

VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE, MCDOWELL AND ARISTOTLE, CONSIDERATIONS
AND OBJECTIONS

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Michael Dale Moore

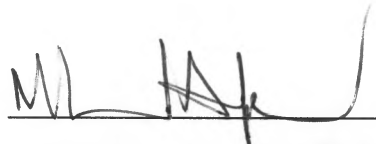
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Virtue is Knowledge*, McDowell and Aristotle, *Considerations and Objections* by Michael Dale Moore, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.



Mohammad Azadpur Ph.D.
Professor



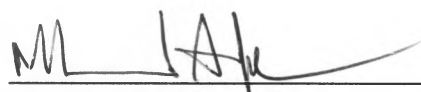
Justin Tiwald, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

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AND OBJECTIONS

Michael Dale Moore
San Francisco, California
2015

In this thesis I argue that John McDowell is correct in utilizing an Aristotelian framework to interpret the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. I show that non-cognitivist objections to McDowell's view fail to undermine the idea that virtuous action consists in a perception alone. Furthermore, I innovate several other objections to McDowell's thesis from a non-cognitivist perspective and demonstrate that the strength of these objections can be obviated.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5/19/15
Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Uxori fidellissimae sacrum.

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Introduction and Summary

In this thesis I wish to develop and defend John McDowell's Aristotelian interpretation of the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. This project assumes, from the outset, an Aristotelian framework, most notably the stipulation that we are discussing ethical scenarios in the case of the fully virtuous man, one who has become habituated to live in a certain way. In order to preserve this thesis, a credible defense must be made concerning different possible scenarios wherein doubt is cast as to whether knowledge alone can account for virtue. Another way of stating this is to say that if something apart from knowledge can be brought to bear in explaining the case of the virtue of the virtuous man, then virtue is not knowledge, and both Aristotle's and McDowell's enterprise fails.

The most pressing of these concerns is the non-cognitive objection, which if successfully established, shows that acts of virtue involve something in addition to knowledge alone, namely an orectic state. What I mean by non-cognitive is the view that moral claims have no truth value, because they are not, at root, about anything beyond the subject to whom they belong;¹ rather they express states of mind similar to or identical with desire, approval, preference, or their opposites.² For the man so

¹ I will go into more detail about non-cognitivism in the eponymous section.

² McDowell easily negotiates away from one variation of the objection which plausibly postulates that a non-virtuous person can perceive a situation in the same way that a virtuous person can, but nonetheless fails to act in the right way.

constituted, as the virtuous man certainly is, McDowell claims that a concern³ and a given circumstance are sufficient to explain his actions. That is, knowledge alone, of the concern and the circumstance, explain his action.

In the process of avoiding the non-cognitive objection, McDowell notes that one way to provide for objective and consistent moral determinations is codifiability. He rejects this view but also reasserts that there is no candidate which would provide the putative orectic desire. He eliminates both the concern for one's friend and the conception of how to live as candidates for this orectic desire, which will be explained in more detail in this thesis.

I next show how McDowell is faithful to Aristotle's conception that the virtuous man lives in light of an orectic state, which is his concept of the whole of a live well-lived. I then try to defend the objectivity of this orectic state, staving off the charges of the non-cognitivist, by showing that it is *already* part of the constituent nature of a fully matured moral actor, such as the virtuous man is. Secondly, I appeal to a kind of anti-scientific reasoning which McDowell raises in another work, which argues that there can be a kind of objectivity beyond the accustomed pronouncements of the scientific method.

In the second half of this thesis I propose three new objections, centering on counter-examples, to the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. I answer each of the objections in turn. I begin by raising the objection of a situation in which multiple, intrinsically morally equivalent choices present themselves. In this situation, it seems

³ E.g. McDowell uses "concern for a friend."

that nothing but an orectic desire *could* explain why one out of a number of morally equivalent choices would be preferred. Next, I raise the objection of novelty, proposing that a novel ethical situation raises a difficulty, in that if virtue is habituated into one in such a way as to result in instances of knowledge such that future ethical situations can be discerned by comparison, then novel moral situations accordingly do not fit into the knowledge paradigm. In this way, the objection goes, there must be something else (perhaps an orectic state) besides knowledge determining the course of action. The last objection I raise is the case of the “no-brainer.” In this type of situation, a given moral situation has only one correct answer. If this is so, then codifiability seems inevitable. But if it is codifiable, then this means morality is susceptible to charges of non-cognitivism, for codifiability can accommodate non-cognitivism in that, the gerundive nature of a law or rule virtually guarantees that there is an orectic state.

Virtue is Knowledge

The Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge means, minimally, that to have knowledge of the right course of action is sufficient to follow that course of action. John McDowell, in a bid to preserve this thesis, characterizes this knowledge as a type of sensitivity to the demands of a situation; a sensitivity which is conceptual which yet falls short of any linguistic formulation and oftentimes even any conscious awareness. Nevertheless, it is not a brute instinct, blind and mindless, but a real possession of the virtuous man insofar as he is such a man. This sensitivity is able, on its own, to explain

any and all acts of virtue.⁴ However there is an objection to this Socratic thesis: could not a non-virtuous person perceive a situation in the same way as a virtuous person and nevertheless fail to act virtuously? The answer seems to be yes, yet McDowell argues that this is so not because of some accessory element in the virtuous person, which, by a superaddition to the knowledge-*cum*-sensitivity would (undesirably) undermine the idea that virtue is knowledge. Rather the possibility that both the virtuous and non-virtuous can have the same perception, and yet act differently, owes to a defect in the non-virtuous: the obfuscation of a desire to behave otherwise. Another way to state this: “virtue must consist not in the sensitivity alone but in the sensitivity together with freedom from such obstructive states” (McDowell 1998: 52 n4). By this maneuver McDowell is able to avoid the problem of allowing that anything else, over and above a mere sensitivity, is necessary for virtue. However this concern, zealous to keep knowledge both centered and isolated as a reason for action, will itself shift into a new kind of objection.

The Non-cognitivist Objection

Before orienting non-cognitivism to the particular concerns McDowell has in mind, let us first give a brief sketch of it, in order to say what non-cognitivism is and to lay out its broad scope. What is said about it here is necessarily cursory and brief, and moreover, the interest which it will be attended with in this paper is mostly practical: how does non-cognitivism inform a certain objection against McDowell’s thesis? Non-

⁴ Of course, this claim must be qualified as applying only to the virtuous man, not a man who is merely continent.

cognitivism, broadly construed as possible, can be said to broadly endorse two theses.⁵ The first is “semantic nonfactualism.” This means that predicative moral sentences are not propositions. For example, “Murder is wrong” is neither true or false (it is non-truth evaluable), but rather expresses something else, dependent on the variety of non-cognitivism one embraces. The other thesis is “psychological non-cognitivism.” The idea behind this is that the states of mind behind moral utterances are not beliefs or mental states in the sense that they concern the objective reality of the outside world. Schroeder has described this as, “If ‘cognitive’ means ‘having to do with belief’, the idea is that moral thoughts are not of the same kind as ordinary beliefs—at least, ordinary non-moral beliefs. So they are in that sense ‘noncognitive’, and hence the name for the view” (2010:12). McDowell has an interest, of course, in denying both of these claims, and it is sometimes difficult to determine when, or indeed if, these two theses can be cleanly separated in his treatment of the non-cognitivist objection. However, it seems apparent that that aspect of the objection which McDowell has reason to worry about the most is “psychological non-cognitivism,” but that this also entails “semantic nonfactualism,”

In recognizing the seriousness of the non-cognitivist challenge, McDowell

⁵ This two theses are adapted from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism*, and articulate the broad constituents of this position. A positive account of what the non-cognitivist claims is going on with both morality and moral talk is what separates different branches of this metaethical position, “Philosophers have offered many different definitions for the term ‘noncognitivism’ over the last seven decades or more. Some have defined it as the view that moral sentences cannot be true or false. Some have defined it as the view that there is no such thing as a moral belief. Some have defined it as a special version of expressivism...” (Schroeder 2010: 12).

presents the objection to his view thus (1998: 56):

It must be a misuse of the notion of perception to suppose that an unclouded perception might suffice, on its own, to constitute a reason for acting in a certain way. An exercise of a genuinely cognitive capacity can yield at most part of a reason for acting; something appetitive is needed as well. To talk of virtue—as consisting in a sensitivity, a perceived capacity, is to amalgamate the required component into the putative sensitivity. But all that is achieved thereby is a projection of human purposes into the world. (Here it becomes apparent how the objection touches on the issue of objectivity.) *How one's will is disposed is a fact about one oneself; whereas a genuinely cognitive faculty discloses to one how the world is independently of oneself, and in particular independently of one's will. (emphasis mine)*

So then, as an objection against McDowell's view, the accusation, as one could call it, can be condensed into the idea that, with respect to some sensitivity, if it informs about the volition of an individual, then it lacks, to that same degree of information, an autonomy owing to the deliverances of a sensitivity *qua* sensitivity. For objective knowledge is of the world, not of the will.

McDowell is, in light of a non-cognitivist kind of objection, merely conflating a cognitive element with some non-cognitive element of desire, or analogous state. By so doing, McDowell is surreptitiously importing want or desire into an account that he had promised was to be grounded on purely intellectual grounds (i.e., a sensitivity, a kind of knowledge). Among other issues that this might raise, McDowell is saddled with the consequence that this “sensitivity,” at least in light of the objection, tells us nothing of the outside world, but merely informs us of the preferences of the person owning this sensitivity, for it is, in fact, nothing other than this sensitivity. The severity of this

critique, if it is accurate and on point, is devastating for McDowell's view: so far from knowledge being virtue, knowledge is not even knowledge.

Codifiability Vs. A Conception of the Good Life

In considering the non-cognitivist objection to his view, McDowell gives us one possible account which can ground moral actions in objective fact. This account depends on codifiability. The philosophical inducement to this account, on McDowell's take, is that acting in accord with reason, on the common conception, appears to necessitate a consistency which only rule-following can afford. As such, this belief is a kind of presupposition similarly imported into discussions of ethical behavior that rely on rational sensitivities for their efficacy. Yet McDowell believes this to be wrong, since he believes there is an alternative to rule-following, "The prejudice is the idea that acting in the light of a specific conception of rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle" (1998: 58).

Now it is clear that the provocation for someone to adopt rule-following is the need for consistency and reliability in the deliverances of appropriate sensitivities. If there is no consistency, there can be no rationality; this is true. Yet can there be consistency without codifiability? There can be, as McDowell contends. In his explanation, the virtuous man lives his life by a, "conception of the sort of life a human being should lead" (1998: 66-67). This, of course, is not explicable in lists of rules or

maxims. At best, attempts to make explicit the proper conduct in ethical situations can only serve to approximate future moral endeavors. From McDowell's point of view, to attain this virtuous life, the virtuous man acts with an eye toward fulfilling various concerns, the completion of which is determined by his sensitivity to the appropriate circumstances capable of fulfilling them.⁶ Thus, there are two psychological states which wholly account for the virtuous action in any given situation. These are a concern (which, with other concerns, leads to the kind of a life a virtuous man aims at) and a fact which is perceived as salient in achieving a given concern, appropriate to the circumstances of a moral act. It can be seen that both of these states of mind, about a concern and a salient fact, are jointly necessary and sufficient for explaining a morally correct course of action. A fact, of course, contains the possibility for truth conditions. A concern, however, despite McDowell's assurances, seems like it could plausibly turn out to be a covert desire. If this is so, then McDowell has fallen into the depths of the objection: a concern on the part of an ethical agent tells us something about his desire, not about the world.

In staving off the objection, McDowell returns to the example of a, "friend is in trouble and open to being comforted" (1998: 70). This, on its own, has no power to move an agent into action, so there must be some additional desire, the objection goes, which can account for the so-called perception causing the correct action. McDowell says that

⁶ Consider also, that the man is *already* virtuous. Thus a prior or ectic condition, which obtained in his pre-virtuous days, explains the inculcation of that particular conception of the virtuous life.

there is, however, no suitable candidate for this desire, or orectic state. It cannot be the conception of how to live, since the thesis of uncodifiability means that it is unanalyzable divorced from particular instances.⁷ On the other hand, nor can this desire be the concern for one's friends, since this is the grounding explanation for a particular act and not an explanation for the emergent perception between the facts on the ground and a concern, that is, as an explanation for salience.⁸ That is, the circumstances or set of circumstances which the would-be actor observes are the conditions from which this actor chooses, themselves choice-worthy to the degree that they conform to a life worth pursuing. With the proper background in place, I will attempt to develop the germs of these two responses into something more substantive than McDowell has offered, in a way in which they are faithful to both Aristotle and McDowell. In order to achieve this though, we need to first look with more depth into Aristotle's moral psychology.

Aristotle's Moral Psychology

Aristotle's moral psychology, as it touches upon the philosophical interests of John McDowell in this thesis, can tell us quite a bit about the intellectual status of both the actor and the circumstances in which that actor finds himself in a given instance of

⁷ More on this to come, but the obvious response from the objector would be to say that of course it is not the conception of how to live by itself that provides the orectic state, but the input of the particular circumstances *with the conception of how to live*.

⁸ McDowell is obscure and perhaps dismissive towards the idea that a "concern" could be smuggling in an orectic state. He says, again sticking with the same example of a friend in need, that, "Concern for one's friends yields only the core explanation, not the explanation in which the 'perception' of salience was to figure" (1998: 70). The thought behind this is that presumably a concern is really only one aspect of the constitutive knowledge which the virtuous man possesses, insofar as it leads to the fulfillment of a virtuously and happily lived life.

moral choice. Perhaps the best place to begin in this vein is in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle divides the parts of the soul or mind, broadly, into that which possesses reason and that which does not. Now, concerning the part that possesses reason, there is that part which reflects upon things which cannot be otherwise than they are, the so-called “scientific” knowledge and that which reflects upon those things which can be otherwise, the “calculative” or “deliberative” part. Within this second kind, there are two categories on which this type of deliberation works. One concerns production while the other concerns action.

Within the boundaries of this schema, it is important to acknowledge that action and the things affiliated with actions are concerned with rationality, and that this rationality, to some degree, involves an assessment of possible scenarios and of course, choice. Now, we have not reached a point where we are able to tell whether or to what degree, on the McDowellian picture, orectic states are involved in Aristotle’s conception of the virtuous man and his reasoning concerning action.

To this end, it would be helpful to look at 1139b3, where Aristotle speaks of doing well, saying⁹:

Mere thought, however, moves nothing; it must be goal-directed and practical. Such thought governs productive thought as well, in that everyone who produces aims at some goal, and the product is not the goal without qualification, but only relative to something, and instrumental to something; for the goal without qualification is what is done, because acting well is the goal, and the object of

⁹ All translations, unless noted, are from Roger Crisp with some modification for consistency of terms and to highlight cognates. All Greek text is from the Oxford Classical Text edition.

desire. So rational choice is either desire-related thought or thought-related desire, and such a first principle is a human being.¹⁰

On a first take, it could seem that this passage contradicts McDowell's understanding that the perception of the salient course to be undertaken by a virtuous man is without an orectic state. In fact, Aristotle explicitly affirms that a "perception," in McDowell's vocabulary, or choice, is literally orectic in that it can be described as either a, "desirous thought or thoughtful desire" (...ὄρεκτικὸς νοῦς ἢ προαίρεσις ἢ ὄρεξις διανοητική).

This could put McDowell back to square one, creating a schism with Aristotelean thought such that his theory could not plausibly be construed to represent, much less be compatible with, Aristotle's views. However, McDowell is not committed to the view that the virtuous man is in some sense absolutely void of being informed by some kind of desiderative state. He says that, "If someone guides his life by a certain conception of how to live, then he acts, on particular occasions, so as to fulfill suitable concerns" (1998: 67). McDowell has not quite made explicit what he means by a "certain conception of how to live," but he makes it clear as day when he says that, "In Aristotle's view, the orectic state cited in an explanation of a virtuous action is the agent's entire conception of how to live, rather than just whatever concern it happened to be; and this may now seem

¹⁰ διάνοια δ' αὐτὴ οὐθὲν κινεῖ, ἀλλ' ἢ ἔνεκά του καὶ πρακτικὴ· νοία δ' αὐτὴ οὐθὲν κινεῖ, ἀλλ' ἢ ἔνεκά του καὶ πρακτικὴ· αὐτὴ γὰρ καὶ τῆς ποιητικῆς ἄρχει· ἔνεκα γὰρ του ποιεῖ πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν, καὶ οὐ τέλος ἀπλῶς (ἀλλὰ πρὸς τι καὶ τινός) τὸ ποιητόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ πρακτόν· ἢ γὰρ εὐπραξία τέλος, ἢ δ' ὄρεξις τούτου. διὸ ἢ ὄρεκτικὸς νοῦς ἢ προαίρεσις ἢ ὄρεξις διανοητική, καὶ ἢ τοιαύτη ἀρχὴ ἄνθρωπος (1139a35-b5).

mysterious” (1998: 67). Here we have found a possible point of reconciliation, wherein orectic desire does not owe to any particular act, but rather to the conception of the virtuous life as a whole. That is, in support of the whole of a life well-lived, each action and circumstance is assessed as to its fitness, and in measurement with this fitness, the action is either undertaken or not. Understood in this light, choice as a “desire-related intellect [or better, desire-related thought],” would mean that the “choice” would be built-into the actor’s psychology. That is, the actor would skillfully fit the appropriate action to fulfill whatever conception of a happy life he or she had in mind.¹¹ At this junction, however, we might be accused of staving off the objection to a more remote point: perhaps the orectic desire is not for the particular action, but rather for its very assimilation into a much larger conception of the happy life. Because of this, the charge would go, there is still an orectic state as both Aristotle, and now McDowell, seem to admit.

Orectic states and Non-cognitivism

Returning now to an earlier moment in the paper, it will be necessary to remind ourselves in exactly what the non-cognitivist objection is grounded in. If moral choices are reflective of the voluntary soul of an individual, then the thought goes, these moral choices inform us of nothing other than the peculiar preferences of an individual, but nothing about the truth of the moral actions themselves. Now, if, as McDowell concedes, there are individual moral choices with accompanying orectic states, then an instance of

¹¹ This is not to say that any such conception will fulfill this condition, but the conception of a virtuous man certainly will, as I will show later on in this paper.

what appears to be a mere “perception” of the virtuous act is no such perception at all. Of course, McDowell denies that this situation occurs, at least in the case of the virtuous man. On the other hand, McDowell wishes to affirm that there is, writ largely, a kind of orrectic state controlling the whole life and decision making process of the virtuous man, but which nevertheless does not undermine the fact that virtue is knowledge, that is, that ethically proper action can be explicable by the kind of recognition which we acknowledge knowledge to be. How can this be, however? How can there be a kind of knowledge of something putatively external to the actor when what is being known appears to be known in the sense that it merely accords with the actor’s preference for a particular conception of a way to live, even if we reasonably agree with the nobility of that pursuit? In this next section, I will attempt to answer this question by appealing to a number of factors.

The Objectivity of the Eudaimonistic Orexis

In this section, I will make some remarks which will help to shore up the notion that the overarching orrectic state of the virtuous man, that is, his orientation toward the goal of a life well-lived, is able to tell us something about the state of the world.

The first reason is that the orrectic state of the virtuous man has already been acquired, it has been learned and assimilated through practice to the level of an engrained habit. If he were not so oriented, then by definition, he would not be a virtuous man. But the fact that we are stipulating the actions of a virtuous man means that we are to understand a man who has in view the accordance of his actions with the overall plan of

his life. McDowell may be endorsing something like this view when he says that, “we can equate the conceptual equipment that forms the framework of anything recognizable as a moral outlook with a capacity to be impressed by certain aspects of reality” (72).

The ability to be impressed, or affected, by the proper cognizance of salient situations is a product of, at least, a lot of moral hard lifting. Nevertheless, though it is the end product in one sense, for the would-be magnanimous man, in another sense it is for the already virtuous man a psychological tool wielded at his discretion in the morally relevant circumstances.

Furthermore, McDowell wishes to resist the notion that, in order to stave off the non-cognitive objection adequately, one must appeal to a kind of objectivity which only the scientific method can disclose. For McDowell, the faculties from which we engage with the ethical are an embedded part of the deliverances of those faculties. Thus, there is an objective knowledge of the real world, and part and parcel of this knowledge is the fact that *we* are part of that constitutive world.¹² He states his case with a degree of compelling force when he says, “...it is highly implausible that all the concerns that motivate virtuous actions are intelligible, one by one, *independently of appreciating a virtuous person’s distinctive way of seeing situations*” (*emphasis mine*, 1998: 71).

¹² McDowell views it as a prejudice of the times that we even have this view at all, “It is only an illusion that our paradigm of reason, deductive argument, has its rationality discernible from a standpoint that is not necessarily located within the practice itself” (1998: 71).

There is a further sense in which this orrectic state of the virtuous man is additionally, we might say, objective.¹³ In another of McDowell's chapters in Mind, Value and Reality, "The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics," he makes a point of developing the tautological and uninformative idea that, "Doing well is doing well." What we are to understand from this is that the first doing well is to be understood as, "living in accordance with excellence: as a good man would," while the second doing well is "living as one would wish: living in one's best interest." The latter meaning would also entail that there are "canons of desirability," acceptable and intelligible to all except those most deficient by nature. There is a sense in which there is a universal and objective knowledge involved in the cognizance of doing well. Now, it is of a broad and ambiguous, even if ambitious, scope, such that there are no hard and fast rules or determinations on how to live. Morality is not stepwise or paint-by-number. It is nevertheless a feature of reality in such a way, at least in such a way, that as a measuring rod, actions are able to be measured against it with some level of ethical certainty for one who has been habitually conditioned into the proper practices. It would be difficult to see how by itself this would not be a sufficient reason to consider the overarching life goal of the virtuous man, namely his fitting actions to accord with a life well-lived; how it would not be a recognition on his part of some salient features of his world, the world in which

¹³ This is objective in the sense it can be, taking into account the discussion of the previous paragraph, but one which involves, "empirical data that would be collected by a careful and sensitive moral phenomenology" (1998: 72).

he is enmeshed and involved, as a creature formed to register the kinds of morally sensitive knowledge, that he, as a virtuous man, is particularly skilled at discerning.

Various Objections to the Socratic Thesis

In the previous section I developed more fully a non-cognitivist objection to the thesis that virtue is knowledge. At this point I wish to introduce various new objections to McDowell's picture that a non-cognitivist might plausibly raise. In doing so I will strengthen McDowell's case and shed light on his own conception of the idea that virtue is knowledge.

Difficult Case One: Numerousness

The first of these objections is the notion that, although there may, in fact, be situations in which there is only one correct course of action, there are others in which it is reasonable to think that there are many correct courses of action to take.¹⁴ In such a circumstance, what would appear to be occurring is that there is a deliberation about what choice to make. If there is a deliberation, in a Buridan's ass type of scenario, which is very plausible, then what would be the determining factor in choosing one circumstance over another?¹⁵ For one decidedly on McDowell's side, it could be offered up that in

¹⁴ I here stipulate a situation not in which there are a number of morally permissible actions, in some type of preferential hierarchy, but a circumstance in which there are two or more morally identical actions, actions morally so defined as equally conducive and constitutive of a morally good life.

¹⁵ McDowell seems either not to acknowledge the possibility of such a scenario, which seems unrealistic to me, or he does not recognize the objection when he says, "A conception of how to live shows itself, when more than one concern might issue in action, in one's seeing, or being to be brought to see, one fact rather than another as salient" (1998: 68-69).

these relatively rare circumstances, caution is thrown to the wind, and a choice is more or less made indifferently, the way one picks a fork out a drawer, i.e. with no particular determination of this or that fork in mind. On the other hand, the objector could press, going along with the metaphor, there actually is (usually) a reason that a particular fork is chosen out of the jumble: its proximity to us. Whichever fork is clean and closest to us gets yanked out. On this thinking the choice would tell us nothing about the fork, only about the psychological preferences of the fork-wielder. Thus, returning to the referent of the metaphor, there must be some kind of orrectic state informing us as to which moral choice is to be preferred, given a situation in which all choices are morally equal.

Perhaps the way to find our way out of this puzzle is to acknowledge that, in light of the virtuous man's knowledge of living his life in accordance with a certain conception of happiness, he will be possessed of a kind of sensitivity which will result in the recognition of at least one right course of action. Now, more may occur to him, or perhaps not, but important for our purposes here is that this recognition itself is not the result of some preferential state, but the result, as we all admit the virtuous man capable, of a recognition of the appropriate potential of a virtuous act. Over and above any other feature which may or may not determine the particular course of action in a particular situation, serving as the straw on the camel's back, what we can say for sure is that the

original cognizance of either one or multiple courses of actions was a procedure accomplished not by a desiderative, but by an intellectual state of the man.¹⁶

Lastly, moral situations are such that to see them correctly is to perceive an obligation toward action, and not to see this feature of their existence is not to see them at all. Thus to see a circumstance (which would properly elicit a given action from the virtuous man) but which provokes no such reaction,¹⁷ would not be viewing say, to pick a morally simple case, a rape as a rape, but in a bizarre and grotesque sense, one human copulating with another. Thus, their morality, just as their cognition would be morally lacking.

Difficult Case Two: Novelty

Another problem could be posed to McDowell's account in the following way: supposing that virtue really is a recognition of something, a kind of knowledge. On Aristotle's account this would mean that this kind of knowledge was partially constituted, by, among other intellectual virtues, *phronesis* or practical reasoning. As Aristotle says, in discussing why boys can be good geometers but are not prudent: "The reason is that Prudence includes a knowledge of particular facts, and this is derived from experience,

¹⁶ McDowell wishes to avoid an endorsement of some hierarchy of available choices, for to him this means that the ethical choices are codifiable, "If the conception of how to live involved a ranking of concerns, or perhaps a set of rankings each relativized to some type of situation, the explanation of why one concern was operative rather than another would be straightforward. But uncodifiability rules out laying down such general rankings in advance of all the predicaments with which life may confront one" (1998: 68). However, I see no reason why such rankings cannot be made, in the moment, *in the context* of a particular circumstance rather than, in his words, "in advance of all the predicaments."

¹⁷ In the extreme case a sociopath, but more generally anyone whose sensitivities are not so attuned as the practically wise.

which a young man does not possess; for experience is the fruit of years” (1142a14-16, trans. Rackham).¹⁸ In light of this passage and common reflection we can easily imagine that the kind of deliberations which have given rise to the virtuous man are the results of much difficult moral progress which has been plied on the plain of mortal life. If this knowledge has been accrued, then of course it has been transformed into the personal character of the virtuous such that it is in a very true sense reflective of him.

The thrust of this objection would be to try to press the point that all moral actions are the result of particular knowledge on the part of the virtuous man. The objector could ask how the virtuous man could possibly be equipped to handle a morally novel situation, one which he never encountered before, one in which he did not have the benefit of an accrued bedrock of knowledge to which he could compare it. Thus, if the objection stands, instances of ethical action would not in all cases be triggered by some act of intellectual recognition, but something over and above what recognition itself (aided by experience and memory) could provide. This something else could very well be an orectic state determining the preference for a particular course of action.

The answer to this objection could be tackled in several ways. The first step, I think, is to acknowledge that there are or could arise novel ethical situations, such that the virtuous man has never encountered them. One such area rich in these possibilities is war, wherein a man who is already virtuous will find himself in a quandary of various predicaments. Tackling the issue more straightforwardly, what we could say is that,

¹⁸ αἴτιον δ' ὅτι καὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστά ἐστιν ἡ φρόνησις, ἃ γίνεται γνῶριμα ἐξ ἐμπειρίας, νέος δ' ἔμπειρος οὐκ ἔστιν· πλῆθος γὰρ χρόνου ποιεῖ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν·

having resolved the first difficulty above, we can say that just as there is not necessarily any one correct answer to an ethical solicitation, we can also resist the need to posit some finite amount of ethical provocations. In fact the former may imply the latter, insofar as we grant that there are numberless possible ethical solutions, this could very well be explicable because of the existence of numberless possible ethical problems. Another avenue of approach to this problem is to say that the particular practical expertise which is gained by the virtuous and practically wise man is accrued by means of particular examples, but it develops and is matured into a knowledge of universal principles which can then be distributed to the arrival of novel circumstances, but again only in the context of aiming at a fully lived virtuous life.¹⁹ A different characterization of this same idea is that ethical situations are not simply devoured by rote, and then in a moment of recognition, like in a children's card game of "memory," flipped over at the appropriate match. Even in the lives of the average Joe and Jane, we do not think that moral progress occurs in this way; *a fortiori*, there would be no good reason to think an ethical master would rely on such a mechanical and artless method.

Difficult Case Three: The No-Brainer

In presenting his case that virtue is knowledge, McDowell wishes to preserve the idea that a conception of the life well-lived is the orectic state guiding the deliberations of

¹⁹ Aristotle affirms both of these bookends of knowledge as belonging to *phronesis* at 1141a14-16, "Nor is practical wisdom concerned only with universals. An understanding of particulars is also required, since it is practical, and action is concerned with particulars" (οὐδ' ἐστὶν ἡ φρόνησις τῶν καθόλου μόνον, ἀλλὰ δεῖ καὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα γνωρίζειν· πρακτικὴ γάρ, ἡ δὲ πρᾶξις περὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα.)

the virtuous man. One thing that this does not entail, as he is quick to point out, is an obligation to follow any particular line of action, since the virtue is “uncodifiable” and resists an easy distillation into hard and fast commands. As he says, “Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does...by being a certain kind of person: one sees situations in a certain distinctive way” (1998: 73).

One idea that seems to be undergirding this uncodifiability is that, for McDowell, if ethics were able to be codified, then this would be a reason to suspect that orrectic states were in fact being smuggled into the equation. For instance, if the ethical system of a virtuous man were able to be boiled down, into among other things, the dictum, “When a person is being killed, you must stop the killer,” then that part of the dictum, “you must stop the killer,” would represent a desire on the part of the doer to enact a state of affairs conducive to his preference to, in fact, stop the killer.²⁰ Thus there is a sense in which we should resist codifiability in the realm of ethics because this would confer greater force to the objection that, when we claim virtue is knowledge, what we are really claiming is that virtue is knowledge of our own desiderative state, as exemplified above. This should be enough to establish the motivation as to why codifiability should be avoided by those with a McDowellian reading of Aristotle.

However, there is another circumstance of the moral life which would seem to resuscitate this objection, and require a form of codifiability. This would be a situation in

²⁰ On this construal, two things are easily seen. 1) That the ethical precept is not really “grounded” on anything, yet. 2) That as well-meaning and perhaps common sensical as this dictum seems, there would be a number of counter-circumstances where the ethical thing to do would not be in fact to stop a killing from taking place.

which there is really only one correct action, and not only would the virtuous man in the given circumstance only do this one action, but if he were ever to contemplate it, even if he did not encounter the situation, he would arrive at the same conclusion. This would be a “no brainer,” a circumstance which calls for one and only one right action, such that its simplicity would allow it to be codified. Thus, the line of thinking would run, if it is a morally simple situation (i.e., one which calls forth only one correct action), then it is codifiable, if it is codifiable, it is susceptible to a particular non-cognitive objection—that orrectic requirements are woven into its codifiability.

Now, the normal maneuver would be to say that moral actions, qualified as such by a virtuous man, avoid the charge of involving particular orrectic states at least insofar as they avoid codifiability, this avoidance owing to the fact that moral actions are quite nuanced affairs, such that,

If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong... (McDowell 1999: 58)

Nevertheless, returning to the difficulty in the case of the “no-brainer,” it is difficult to see how this consideration could be avoided. In approaching this question one could say something like the following, that although there might appear to be a kind of simplicity to a particular circumstance, there are still countless variables which must be taken into consideration in the contextual cues of the moment, and these cues *can only be perceived by one in the relevant situation, for it is only for a virtuous man so situated to be able to recognize the morally correct course of action.* Thus, the no-brainer would be

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an easy choice while he was in the midst of the situation, given a specific time and place, concerns and considerations for how things would work out, given certain relations and conditions. But if these variables were to change, and they would if he is a human traveling life's way, then a different solicitation would present itself. In this way, there would be an avoidance of any codification, on the grounds that even in the most seemingly simple moral situation, other variables might impinge on its practicality or impracticality. In effect, this would involve a denial that there is a moral simplicity to a particular kind of action such that it could be codified in some way, but this would not preclude the possibility, indeed, it would be very much preferable to preserve the notion, that certain circumstances ought to be construed as morally simple, when they are encountered.

Conclusion

There is a commonly understood Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. There is an Aristotelian construal of the idea that virtue is knowledge as well, following the lead of John McDowell. In order for this Aristotelian interpretation of virtue as knowledge to work, we must stipulate that we are discussing the Aristotelian virtuous man, not someone who is merely continent.

McDowell maintains that a virtuous man acts virtuously in light of seeing circumstances in morally salient ways. This "seeing" is thus a kind of knowledge, available to one with the correctly habituated moral sensitivity.

Now, it is not difficult to perceive the weak point in this position: If there is anything else in a virtuous man's psychological orientation toward virtue over and above knowledge alone, then McDowell's (and Aristotle's view, by implication) is false. A particular worry arises from a non-cognitive objection: if as non-cognitivists hold, morality tells us nothing about the status of the world "out there," then McDowell must, in fact, be smuggling in something other than knowledge to explain virtue. This other thing is an orectic desire, a preference to choose one thing over another. If this is so, then virtue is not knowledge, but virtue is knowledge and desire.

On McDowell's understanding a concern and a fact are sufficient to explain a virtuous man's virtuous action, where "concern" means, in a broad sense, a recognizable significance to the living out of a virtuous life and "fact" means the salient course of action which could actualize that concern.

Perhaps puzzlingly, Aristotle does tell us that there is a kind of orectic state at which the virtuous man aims. "Mere thought," he tells us, "moves nothing; it must be goal-directed and practical. Such thought governs productive thought as well, in that everyone who produces aims at some goal, and the product is not the goal without qualification, but only relative to something, and instrumental to something; for the goal without qualification is what is done, because acting well is the goal, and the object of desire" (1139a35 ff). Thus, although there is not a specific and contextually circumstantial desire dedicated to an individual decision, there is, "an orectic state cited

in an explanation of a virtuous action is the agent's entire conception of how to live..." (McDowell 1998: 67).

If there is an orectic state which governs the whole life of a virtuous man, then it seems reasonable to think that perhaps this orectic state falls prey to the non-cognitivist objection as well: the virtuous man is following the dictates of his preference for a "happy life" and not knowledge alone.

However, there are two approaches to answer this charge. The first is to say that the orectic state of the virtuous man has already been habituated, inculcated, one may even say "loaded" into the character of the virtuous man. It is thus just a given of the virtuous man's psychological makeup that he disposed to be this way. Perhaps a more satisfying answer to this objection though, is the recognition that this type of orectic state is part of a feature of reality for the human animal. That is, there is a sense in which the human psychological framework is fundamentally oriented toward the happy life, even if, with some privileged access, the virtuous person alone has practical cognizance of this. This could be described in more classically Aristotelian terms such as that the good is what all things strive for, or that on account of which all other choices are made for and which nothing else is more choice-worthy than. Or this could be put in more McDowellian terms, such that there are "canons of desirability" which are themselves objective in such a way as to be true descriptions of the world.

McDowell, in my estimation, successfully defended his version of the Socratic thesis by positing how it is plausible to believe that it is the non-virtuous who has

something interfering with his moral sensitivities, and not the addition of something to the virtuous, which explains the difference in action between a virtuous and non-virtuous action. I also attempted to answer an objection that McDowell perhaps acknowledges but did not engage: how is that the Eudaimonistic orrectic state, which aims at a whole life well lived, is not susceptible to non-cognitive objections. Next I proceeded to raise other objections to McDowell's Socratic thesis which could undermine his project.

This first problem can be imagined if we think that there is a given circumstance in which there are multiple, morally equivalent courses of action that can be taken. If one has to make a choice, then one has to make a choice, but what would be the determining factor? It would seem that it would have to be the personal preference of the actor, but then this would make this example vulnerable to the non-cognitive objection.

The answer to this problem is that the virtuous man's deliverances of one or multiple courses of action, are initially the result of a sensitivity. Whether, he is, in strange circumstances, presented with multiple choices, the recognition itself is not the result of preferential state. One may even go so far as to say that, after the field of choices has been narrowed, it does not matter what is determinative of the final choice, including a personal preference, but that this would be both extremely rare and not representative of *how* the field of choices would have deemed choice-worthy to begin with.

A second difficulty could arise in the case of novelty. The objection would run thus: you claim that virtue is knowledge of the virtuous man who has experience, and is thus fully actualized in his virtue. But what about scenarios he has never encountered?

How could he possibly deploy knowledge about situations he has never met? The first thing to remember is that we want to avoid codifiability, so it is not as if the virtuous man is taking notes of each episode of everything that happens to him, and then at the right moment, he scrolls through his moral rolodex to retrieve the appropriate protocol. This does not seem indicative of any moral life, much less that of the moral exemplar. This objection also would miss the point of the generality of the moral enterprise as consisting in a recognition of a concern and a fact to achieve that goal.

It appears there is another class of moral situations in which the morally correct course of action is not up to interpretation: the no-brainer. This would be a situation in which there is one, and only one, morally correct action. The problem then would be that this no-brainer would be able to be codified in such a way as to inescapably express a desire on the behalf of the actor, e.g., “Don’t drown babies.” Thus the existence of a no-brainer would give fodder to the non-cognitive objection. Perhaps the way to approach this objection is to face it as straight-forwardly as possible and deny that no-brainers are codifiable while affirming that they are morally simple from the perspective of the moral actor. The idea would be that there are countless variables in the contextual cues of the moment, and these cues can only be adduced by one in the relevant situation, for it is only for a virtuous man so situated to be able to recognize the morally correct course of action.