

Kvantifikator för en Dag

Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday



McDowell's Naturalism

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Abstract

This is an essay on McDowell's naturalism. It is, *pace* some commentators, argued that McDowell's naturalism does not end up in any strange metaphysical positions in the philosophy of mind, because second nature non-reductively supervenes on first nature and have causal powers. *Pace* certain other commentators, it is also argued that McDowell can be read as drawing a clear line between ethical platonism, and his own naturalized platonism, but only at the cost of landing in standard naturalism.

1. McDowell's Problem

One of the more puzzling features of John McDowell's *Mind and World* is his purported naturalism. The originality of McDowell's position lies in the fact that he on the one hand attempts to naturalize intentional notions, while at the same time claiming that they should be described as belonging to the realm of spontaneity, rather than the realm of laws. McDowell's attempt is thus to naturalize the intentional realm, without at the same time reducing it. There are two related problems involved with this attempt. The first problem is the question whether a naturalization that avoids a reduction is feasible at all. The second problem is whether McDowell's "naturalization light" really is distinct from what McDowell coins "rampant platonism". I shall initially present an interpretation of McDowell. I shall subsequently argue that the first problem is no real problem, assuming that my interpretation of him is correct, but that the second problem is real enough. It is however not a problem for his philosophy of mind, but rather for his ethics.

The underlying purpose of *Mind and World* is to secure the rational connection between

perception and thought. McDowell's main thesis is that this connection can only be rational if the same conceptual network that enables rational thought and reflection is drawn on in perception. On this account, the concepts that feature when we rationally reflect upon events in the world are the same concepts that feature in the perception of those events. As Kant once put it, "intuitions without concepts are blind".

But this has according to McDowell not been fully appreciated by modern epistemologists and philosophers of mind. On the contrary, the two or three dominant trends in that branch, have accepted and defended a position that is at crosscurrents with this largely – but in an important respect that we will return to, not entirely – Kantian theory of perception.

There are two major competing candidates in modern philosophy of mind and epistemology which McDowell challenges. The first candidate is simply ordinary naturalism, or what McDowell coins "bald naturalism". Bald naturalists obviously include eliminativists who try to eliminate intentional notions altogether. Bald naturalists are also to be found among cognitive psychologists like Jerry Fodor, who are attempting to reduce the intentional realm, to a realm governed by causal laws. In the context of epistemology and philosophy of mind, bald naturalists attempt to explain our capacity for conceptual thought and reasoning in causal terms.

The major problem with bald naturalism is in McDowell's opinion that intentionality is reduced to the "realm of law". Our capacity for rational thought can on this account be reconstructed from "conceptual materials that already belong in a natural-scientific depiction of nature".¹ But the "space of reasons", or the "logical space", that is, our capacity for rational thought and reasoning, is according to McDowell independent of the realm of law. "The structure of the space of reasons stubbornly resists being appropriated within a naturalism that conceives nature as the realm of law".² So this approach is a non-starter for McDowell.

The second option is to consider the logical space of reasons as belonging to a faculty of spontaneity. According to this Kantian view, "rational necessitation is not just compatible with freedom but constitutive of it. In a slogan, the space of reasons is the realm of freedom".³ As a consequence, "our freedom in empirical thinking is total" and "is not

¹ McDowell (1994), p 73

² Ibid

³ Ibid p 5

constrained from outside the conceptual sphere”.⁴

This is the kind of solution that McDowell ultimately favours, but, unfortunately, the various available theories of this kind lead to what he calls a “rampant platonism”. McDowell primarily considers two alternative theories, both of which ultimately have roughly the same ontological implications.

According to one theory, primarily defended by Gareth Evans, perception is in itself a non-conceptual affair. We can however conceptualize the perceptual content, but this is a process in which our conceptual capacities work on a “given” material. Perceptual content as such is nonconceptual. But this theory is according to McDowell intolerable, because it fails to establish a rational linkage between perceptual content and rational thought of the empirically given. This is so since it assumes that the space of reasons is not exhausted by the conceptual sphere. But this is a non-starter, because we are unable to “understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts”.⁵ Evans theory ultimately leads to what Wilfrid Sellars coined “the myth of the given”.

The second option available is to bite the bullet and accept that there are no rational relations between perception and empirical thought. This is the kind of solution to the problem that is defended by coherentists such as Donald Davidson. On this conception, perceptual experience has a causal impact on our empirical thought, but perception has no bearing at all as on whether or not the thought is justified or warranted. But this ultimately means that there is no rational constraint on thought, from outside the realm of thought itself. The rational link between thought and experience is in other words broken down. And this conclusion is to McDowell – and many others, myself included – unacceptable.⁶

Coherentism and the myth of the given both imply a standpoint that McDowell coins “rampant platonism”. Characteristic of rampant platonism is that it conceives the realm of reason and thought as essentially separated from nature. This might seem to be the logical conclusion of rejecting bald naturalism, but McDowell doesn’t think so. He believes that there is a third option available.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid p 7

⁶ Ibid 15ff

2. McDowell's solution

According to McDowell, the problem can be dispelled once we see that “conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity.”⁷ This means that they are not exercised upon some non-conceptual state that is given, but that what is perceptually given, already is conceptual. Moreover, the conceptual capacities that are drawn on in receptivity would according to McDowell not be conceptual in the proper sense of the word, if they were *only* used in receptivity. “They would not be recognizable as conceptual capacities at all unless they could also be exercised in active thinking”.⁸ The reason for this is basically that an empirical experience represents certain conditions as obtaining in the world. As a consequence, an empirical experience is related to the rational capacities of the perceiver. It is ultimately the very same conceptual capacities that are being employed in rational and active thought, which are drawn upon in receptivity: They “belong to a network of capacities for active thought, a network that rationally governs comprehension-seeking responses to the impacts of the world on sensibility.”⁹

McDowell's claim that the conceptual network employed in thought is employed in perception, could on the face of it be read as a concession on McDowell's part to bald naturalism. Perception is after all a natural event, and one of Evans' arguments for the thesis that perceptual content is nonconceptual is that perception is something that we share with animals. Animals presumably do not have a faculty of spontaneity, capable of understanding and rational thought. By implication perceptual content cannot be conceptual.

But this is not how McDowell should be read, because he believes that there is another kind of naturalism open, one that is not restricted to the realm of law. Even though it is true that perception and thought are natural events, they do not belong to the realm of law, but to man considered as a rational animal. It is in virtue of man having a second nature that we can act rationally and reason logically. The space of reasons pertains to the second nature of man.

What does this mean? It means that nature must not be conceived of as “disenchanted”, to use the famous phrase of Max Weber. The disenchantment of nature by the scientific

⁷ Ibid p 9

⁸ Ibid p 11

⁹ Ibid p 12

revolution left nature empty of meaning. It left us with a conception of nature as being governed only by law. Hence, it left us with a conception of nature which by its very essence excluded the space of reasons.

What McDowell proposes is essentially to re-enchant nature. Obviously he is not attempting to take on the entire scientific revolution, but trying to frame an alternative conception of nature, a pre-modern conception which conceives of second nature as filled with meaning, and not as describable in causal terms. McDowell reminds us that exercising our faculty of spontaneity “belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals”.¹⁰

By implication, our second nature, the re-enchanted conception of nature preferred by McDowell, should not be considered as belonging to the realm of law. Even though second nature is nature, properly so conceived, it cannot be described in its entirety by using causal notions. McDowell rather prefers to frame a description of second nature in terms borrowed from Aristotle’s ethics.

According to McDowell’s Aristotle, having a virtue of character is more than merely having a propensity to act in an ethical way. It consists on the contrary of acquiring a “specifically shaped state of the practical intellect”, a “practical wisdom”, which, when acquired, means that its possessors have a “responsiveness to some of the demands of reason”.¹¹ Acquiring a sensitivity to the rational requirements that we confront during the course of a lifetime is thus something that is acquired by a decent upbringing. An essential part of character-formation consists in a shaping of the practical intellect. “The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature.”¹²

McDowell gives an inverted Quinean picture of the faculty of spontaneity, which is shaped by the second nature. On this account, our conceptual network is continually being refashioned according to the demands of reasons. But this does not mean that it is ever radically overhauled. On the contrary, the modifications are usually modest, but no part of the system is exempt from rational scrutiny – in this sense, the system resembles Neurath’s boat. In particular, the concepts at the outer fringes of the network, the observational concepts, are rarely or never reshaped by pressure from within the network.

¹⁰ Ibid p 78

¹¹ Ibid p 79

¹² Ibid p 84

3. McDowell's naturalism in the context of the philosophy of mind.

McDowell's naturalism has come under close scrutiny and has been harshly criticised, from some quarters. This has not least been the case for his naturalism considered in the context of philosophy of mind. Jerry Fodor, for example, reads McDowell as advocating a kind of dualism. "The cost of McDowell's a priorism is that he has to be some sort of dualist; not necessarily the Cartesian sort, who thinks that there are immaterial *things*. But, quite likely, the kind of faculty dualist who is, willy nilly, landed with occult powers".¹³ On Fodor's reading, McDowell is thus situating second nature in a realm which is independent of the realm of law, and therefore of disenchanted nature.

But this is not what McDowell has in mind, or at least not what I take it that McDowell has in mind. McDowell is on the contrary careful to explain that his naturalism is not at odds with disenchanted naturalism:

Since we are setting our faces against bald naturalism, we have to expand nature beyond what is countenanced in a naturalism of the realm of law. But the expansion is limited by the first nature, so to speak, of human animals, and by plain facts about what happens to human animals in their upbringing. We are not irresponsibly cutting the concept of nature loose from the realm of law [...] McDowell (1994), p 109f

I take it that this means that second nature supervenes on first nature, but that it cannot be reduced to first nature.

The notion of supervenience being employed in this context is quite clear. It simply means that second nature is something that depends on first nature, in such a way that a difference in second nature implies a difference in first nature. And moreover, it means that whatever happens in second nature, ultimately can be given an explanation at the level of first nature. To give an example, if I were to perceive a situation as being morally reprehensible, there would be natural causes in the realm of law underlying this perception. There would be nothing mysterious going on here; every process in such a perception would have a natural

¹³ Fodor (1998), p 7

cause. Nothing happens, that is outside the realm of law.

But does this not mean that the mental is a realm that is separate from the natural? After all, a dualist might also claim that the mental supervenes on the physical. But this, alas, it does not mean. And the reason for this is that second nature has causal powers.¹⁴ Having a second nature of a particular kind, is to have the ability to perform physical actions in the natural world. Moreover, there is no need to deny that the realm of the physical is not causally closed, which is what the dualist has to do, if he wants to claim that the mental has causal powers. Second nature may non-reductively supervene on first nature, but it does not postulate the existence of any supernatural states or processes.

But this does not mean that second nature can be reduced to the realm of law. A correct description of second nature can only be given in terms that are not translatable into terms describing causal processes in the realm of law. While a state or process of second nature can have causal powers, it is not necessary that the state or process itself can be explained as being caused by other states or processes at the level of second nature. A description framed at the level of second nature, may not be able to describe the state or process as anything but something which occurred due to the faculty of spontaneity, which by definition cannot be given a description in causal terms.

Now, in order to show that second nature is redundant in an explanation of a subject's rational capacities, it has to be demonstrated not only that second nature supervenes on first nature, but also that an instantiation of a state or process at the level of second nature, is identical to a state or process at the level of first nature.¹⁵ But this is highly unlikely to ever be the case, because a state of second nature, can presumably be realized in a variety of different ways, without ever having anything interesting in common. Perceiving a situation to be morally reprehensible, can, naturally, be physically realized in a variety of different ways. In a similar vein, that a person has the character-trait of being humble, can be

¹⁴ Note that this does not imply that a state or a process at the level of second nature, has the same causal powers as a corresponding state or process in first nature, even though it does imply that states and processes in second nature only have such causal powers as are consistent with the causal powers that the corresponding states and processes in first nature have. A state of second nature can, for example, have the power to cause several materially different events, and it suffices that the state of first nature have the power to cause one of those events, in order for the second state to have causal powers which are consistent with the causal powers at the first level. This is important, because according to McDowell, states and processes at the level of second nature, lack the kind of causal powers that states and processes at the level of first nature have, even though they do not lack causal powers altogether.

¹⁵ The argument here is, somewhat ironically, modelled after Fodor's argument about psychological reductionism in *Language of Thought*. See Fodor (1975), p 9ff.

physically realized in a variety of ways. The important point here is that the realization-states, which obviously pertain to the realm of law and first nature, need not have anything interesting in common. A theory which attempted to translate the notions we use to describe second nature to notions applicable at the level of first nature, would by implication have to translate second nature into laws which were widely disjunctive. By implication, the kinds and properties that a theory of second nature refers to cannot be reduced to the kinds and properties which a theory of first nature refers to. Second nature non-reductively supervenes on first nature.

It is textually quite clear that McDowell would accept that second nature cannot be reduced to first nature, but it is less than clear whether he would accept that second nature supervenes on first nature and have causal powers which respect the causal closure of the physical. I do however believe that there are clear textual passages that indicate that McDowell would accept this. Moreover this is the only interpretation of McDowell's naturalism that makes sense. If McDowell denied it, he would end up in the same metaphysical position as the rampant Platonist.

As a position in the philosophy of mind, McDowell's standpoint is not as revolutionary as it might appear. Whether his position is warranted or not, quite simply depends upon whether we should individuate psychological states and faculties in the way McDowell proposes that we individuate them. Such an individuation would have at least two interesting consequences.

The first consequence would be that psychological faculties, states and processes could not be described in causal terms. In this sense, McDowell's philosophy of mind is clearly distinguished from, for example, cognitive psychology, which attempts to describe the workings of the mind in causal terms. McDowell is careful enough to point out that his philosophy of mind does not imply that there is necessarily anything wrong with cognitive science, as long as the latter "stays within its proper bounds".¹⁶ This presumably means that the psychological entities in McDowell's theory supervene, but are not reducible to, states and processes postulated by cognitive psychology.

The cash value of this consequence has to be judged from a variety of perspectives. One such perspective is, obviously, the empirical sciences. Another perspective comes from

¹⁶ McDowell (1994), p 55

epistemology. And this is apparently where McDowell believes that he can find most support for his kind of individuation. If it is indeed essential that a faculty of spontaneity underlies understanding and theoretical and practical reason, a McDowellian individuation of mental states and faculties is presumably the only way to go.

A third perspective comes from the philosophy of psychology. Is it reasonable to assume that the iron law of causality does not apply in the contexts of belief-formation and explanation of behaviour? Well, the answer here seems to be yes. There are in principle no exceptionless laws in psychology. Moreover, explaining the action of a person in terms of the reasons that the person had for performing the action, is not necessarily tantamount to giving a causal explanation for the action in the same way that one can give a causal explanation for the occurrence of a phenomenon in the realm of law.

The verdict on this consequence is in other words very much in question. Depending on one's general philosophical inclinations, a convincing case could be made that the evidence points in favour of McDowell's case. But regardless of the outcome of that debate, McDowell's theory hardly has any odd or unwanted metaphysical consequences.

The second consequence mentioned above has to do with the individuation of states and processes in the case of perception. McDowell's individuation of these implies that perception is direct. This is a consequence that McDowell has spelled out in a paper, "The Content of Perceptual Experience".¹⁷ In this context McDowell makes the critical distinction between the sub-personal and the personal level of description. Cognitive science has on this account a critical role to play at the sub-personal level of description, but not at the personal level.

The argument here is roughly that while it cannot be denied that there are various sub-personal processes of information which are responsible for generating content at the personal level of description, it would be a mistake to assume that the subpersonal processes are states and processes *for* the person. What a cognitive-scientific account of perception can get at is at best a description of how various parts of the organism communicate in a technical sense with each other. The content that can be ascribed to the perceiving animal, is not a content that is being presented to it by one of its parts, because the perceiver himself is

¹⁷ McDowell (1998a). The paper was actually written before *Mind and World*, but is reprinted in *Mind, Value and Reality*.

not interacting as a part among others with his neural mechanisms.

The eyes of a perceiver can on this account interact with the brain of a perceiver, but it would be a mistake to assume that the perceiver is interacting with his eyes. The eyes of a perceiver are on the contrary a part of the perceiver, and, by implication, the perceiver is interacting directly with the environment, rather than with his organs. But this does not hinder that perception non-reductively supervenes on a process of subpersonal information-processing.

This seems, at least to me, to be a good and convincing argument, which manages to square our phenomenological intuitions with the account being given by cognitive-scientific studies of perception. Moreover, it manages to explain quite nicely how Gibson and his critics from the cognitive science community *both* could be correct on the issue of direct perception. And while it is certainly not an uncontroversial position, it does not lead to the metaphysical doom and gloom predicted by Fodor.

4. McDowell's naturalism in the context of ethics

McDowell believes that his notion of second nature can help establish a foundation for ethics that is neither naturalistic in the standard sense of that term, nor non-naturalistic in the standard sense of that term. He believes in a naturalism of second-nature, which must be closely distinguished from the naturalism that he ascribes to modern Aristotelians in the field of ethics. The modern Aristotelians defend, according to McDowell, a naturalism of first nature. This means that ethical truth-makers are to be found in the realm of law, that is, in disenchanted nature. But McDowell claims that this view was not merely foreign to Aristotle, but is also plain wrong. The everyday non-naturalist on the other hand, normally ends up in a position of rampant platonism, in which ethical kinds and properties are conceived of as forming a sphere of their own. On this account, ethical truth-makers are to be found in an entirely non-natural sphere.

McDowell is usually accused of failing to demarcate the line between his own naturalism of second nature, and rampant platonism. This is for example the argument that Crispin Wright and Alexander Miller make.¹⁸ But, or so I shall argue, McDowell can distinguish

¹⁸ Wright (2002), p 150ff. Miller (2003), p 257ff

between his naturalism of second nature and rampant platonism. The problem is that if he does, the distinction between a naturalism of second nature and a naturalism of first nature cannot be upheld in the context of ethics.

McDowell himself believes that his naturalism of second nature is an attempt to “try to ground the rationality of ethics in something like what it is for the life of the species to go well”.¹⁹ But it is important to note that even though this means that human nature is the truthmaker of ethical statements, it is ultimately human nature as second nature that fulfils this role. It is however true that McDowell is somewhat ambiguous in spelling this out:

In rampant platonism, the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical. Naturalized platonism is platonistic in that the structure of the space of reasons has a sort of autonomy; it is not derivative from, or reflective of, truths about human beings that are capturable independently of having that structure in view. But this platonism is not rampant: the structure of the space of reasons is not constituted in splendid isolation from anything merely human. McDowell (1994), p 92

This critical passage can be interpreted as meaning that naturalized platonism, or a naturalism of second nature, is metaphysically independent of anything “merely human”, in the sense that the truthmakers of ethics are independent of anything merely human, but epistemologically different from rampant Platonism, in that humans, by virtue of having a second nature, can resonate to the demands of ethics. But this would still leave McDowell with a metaphysical platonism, and at best with a bad argument for an epistemological naturalism of second nature.²⁰

On the interpretation that I am suggesting, McDowell is claiming that second nature constitutes the metaphysical basis for ethics. This interpretation is not only supported by the considerations being given above, but also by the fact that McDowell actually claims that the structure of the space of reasons is dependent on human nature, or, more specifically, on second nature. It is, to use McDowell’s own terms, “not constituted in splendid isolation

¹⁹ McDowell (1998b), p 177

²⁰ This is not to deny that there are passages that indicate that this kind of reading may be the better one. But McDowell is ambiguous here, and I am simply suggesting a reading of him, that, to my knowledge, has not been undertaken before, and which is, at least in my opinion, at least as plausible as the alternative reading.

from anything merely human”.

This reading of McDowell also squares well with his own reading of Aristotle. McDowell criticises modern Aristotelians for attempting to “construct the requirements of ethics out of independent facts about human nature”.²¹ McDowell’s objections are however not directed at the attempt to found the requirements of ethics on human nature, but on founding it on disenchanted nature. And if it was directed at an attempt to found ethics on human nature, McDowell himself would be guilty of a reading of Aristotle which “is a historical monstrosity” to paraphrase his own criticism of the kind of reading of Aristotle which is prevalent.²²

If this is correct, we are left with an ethical naturalism of second nature, or a naturalized platonism. But this position is not tantamount to platonism, properly so conceived, because second nature is not independent of first nature. Not only does it non-reductively supervene on first nature, second nature also has causal powers. It is in virtue of having a second nature that human beings are able to act. Having a second nature, implies a capacity for physical action.

But is this not simply standard naturalism? McDowell thinks not. His argument here is roughly that facts of second nature do not reduce to facts of first nature, because a creature with a second nature can reflect on and change his nature. By implication, even though a creature is innately endowed with certain needs and capacities that pertain to it in virtue of being a creature of a certain kind, the creature can through its second nature take a stand on these needs and capacities, and, at least to a certain extent, change and modify them. When an individual of a particular species starts reflecting upon his natural disposition, the reasons for fulfilling the particular natural disposition is also opened up for questioning. Prima facie, there is, according to McDowell, no natural reasons why someone should realize his particular dispositions. “The point stands that what members of one’s species need is not guaranteed to appeal to practical reason.”²³

So, McDowell’s naturalism is a naturalism of second nature. Unfortunately, he is none too clear as to what this implies. We are however told that “the rational demands of ethics are not alien to the contingencies of our life as human beings” and that these demands can be

²¹ McDowell (1994), p 79

²² Ibid p 79

²³ McDowell (1998b), p 191

brought into view by an upbringing that shapes the second nature of human beings.²⁴ A second nature is, as we have already seen, roughly the ethical character that a person has. As such, it includes, obviously, the character-traits of the person, but also the shape and dispositions of his practical intellect. Second nature is in short, “habits of thought and action”.²⁵

Practical situations can thus be conceived of in ethical terms only because the person involved has acquired a specific ethical outlook. It is ultimately in virtue of the fact that the person involved has a specific character, a specific second nature, that the person can conceive of the situation in ethical terms. But this apparently also means that it is in virtue of the fact that the person has this outlook, that the sceptical question, “why should I do that” does not arise. It is ultimately because the person involved has acquired specific habits of thoughts and actions, that she refrains from questioning the reasons behind acting in a particular way. These reasons are simply natural to her, given her particular second nature.

But this does not mean that ethics is immune from revision. On the contrary, ethics can be revised, but not from a view from nowhere, but only from within – this is what distinguishes this position from disenchanting naturalism. Practical wisdom is not only applied to particular situations that may arise, it is also applied to itself. So, “the appropriate image is Neurath’s, in which a sailor overhauls his ship while it is afloat”.²⁶ Ethical reflection can disclose weaknesses in “inherited ways of thinking [and] can dictate the formation of new concepts and conceptions. But the essential thing is that one can reflect only from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about”.²⁷ Ethical reflection is thus not tantamount to reflecting on something external to second nature. It is simply to use one’s own second nature, in order to evaluate this nature itself. This can be done in a rational way, because the conceptual network that one has acquired in the process of acquiring a second nature includes evaluative concepts which can be used in a process of reflection.

This is however where McDowell gets into trouble. In order to evaluate one’s conduct and character, one needs to find a standard of evaluation. One needs to start reflecting on what is the good and the best in any given particular situation. The only option open for McDowell

²⁴ McDowell (1994), p 83

²⁵ Ibid p 84

²⁶ Ibid p 81

²⁷ Ibid

would be to claim that second nature evaluates itself.

On any such account, second nature would have to evaluate itself by employing its entire capacity for rational thought and normative reasoning. But if one is unable to draw upon a standard of evaluation, which is independent of second nature, it is only possible to change ones second nature, if it is in any way inconsistent. Otherwise, there simply would not be any reason for changing it. This has however the somewhat counterintuitive consequence that being a good person implies having a logically more consistent faculty of reasoning than a bad person has. But this squares badly with common-sense; being a bastard is not tantamount to having an inconsistent set of beliefs and desires.

But even if this objection is unwarranted, there are further problems for McDowell. What are we to make of ethical cases in which second nature cannot give a consistent answer? Let us for example assume that someone believes that he should have a consistent set of beliefs and desires, that it is always morally wrong to kill a sentient creature, that chickens are sentient creatures, and that it is morally permissible to kill chickens. Clearly, this person has an inconsistent second nature. So, what should he say? Is it right to kill chickens? Well, since his beliefs in this instance are inconsistent, it appears that it is neither right nor wrong to kill chickens. But clearly this consequence is intolerable.

At this point, one may respond by claiming that the answer to the question depends upon what the second nature ought to look like, given that it was consistent. And if that is the case, the answer to the question would depend upon which beliefs were revised. But by which standard of evaluation should the person revise his beliefs? Should he revise the belief that it is morally permissible to kill chickens, or should he revise the belief that it is always morally wrong to kill a sentient creature? Well, his own standards of evaluation cannot help. Those standards can not determine which belief should be revised. The normative standards are contradicting each other, and from the standpoint of the logical or rational standards, it does not matter which belief is revised. Hence, second nature cannot evaluate itself.²⁸

Finding out what the good and the best is can thus not be done by reflecting solely on ones

²⁸ Another problem for McDowell is that his theory leads to a rampant relativism or subjectivism. It is after all second nature which is the foundation of ethics. By implication, ethical statements can only be true relative to a certain second nature, viz. relative to a certain subject. It can apparently not be true, independently of the second nature of the human beings involved.

own second nature. It is simply not possible for second nature to evaluate itself. In order to evaluate something, one needs a standard of evaluation. But this standard must be something that is external to what is to be evaluated. At this point, we can choose to revert to claiming that second nature evaluates itself by employing a platonic standard of evaluation. Or, we can choose to employ a naturalistic standard of evaluation, where the standard of evaluation is conceived of as being independent of second nature. Some prefer the first choice, others, like myself, prefer the second. But, alas, neither option would be open to McDowell. While it is true that McDowell can distinguish between naturalized platonism and rampant Platonism, he can only do so at the cost of having to accept traditional naturalism.²⁹

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²⁹ Many thanks to Helge Malmgren, Ragnar Francén and Lars Hedlund, for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

