being cruel will not be predicated of action A, and so the obtaining of action A will not constitute a reason for the particular behavioural response that it is taken to constitute for the agent who does employ the concept of cruelty when describing the world.

The relativism inherent in McDowell's moral philosophy undermines, therefore, the prospect of any discursive resolution of such conflicts.

As well as causing a problem for *inter-cultural* discussion, the relativism engendered by McDowell's moral philosophy also undermines the idea of *intra-cultural* moral progress, i.e. the idea that a particular culture can engage in reflective criticism of its own tradition and inheritance with the confidence that the criticism has a certain degree of objectivity. For example, we contemporary Europeans would like to think that the removal of chivalry and chastity from the list of virtues, and the downplaying of the virtue of honour, is an objectively good thing. But, given that any moral assessment presupposes a particular set of virtues, the point of view from which we make the assessment that the removal of chivalry and chastity from the list of virtues, and the downplaying of the virtue of honour, is an objectively good thing, presupposes a set of virtues of which chivalry and chastity are no longer members, and in which honour has already been relegated. Thus, that which is supposed to be the outcome of an

objective, reflective assessment is being presupposed. We are, in other words, merely begging the question.

§3.6 – Counter-Responses

Having laid out what I take to be the moral relativism given rise to by McDowell's moral philosophy, I construct in this section a series of counter-responses on behalf of McDowell, in order to see to what extent, if any, his account can be defended. In turn, however, I argue that each counter-response is problematic.

§3.6.1 – Counter-Response no.1

It might, at this point, be suggested that one way of resolving the problem engendered by McDowell's moral philosophy of how there can be genuine constructive moral discussion between cultures, and of how there can be objective self-reflective moral assessment, would be to lay the set of virtues of one culture beside the set of virtues of the other, or to lay the set of virtues of a particular culture at time t_1 beside the set of virtues of that culture at t_2 , and then make an assessment as to which is the right set, or which the better, or which is truly good. If this could be done, then the set of virtues which came out on top would be the one that trumps in any inter-cultural discussions, and the one which would lend to any assessment made from within that set the degree of objectivity required to instil the confidence that the assessment is sound.

This way out, however, is not open to McDowell, for, in line with most virtue theorists, and as will be recalled from §3.3, his view is that the extension of thin ethical concepts such as 'better', 'right', and 'good', is determined *via* the virtuous agent and not independently of him; and so by invoking such thin concepts in any putatively impartial assessment, a particular set of virtues will itself be presupposed. In other words, there is no way for us to get behind our current cultural set of virtues in order to occupy a neutral standpoint from which such an assessment could be made. There is no possibility of, as McDowell puts it in 'Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology'

(MVR p.37), breaking “out of a specific cultural inheritance into undistorted contact with the real”.

§3.6.2 – Counter-Response no.2

It is not clear what McDowell’s response would be to the charge of relativism as formulated above in relation to the two warring parties. But it is clear what he would say regarding the relativist charge that, given that any moral assessment presupposes a particular set of virtues, and that, therefore, there is no way of getting behind one’s current cultural set of virtues in order to assess whether the point of view from which one is making the moral assessment is a good one, one cannot have any confidence in any reflective criticism of one’s own cultural tradition and inheritance. McDowell would say that while there is no way of stepping outside of one’s own cultural inheritance, objective moral assessment of that very tradition is still possible. The assessment will, however, be a matter of *Neurathian* reflection, by which McDowell means that just as in Neurath’s image where the mariner repairs his ship while afloat at sea, so too is it that any reflection “on an inherited scheme of values takes place at a standpoint within that scheme” (ibid.). (Thus, the best response to Bernard Williams’s charge on p.218 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that “McDowell seems rather unconcerned even about history and says nothing about differences in outlook over time”, is to point out that McDowell does indeed have something to say regarding changing sets of virtues and values over time, and how the changes are to be regarded, viz. that the changes will, ideally, have come about as the result of considered reflection, which, while Neurathian in character, is nevertheless objectively constructive.)

That McDowell does view such Neurathian reflection as capable of being objectively constructive, and as being neither circular nor ineffectual, cannot be doubted, for the use of Neurath’s image is supposed to suggest that just as the mariner even while at sea genuinely repairs his ship, i.e. makes it *objectively better*, so too can reflection on one’s own cultural set of virtues and values, made from a position within that very set, be likewise genuinely constructive and thus result in objective improvement of that cultural set.

But it is, I believe, regarding this last point that McDowell has a major blind-spot. In other words, I call into question the very legitimacy of McDowell's use of Neurath's image; and I do so for the following reason.

The mariner has guiding his work on the ship the objective idea of a ship's purpose, i.e. the idea of what a ship is for: e.g. for transporting crew, passengers, armies, and cargo, long distances across water. It is because the mariner possesses this objective *teleological* idea that his work can be deemed goal-oriented – i.e. directed towards the goal of making the ship sea-worthy – and can be considered a matter of *repairing* the ship, i.e. making it objectively better. Of course, because the repairs are done at sea, they will be carried out piecemeal, perhaps with one plank being mended or replaced at a time. But because the mariner is equipped with the notion of what a ship is for, he is in a position to know what state each plank should be in if it is successfully to play its part in making the ship sea-worthy.

For the image of Neurath's boat to be applicable to ethical reflection, it would have to be the case that the reflective agent has at his disposal a teleological conception of what the virtuous life is *for*. This remains the case even if it is acknowledged that like the repair of the boat, the reflective criticism of one's cultural set of virtues will be carried out piecemeal, i.e. with one virtue at a time coming under the critical spotlight while the others are held in place in the background, for the successful objective assessment of any one particular virtue requires that the agent undertaking the assessment know what function this virtue should be performing, and that knowledge is, of course, dependent on the knowledge of what the virtuous life in general is for.

In short, then, if McDowell's use of the image of Neurath's ship with regard to ethical reflection is to be legitimate, he must provide a teleological conception of what the virtuous human life is for.

But this is exactly what McDowell does not provide. Indeed, as he makes clear in his paper 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', such provision should not be sought. First, (*MVR* p.167), he makes an exegetical comment on Aristotle's moral philosophy:

I begin with a claim about how not to read Aristotle, whose ethical outlook is obviously naturalistic in some sense. There is an Aristotelian notion of what is necessary as that without which good cannot be attained. It is tempting to suppose that when Aristotle relates human virtue to nature he is, in effect, exploiting that notion in order to validate the appeal of ethical considerations to reason. The idea is that the appeal is validated on the ground that the virtues are necessary in that sense, with the necessity founded in independent facts, underwritten by nature, about what it is for a human life to go well. But I think any such reading of Aristotle's intentions is quite wrong.

Second, (*MVR* p.174), McDowell recommends that we resist a certain modern mindset, for "That way, we can stop supposing the rationality of virtue needs a foundation outside the formed evaluative outlook of a virtuous person".

What McDowell is in effect saying in these two passages is that the attempt to ground the virtues in extra-moral facts about human nature – an attempt modelled on the zoologist's showing that bees need their stings because of independent natural facts about those creatures – is not part of the original Aristotelian project and, moreover, should not be embraced by contemporary virtue theorists.

Thus, while a zoologist may be able to tell us what the sting of the bee is for, it is McDowell's belief that we should not expect the moral philosopher to come up with an analogous teleological conception of what the virtuous human life is for.

It follows, then, that McDowell's use of Neurath's image is illegitimate. And because McDowell uses the image as a model for how reflection on one's own cultural set of values and virtues, which, although made from a point of view within that very set, can nevertheless yield genuinely objective, non-relative improvement and correction of that cultural set, the loss of the image leaves McDowell vulnerable to my accusation that his moral philosophy engenders a type of moral relativism.

§3.6.3 – Counter-Response no.3

The third counter-response I construct on behalf of McDowell involves the suggestion that an empirical investigation could yield the result that there is a core set of virtues –

including, perhaps, the virtues of justice and courage – which remains constant across *all* cultures and societies.

Were this found to be the case, then as long as any critical assessment of other cultures, or of one's own culture at a different time, is made from a point of view informed by just these constant core virtues, each and every assessment would, in principle at least, be one that could be made by any geographical or historical culture.

The idea is that as long as, for example, a contemporary European makes the assessment that the virtues of chastity and chivalry are rightly absent from his current set, and that the virtue of honour is rightly ranked lower than it would have been by his predecessors, from a point of view informed by nothing other than, say, the virtue of justice, a virtue which our contemporary European has in common with his counterpart of yesteryear, then the charge that he is merely begging the question does not really get a grip.

Notwithstanding the possibility that an empirical investigation might not show there to be a common core of virtues constant across all societies, the problem with this counter-response made on behalf of McDowell is that because of McDowell's endorsement of the Socratic thesis that the virtues form a unity, the notion of virtue constancy is jeopardised.

It will be recalled from §3.4.2, in which the thesis that the virtues constitute a unity is discussed, that Mark's offering of comfort to Matthew could not be considered kindly behaviour because of considerations of justice. What this example illustrates well is that the virtues bleed into, or inform, one another, such that any change in the total set of virtues will entail a change in any individual virtue. Europeans circa 1800 will have ranked the virtue of honour higher than we do so today. This change in ranking will, moreover, affect the whole set of virtues, including any 'core' virtues, such as justice, which may be common to Europeans of 1800 and to Europeans of today. We can, for example, imagine two European men of 1800 fighting a duel to settle a point of honour. At least one of the duellists will be killed. But this outcome would be considered a just one by those fellow Europeans of 1800 casting a moral glance at the situation. The modern equivalent of a duel fought over a matter of honour would be

something like a drive-by shooting of a gangland member who had ‘dissed’, i.e. committed an act of disrespect with regard to, another. The outcome may well be that one of the gangland members is killed. But *we* would certainly not consider this to be a just outcome, and for the reason that matters of honour do not weigh as heavily with us as they did for our counterparts of 1800. The virtue of honour has been relegated to the sidelines, one of the consequences of this relegation being that what we consider to be just and unjust is different from what our European predecessors, for whom honour was in the premiership of virtues, considered to be so.

The counter-response being considered in this section trades on the idea that there could be a core set of virtues which are constant across all cultures, and which, if being the sole virtues to inform the point of view from which any moral assessment of other cultures, or of one’s own culture at different times, is made, will allow McDowell to claim a certain degree of non-relative objectivity for such moral assessments. But, as demonstrated above, McDowell’s Socratic thesis that the virtues form a unity entails that what justice is for us is different from what it was for Europeans circa 1800, for the reason that we rank the virtue of honour much lower than they did. And so, my charge that McDowell’s moral philosophy gives rise to a type of relativism is back on the table, for even if we insist that our assessment that the virtue of honour is rightly ranked lower than it once was, is made from a point of view informed by justice, because our conception of justice is in part constituted by that very drop in the fortunes of the virtue of honour, we are, it seems, presupposing what we claim to be establishing objectively.

§3.6.4 – Counter-Response no.4

The final counter-response I construct on behalf of McDowell is one that he would not approve of, revolving as it does around the attempt to establish what the virtuous human life is for. This attempt, as I mention in §3.6.2, is considered by McDowell to be wrong-headed. But we saw in that section that for his use of Neurath’s image to be legitimate, McDowell would have to provide such a teleological conception of the virtuous life. It is worthwhile, therefore, pursuing this idea, for if it can be established

that the virtuous life serves some further end, then the agent who engages in moral reflection on his own cultural set of virtues will have at his disposal an idea of the function the virtues should be performing, and so will be in a position to judge objectively whether any particular virtue is up to scratch.

To pursue this idea is to adopt something like the approach taken by Philippa Foot. In her recent book *Natural Goodness*, Foot attempts to justify particular virtues by highlighting their dependence on the natural life of the human species, by showing, in other words, that “human beings need virtues as bees need stings” (ibid. p.44).¹ As part of her argument, she draws on the notion of an ‘Aristotelian necessity’, dubbed so by Elizabeth Anscombe and defined as: “that which is necessary because and in so far as good hangs on it” (ibid. p.15).

The notion is applicable to human and non-human life forms alike. Foot illustrates what she has in mind with a botanical example (ibid. p.46). It is necessary that the oak tree has deep sturdy roots because without them it would not be able to stay upright, and so would have no chance of life on the ground. Thus, the good of the oak tree that hangs on the Aristotelian necessity of deep sturdy roots is the tree’s reproductive life cycle.

When it comes to animals, a common Aristotelian necessity is concern for the offspring. The form this concern takes varies depending on the nature of a particular species and the natural dangers that the offspring of that species typically meet with. For example, kangaroo joeys are put at risk when their play-boxing with one another becomes too violent. The mother kangaroo shows concern for her offspring by intervening when the boxing exceeds a safe degree of playfulness. And continuing the antipodean theme, mountain wallabies in arid regions of Australia show concern for their offspring by regurgitating fluid from their stomachs so that their young can drink and thus avoid becoming dehydrated.² Despite this variety of forms that the concern for offspring can take, the good that hangs on such concern is the survival of the young and so survival of the species.

¹ It is Peter Geach, as Foot acknowledges, who puts it this way.

² The choice of these two examples to illustrate the notion of an Aristotelian necessity is my own.

Moving to the human animal, it is Foot's belief that the virtues are an Aristotelian necessity, i.e. that much human good hangs on them. She acknowledges that whereas the goods of non-human animals revolve around species survival, human goods are "much more diverse and much harder to delineate than are animal *goods*" (ibid. p.16). For Foot, human goods are those which are associated not so much with mere human survival as with human *flourishing*. As she puts it in her paper 'Moral Relativism' (p.164):

All [human beings] need affection, the cooperation of others, a place in a community, and help in trouble. It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things – being isolated, despised or embattled, or without courage or hope.

Foot is right to lift what constitutes a good human life above the level of mere survival. Indeed, if she were to attempt to justify the virtues at this level, i.e. to suggest that the virtues get their *raison d'être* from enabling human beings to survive, then she would founder. This can be illustrated with the virtue of courage. Someone with a terminal disease may well decide that all things considered, committing suicide is the best option. Committing suicide is no light matter, and would surely involve great courage on the part of the person choosing to end his or her life. It is clear, then, that whatever the human good which hangs on the virtue of courage is, it cannot be mere human survival, for in this example there has clearly been an employment of the virtue of courage, but an employment such that as a result, a particular human life is terminated.

For Foot, then, the virtue of courage, and the virtues in general, are Aristotelian necessities in that they make it possible for human beings to flourish, where human flourishing is understood as something over and above mere human survival.

My worry, however, is that once this idea of human flourishing is spelled out in more detail, it becomes clear that it actually presupposes the virtuous life. And this is a problem for the counter-response of this section because the whole point of turning to Foot was to see if a teleological conception of the virtues were possible, one that could objectively guide an agent in any moral assessment he might make of his own cultural set of virtues. That assessment can be objective and non-relative only if the virtuous life serves some further end, i.e. an end found *outside* the field of virtues. If the 'end' that the virtuous life serves is human flourishing, and if human flourishing is itself constituted by the virtuous life, then that is not the independent end that was required

in order to provide our moral agent with an objective idea of the function the virtues should be performing. And without this idea, the moral agent cannot judge objectively and non-relatively whether any particular virtue is up to scratch.

My worry detailed in the last paragraph is, moreover, well-founded, as can be illustrated using, once again, the example involving the virtue of courage. The terminally-ill person who courageously commits suicide realises that to let the illness take its natural course would be no longer to flourish. The illness would eat into a certain quality of life that the patient has become accustomed to and which he or she regards as not to be compromised. When we seek further characterisations of the type of life that is so precious to the terminally-ill patient that she is willing to forgo life itself in order to uphold it, we find ourselves reaching for the word 'dignity'. This person wishes not to lose her dignity, so much so that she commits suicide. Dignity, however, is one of the virtues listed in §3.3. In short, then, what the exercise of the virtue of courage in this example can be said to be *for*, is the upholding of a way of life which has been shaped and informed by the virtue of dignity. One virtue has been 'justified' in terms of another.

It would, of course, be a gross generalisation to extrapolate from this one example and state that all justifications of the virtues, i.e. all attempts to indicate the human good that hangs on them, will actually presuppose other virtues. However, having shown, in this particular example involving the virtue of courage, how the good which hangs on that virtue is actually shaped by another virtue, viz. dignity, I believe that it is not unreasonable that we be suspicious of attempts to ground or justify the virtues in this way, and that the burden of proof be on the one wishing to pursue the project of providing non-relative and objective justifications of the virtues.

§3.7 – Conclusion

Having constructed on behalf of McDowell four counter-responses to my charge that his moral philosophy gives rise to a type of moral relativism, and having found each of them to be problematic, that charge still stands. More specifically, the charge is that

moral knowledge, and the moral action that issues from such knowledge, is relative to the particular set of virtue concepts prevalent in a culture or society at any given time. It has been shown that such relativism causes problems both for the discursive resolution of conflicts, and for the idea of moral progress within one's own society.

I find this situation to be highly undesirable. I am not sure, however, whether any solution to it can be found within the parameters of virtue theory. After all, the last counter-response I considered (in §3.6.4) took us outside the confines of McDowell's particular brand of virtue theory and found us contemplating instead a line of thought associated with another virtue theorist, Philippa Foot. But even this counter-response did not manage to close the door on moral relativism. And so, I find myself concluding that perhaps the door to moral relativism remains ajar as long as moral philosophers take their cue, as is done by those writing in the wake of Anscombe's seminal paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy', from Aristotle and his belief (expressed in Book I of *The Nicomachean Ethics*) that the good life is the life lived *in accordance with virtue*.

Bibliography

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in *Philosophy* 33, 1958. pp. 1-19.
- Aristotle. 'On the Soul', in *A New Aristotle Reader*. Ed. J.L. Ackrill. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. pp. 161-205.
- *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Blackburn, Simon. 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', in *Morality and Objectivity*. Ed. Ted Honderich. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985. pp.1-22.
- 'Relativism', in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. Ed. Hugh LaFollette. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. pp. 38-52.
- 'Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism', in *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule*. Ed. Steven H. Holtzman & Christopher M. Leich. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. pp.163-187.
- Foot, Philippa. 'Moral Relativism', in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*. Ed. Meiland & Krausz. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. pp. 152-166.
- *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- Frege, Gottlob. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Trans. J.L. Austin. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1980.
- Geach, Peter. 'Good and Evil', in *Theories of Ethics*. Ed. Philippa Foot. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967. pp. 64-73.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge & P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

Locke, John. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Lowe, E.J. *Locke on Human Understanding*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Mackie, J.L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books, 1977.

McDowell, John. 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', in *Perceptual Knowledge*. Ed. J. Dancy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. pp. 209-219.

——— *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

——— *Mind, Value, & Reality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.

——— 'Projection and Truth in Ethics', in his *Mind, Value, & Reality*. pp. 151-166.

——— 'Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology', in his *Mind, Value, & Reality*. pp. 23-49.

——— 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in his *Mind, Value, & Reality*. pp. 167-197.

——— 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in his *Mind, Value, & Reality*. pp. 131-150.

——— 'Virtue and Reason', in his *Mind, Value, & Reality*. pp. 50-73.

McNaughton, David. 'Intuitionism', in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. Ed. Hugh LaFollette. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. pp. 268-287.

Meiland, Jack W. & Krausz, Michael. 'Introduction to 'An Inconsistent Form of Relativism' and 'The Truth in Relativism' ', in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*. Ed.

- Meiland & Krausz. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. pp. 167-170.
- Nagel, Thomas. 'Moral Luck', in his *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. pp. 24- 38.
- Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. 'Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms', in *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ed. Sayre-McCord. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. pp. 1-23.
- Wiggins, David. 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', in his *Needs, Values, Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. pp. 87-137.
- Williams, Bernard. 'An Inconsistent Form of Relativism', in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*. Ed. Meiland & Krausz. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. pp. 171-174.
- 'Ethics', in *Philosophy: A Guide Through the Subject*. Ed. A.C. Grayling. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. pp. 545-582.
- *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana Press, 1985.
- 'Moral luck', in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. pp. 20-39.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.
- *Remarks on Colour*. Ed. G.E.M Anscombe; trans. Linda L. McAlister & Margaret Schättle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.
- *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness. London & New York: Routledge, 1974.

Wright, Crispin. 'Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. LXII, 1988. pp. 1-26.